



Charmed By the Fox Prince

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: I've been locked in a tower for as long as I can remember. The memories of my former life were taken from me by the Goblin Witch who holds me captive.

When I'm rescued by a Fox Shifter Prince, he offers to take me back to his kingdom.

Prince Renard claims that I'm his Fated One, and vows to keep me safe from the Witch determined to recapture me.

But I'm hesitant to consider a future with him, when I know nothing of my past. And the more time we spend together, I find myself drawn to him in ways I do not fully understand.

Now I find myself wondering: What would it be like if I allowed myself to fall for my charming Fox Prince?

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CHAPTER 1

RAPUNZEL

I dream of a man with amber eyes that glow like molten gold. His slitted pupils expand as he watches me from the shadows.

Every night, it's the same. He is always just beyond reach, his features obscured by darkness. "You are mine," he says, his voice deep, rich, and edged with a possessiveness that sends a delicious shiver rippling down my spine.

"Who are you?" I ask. "Tell me your name."

A loud clap of thunder shatters my dream, startling me awake. My entire body is flushed, and my heart is pounding as I sit up in bed. Heavy rain lashes against the tower window. Reaching for my sketchbook on the side table, I flip to the page that holds the image that has haunted my dreams for the past three months.

The flickering glow from the hearth across the room dances over the drawing. The familiar eyes of my mysterious stranger stare back at me, their amber gold color vivid against the shadows that hide his face.

A strange longing aches in my chest as I trace my hand over the parchment. "Who are you?" I whisper.

Lightning flashes as thunder crashes overhead, shaking the room.

My heart clenches as I lift the covers and find a tiny ball of brown fur shivering against my side.

Finik raises his head, his cute little squirrel nose twitching furiously as his dark eyes meet mine. “It’s just a storm, Finik,” I soothe, gently stroking his fur and fluffy tail. “Nothing to worry about.”

Sitting up in bed, I glance around the tower room. Fire burns low in the hearth, casting wavering shadows over the entire space. Shelves line the curved stone walls, filled with novels, sketches, and jars of herbs.

The plush, worn sofa across the way is piled with folded, clean laundry. The two chairs beside it are covered with spools of yarn and thread from my novice attempts at knitting and crochet.

Strong wind howls from the storm outside, seeping through the small cracks around the window, swaying the green velvet curtains and the ivy trailing from a pot on the sill.

In the kitchen area, across the room, Finik’s woven basket nest rests beneath a wooden table, laden with dried flowers and healing ointments.

It’s cozy here—small, but safe. We’ve weathered many storms, but when another deafening crack of thunder slices the air, we both jump.

“All right, fine,” I mutter, holding him close. “Maybe it’s not entirely normal. It’s been a while since we’ve had a storm this bad, but I promise you we’re perfectly safe here.”

Finik squeaks doubtfully, his fluffy ears twitching.

A soft creak echoes from below and my breath freezes in my lungs. Finik stiffens, his tiny paws gripping my sleeve tightly.

“It's probably the wind,” I whisper.

The sound of a door slamming shut echoes up the stairwell, followed by heavy footsteps.

Worry spikes through me, but I force myself to push it back down. This part of the forest is surrounded by a magical barrier, concealing it from outside eyes. Even if someone somehow found a way through it, the door at the base of the tower is hidden by a thick layer of vines.

“We’re fine. I’m sure it’s just the storm,” I say under my breath, and I’m not sure who I’m trying to convince more—myself or Finik. “There’s no way anyone could have discovered this place.”

With a heavy sigh, I start to lie back down but go still as the footsteps grow louder.

Finik chitters anxiously in my ear, his panic matching my own.

“Quiet,” I whisper urgently. “It could be bandits.”

My heart stops as someone knocks on the door. “Hello?” a man’s voice calls out. “Is anyone there?”

Finik and I remain silent, frozen in fear as the doorknob begins to rattle.

Quietly, I slide out of bed and grab the candlestick from my nightstand. The weight of the metal is reassuring in my trembling hands. Dressed only in my shift, my long silver-white braid trails behind me as I tiptoe across the room and then press myself

against the wall, beside the door.

Finik scrambles up onto the bookshelf on the opposite side, his eyes wide, tail twitching nervously as we hear the bandit picking at the lock.

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I wish Glinda was here. She's warned me countless times about thieves and bandits roaming these woods. It's the reason she created the magic barrier to hide the tower and why she insists I stay here for my own safety.

Gripping the candlestick tightly, I spread my feet wide, ready to defend my home.

I'll admit, I've doubted her terrifying stories of the outside world, but as the clicking lock goes silent and the handle begins to turn, icy dread washes over me.

Blood roars in my ears as I raise the candlestick overhead.

If this bandit thinks I'll just let him break into my home without a fight, he's wrong.

My breath freezes as the handle slowly turns. Everything seems suspended—the storm outside, the creaking of the door—as a tall figure, wrapped in shadow, steps into the room.

Fear spikes through my veins, and I swing the candlestick at his head. It connects with a loud thud, and he falls to the floor in a crumpled heap.

Relief washes through me. Taking a small step closer, I study his unconscious form. The bandit lies sprawled on the floor. His lean, muscular body glistens with droplets of rainwater. He has a thin silver chain with a green gemstone pendant around his neck. My gaze travels over the sculpted planes of his chest, down to the contoured ridges of his abdomen until—

Oh, dear gods!

He's completely naked. I've never even seen a man this close before, that I can remember, much less one without any clothing.

My gaze trails helplessly over him again, my pulse fluttering uncontrollably. He's so... undeniably male. My entire body flushes hotly, and something deep within tightens, an unfamiliar sensation pooling low in my belly.

I can't stop staring at the powerful lines of his body, the strength radiating from every inch of him, even as he lies unconscious. Part of me wants to touch him, to run my fingers over his skin, just to see if he feels as warm and solid as he looks.

Heat blooms in my cheeks, and I quickly snatch a blanket and toss it over his hips, trying desperately to ignore the thrilling flutter of excitement inside me. Mentally, I chastise myself. This awareness is dangerous—entirely new and wholly improper. I should not be gawking at a nude man, especially one who is more than likely a bandit.

“Who breaks into a tower naked?” I say aloud, still in shock.

Finik sniffs at the stranger's wet, short red hair, and I gasp when I notice two fluffy fox ears peeking up through the strands and a sodden red foxtail sticking out from beneath the blanket.

“A Fox Shifter,” I murmur.

Finik chitters agitatedly at the invader, tail flicking wildly, and then lifts his tiny head to me, as if asking what's next.

But I'm finding it terribly difficult to think straight at the moment. My face grows hot, and I swear the air itself thickens as I stare down at this naked, mysterious Shifter sprawled out at my feet.

He broke into my home. So, I shouldn't be noticing how utterly gorgeous he is, with his broad, powerful shoulders and chest, the ripple of muscle along his stomach, and the thick corded strength of his arms and legs. And I definitely shouldn't be noticing the way his coppery-red hair falls across his brow, framing those elegantly pointed ears.

But oh gods, I am noticing. And it's doing something terribly unsettling and yet exciting in the same measure as my heart beats wildly in my chest.

I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry. Even the heroes in my favorite romance novels pale in comparison to this man. I'm drawn to him, though I can't quite understand why. He's beautiful in a wild, dangerous sort of way.

His face is partially hidden in shadow, and my fingers twitch as I fight the urge to brush the hair back from his forehead to study him closer. Curiosity wars with reason, before I finally force myself to take a small step back.

"All right. We'll tie him up and question him when he wakes."

Closing my eyes, I raise my hands and call upon my magic deep within. When I open them again, wisps of green smoke curl around my fingers. Focusing my power on the potted ivy near the window, I watch in wonder as the lush green tendrils grow and spiral out.

The vines snake around the Fox Shifter, lifting him from the floor and setting him onto my bed. Concentrating, I direct them to coil around his wrists and ankles like living rope, tying him securely to the bedposts.

Finik hops down onto the mattress, his tiny paws sinking into the quilt as he cautiously edges closer, sniffing the stranger's red hair.

Lighting a candle, I place it on the side table, next to the bed. My pulse quickens as I stare down at the Fox Shifter. When Glinda warned me about bandits and thieves, I always pictured rough looking characters, like the pirates described in the books I've read.

But this man is undeniably attractive. His features are strong and sharp, with an elegantly sloped nose, a powerful jawline dusted faintly with coppery stubble, and full, perfect lips. Thick, dark lashes fan across his cheeks.

A thin scar starts just above his right brow and ends at the top of his cheekbone, lending a lethal edge to his already handsome face. The pale silver color indicates it's old, and I wonder how he came by this injury.

As I lean closer, I'm drawn once again to the two plush, foxlike ears nestled in his tousled hair. For all they are odd to me, they do not take away from his appearance. If anything, it only adds to his allure.

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Cautiously, I reach out, grazing my fingers over the tip of one ear.

He releases a deep, husky moan, and I jerk my hand back. Finik leaps nearly a foot into the air, tail fluffed out comically as he scrambles behind the pillow.

The Fox Shifter slowly shifts his head, lashes fluttering as he opens his eyes. My breath catches.

Amber eyes, intense and familiar, lock onto mine.

My heart stumbles in my chest. “It’s you,” I whisper, completely captivated, feeling a strange pull that goes beyond any logic or reason.

I know these eyes—I’ve sketched them countless times.

They’re the same ones from my dreams.

CHAPTER 2

REN

As consciousness slowly trickles back into my mind, a low moan escapes my lips as something soft brushes over the sensitive tip of my left ear, sending a pleasurable shiver down my spine.

A hint of something delicious, feminine and sweet, like fresh summer berries, threads through the air. The intoxicating scent stirs something deep within—a primal hunger

that has nothing to do with food.

I blink awake, and the entire world shifts as luminous blue eyes meet mine. My inner fox lifts his head as awareness floods my veins.

She is the most beautiful female I've ever seen.

Candlelight casts her in an ethereal glow. She has a lovely heart-shaped face, her features so soft and delicate, I wonder for a moment if she may be Fae or High Elf. But the round shell of her ears tells me she is human. Her eyes are a brilliant shade of crystalline blue.

Her hair is silver-white, reminding me of starlight. It's exceptionally long and bound in a thick braid that hangs over her left shoulder and coils at her feet. She's wearing a silken blue nightshift that hugs the sensuous curve of her breasts and the slight swell of her hips.

Mine. My Fox growls, instantly recognizing her as our mate.

Fierce possessiveness surges through me as the mating bond roars to life, filling me with overwhelming, undeniable need. She's beautiful. I've dreamed of this moment, imagined meeting my fated mate—but nothing prepared me for this intense, immediate hunger, or the passionate, all-consuming desire that slams through my body. It hums beneath my skin, demanding that I claim her.

Just like Wolf Shifters, my inner Fox and I are one and the same. He is unsettled and will remain that way until we have claimed her.

She leans closer, unaware of my exquisite torture as her scent wraps around me, sweet and intoxicating. I want her so much it is maddening. Gods, she has no idea what she's doing to me. My gaze dips to her lush mouth, and I clench my jaw. I long

to taste her lips and feel her softness against me.

“It’s you,” she whispers, staring at me in awe.

My Fox howls in triumph. She feels the bond too.

But even as I think this, doubt begins to creep in. In the back of my mind, I recall that humans do not normally have fated bonds. But as I gaze at her flushed cheeks and note her quickened breathing, I shove this thought away. Surely her reaction means she recognizes the connection. Why else would she react so strongly to my presence?

Every Fox longs to find their fated mate, and I never thought I’d be blessed enough to find mine. She is human, and while such pairings are almost unheard of among my people, it matters not.

She is perfect.

Her features are soft and delicate, and I’m mesmerized as I stare up at her.

“Who are you, fair maiden?” I ask, completely in her thrall. “Tell me your name.”

My Fox puffs out his chest as her gaze travels over my form, appraising me like a female Fox would do a potential mate.

She definitely seems intrigued, but I note a curious hesitancy in her expression. Perhaps she is simply in awe of the fact that we have found one another. After all, it’s not every day that one finds their fated mate.

“I—I’ve been warned to never give my name to strange men,” she says as a faint flush colors her skin.

A sly grin curves my mouth. She is clearly attracted to me. “Then, I suppose it’s fortunate that I am not a man. My name is Renard.” I introduce myself, neglecting to mention that I’m the second prince of Cambryn. “But everyone calls me Ren.”

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Ever since my face was scarred, the only females who have shown any interest are the ones desperate for title and wealth. I want to see how my fated one regards me without knowledge of my royal status.

Mine. The word ripples through me again as every instinct I possess sharpens to razor-edged awareness, the need to claim her burning through my veins.

I move to reach for her, only to discover my wrists immobilized. My eyebrows shoot upward. What in the gods—

Glancing down, I notice thick green vines binding my wrists and ankles to a four-poster bed. I'm sprawled out and entirely naked beneath a small, embarrassingly inadequate blanket covering only my most essential assets.

Well, this is interesting...

"Hmm." I arch a curious brow. "I can see you like to move a bit fast." I lightly tug at my bindings. "I've never considered being tied up before for a mating, but for you, I accept."

Her delicate features scrunch in confusion. "What?"

I flash her my most charming grin. "I accept your claim on me, and I graciously wish to claim you in return." I give the vines around my wrists another experimental tug. "Though there's truly no need to tie me up. I'm entirely willing."

Her mouth opens, closes, then opens again. She sputters, blinking rapidly. "This is..."

you're—"

"Charming and handsome?" I offer helpfully. "Positively irresistible?"

I flash her a confident grin, even as my heart pounds with uncertainty. Female Fox Shifters have admired me from afar, yet their smiles inevitably fade the moment they glimpse my facial scar. I've heard humans are not put off by such things, and I pray she doesn't turn away from me too.

I continue. "If you remove these bindings, however, I promise that I will dedicate myself to worshipping every inch of your lovely form, and—"

"Are you mad?" She stares at me as if I've grown two heads. "You're a bandit! I'm not going to untie you."

CHAPTER 3

REN

"Abandit?" I frown. "What are you talking about?"

"You broke into my home."

"I did?"

Thoroughly confused, I glance at my surroundings, struggling to recall how exactly I ended up here. My memories of last night are still hazy. I've never been one to partake heavily of alcohol, but perhaps I overindulged and don't remember.

"Wait a minute." I tilt my head, grasping at wisps of memory and wincing as the slight movement makes pain ripple across my skull. A vague image resurfaces of

something flying toward me, hazy but increasingly clear. It suddenly all comes back, and I gasp in shock. “Did you hit me with a candlestick?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a bandit.”

I give her an incredulous look. “I am not a bandit.”

She crosses her arms and narrows her eyes. “Then why did you break into my home? And how did you even find this place?”

Frowning, I struggle to piece together the broken bits of memory from last night. “I remember searching for shelter. It was raining so hard, I could barely see my hand in front of my face,” I explain. “Suddenly, I stepped through some sort of magic barrier, and when I looked up, I saw a tower where there had been none before.”

I don’t tell her that it’s the same one I’ve seen in my dreams or that she’s my fated mate, because I’m not quite sure how she’d take this. I thought she recognized the fated bond between us, but now I believe I was wrong.

Her eyes widen. “How did you pass through the barrier?”

I resist the urge to glance down at the pendant hanging from my neck. The green gemstone hums faintly against my chest. It seems my grandfather’s stories were not exaggerated. He claimed this charm could pass through almost any magical ward.

I could tell her the truth, but then I’d risk her possibly taking my necklace and tossing me back outside the barrier. And that is not something I want. I’ve only just found my

fated one and I'm not eager to leave her anytime soon.

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I shrug. "I'm not entirely sure."

She eyes me skeptically, clearly debating whether to believe me.

I tug lightly against the vines, testing their strength. They're sturdy enough, certainly, but not unbreakable—not to a Shifter like me. One quick burst of my Fox's strength and I'd be free in seconds.

But then my lovely human mate would be terrified, and the last thing I want is for her to fear me. Better she believes herself in control. For now.

"Would you mind freeing me?" I ask lightly, adding a charming smile for good measure. "This has all been a big misunderstanding. I am most assuredly not a bandit."

She narrows those beautiful eyes, suspicion sharpening her expression. "And I'm just supposed to take your word for it, after you broke into my home?"

"It was dark, and I was simply trying to find a dry place to wait out the storm." I frown. "There were cobwebs in the stairwell. I thought this place was abandoned." Another memory resurfaces, and I flash her an accusing look. "And I knocked. I distinctly remember knocking and calling out, asking if anyone was here, but you didn't answer."

"Because I thought you were a bandit," she counters.

I arch a brow. "What sort of thief would bother to knock before they broke in?"

“I—” She hesitates, obviously flustered as doubt clouds her features. “All right. Fine. You may have a point. But you were naked. Why aren’t you wearing any clothes?”

“I’m a Fox Shifter. When you knocked me unconscious, I was unable to maintain the shifted illusion of clothing.”

I tilt my head to regard her. A pink blush spreads across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose, her pupils widening as her eyes wander over my figure.

Despite her concerns, it seems that she likes what she sees.

My inner Fox snarls with fierce desire and longing. Perhaps the fated bond is beginning to affect her as it does me. Raw need pulses through me. If she were a female Fox Shifter, we would already be sealing our bond with a first mating. The primal urge to claim and mark her as my mate is difficult to ignore.

“Well,” she says, a bit flustered. “If you can create the illusion of clothing, why are you still nude?”

My nostrils flare as a hint of arousal threads through her sweet berry scent. “Because I think you may prefer me unclothed.” A playful grin curls my lips. “I can smell your interest.”

“You can smell that?” she splutters. “I—I mean, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she denies, even as her scent sharpens deliciously despite her embarrassment.

I arch a brow. Perhaps I am going about this in the wrong way. I flex my wrists against my bindings, trying to put her at ease by reassuring her I am still her captive. “If you’d prefer me to remain bound like this, I won’t object. But before we go any further, I’d love to know your name.”

She studies me a moment before answering, "My name is Rapunzel."

"Rapunzel," I repeat, my voice full of reverence as everything clicks into place.

My gaze travels around the room. This is exactly where I am meant to be. This is definitely the tower from my dreams.

Closing my eyes, I remember the seer's cryptic words when she came to the royal court a few months ago. "In a hidden tower, protected by magic and shadow, you'll find your greatest treasure, Prince Renard of Cambryn."

I always assumed the prophecy referred to riches or artifacts. But as I look upon Rapunzel, her delicate features and her moonlight silver hair, a deeper certainty settles in my chest. She is the treasure. The reason I was led here by fate.

Now, I must convince Rapunzel that I am worthy of being her mate.

Every Fox female expects her mate to prove himself with the mating chase. During a full moon, the male will chase the female. Once he catches her, she will challenge him. If he is able to best her, proving that he is strong enough to protect her and any kits they may have, she will then accept him, and they will seal their bond with the first mating.

"I'd like to prove myself worthy of you," I declare confidently. "When the full moon comes, I'll chase you."

She blinks, bewildered. "Chase me?"

"Yes. The mating chase. Do humans not have this?"

"Uh, no?" she sputters.

Ah. “Allow me to explain.” I meet her gaze evenly. “I wish to take you as my mate. Tell me what I must do to prove myself worthy of you, beautiful Rapunzel.”

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Her jaw drops slightly before she promptly snaps it shut. Silence stretches between us, and while it is worrisome that she's taking a bit to consider my proposal, it's also reassuring that she hasn't outright refused my offer.

"I—I don't..." Color rises in her face, and she averts her eyes. "I mean... I don't even know you."

"There's an easy remedy for that." I grin. "You could release me, and we could get to know each other over tea, perhaps?"

"Nice try." Her eyes snap up to mine, narrowing. "But I'm not freeing you until I'm sure you're not a bandit."

I sigh dramatically, testing the vines once more. I could free myself easily with one swift flex of my claws, slicing effortlessly through the delicate greenery. But if I did, I'd frighten her, and that's the last thing I want.

"I understand your caution," I tell her. "At least we can still talk and get to know each other better. Besides"—I flash a smile—"I cannot think of anywhere I'd rather be than here as your captive, myamira."

"What does that mean—amira?" she asks.

My gaze travels over her silver-white hair and her beautiful features. "It meansstarlight."

She lifts a skeptical brow. "Flattery won't make me untie you any faster."

I stare deep into her luminous eyes. “It’s not flattery if it’s truth.”

Her face turns crimson, and she looks away again, though I catch the shy smile tugging at her mouth.

This is good. Perhaps we can begin to build trust this way.

“Why are you here in this tower?”

“Because it’s not safe outside,” she answers without hesitation.

“What is it you are afraid of?”

“Bandits and fiends,” she says with a pointed look. “And I’m sure you’re going to insist again that you are neither of those things. Am I right?” she asks, a hint of sarcasm in her tone.

“You are correct, my amira.” I flash her my best grin. “But I understand your wish to keep me bound until you feel safe. I’ll wait as long as it takes for you to trust me.”

And as long as it takes for me to convince her to leave with me and become my mate.

CHAPTER 4

RAPUNZEL

“How long have you been in this tower?” Ren asks.

Heat rises in my cheeks as his luminous amber eyes study me intensely. “Three years.”

He looks around the room, nostrils flaring as if scenting the air. “Does anyone else live here?”

I hesitate, unsure if mentioning Glinda is wise. She usually visits every few days, but she's been away longer this time. I glance toward Ren, still bound securely to the bed, and my heart whispers reassurance. Surely, he can't harm me—not like this. “Glinda visits me every few days to bring supplies,” I admit cautiously, “though she doesn't actually live here.”

“Glinda?” he asks, curiosity lighting his gaze.

“She's the one who brought me here—to keep me protected.”

His brow furrows. “Safe from what?”

My fingers twist nervously in my lap, a tiny knot of anxiety forming in my chest. “From people who might try to hurt me.”

“You mean bandits and fiends?” Ren asks, his lips quirking as he repeats my earlier words back to me. “Of which, I assure you, I am neither.”

I bite back a smile at his teasing. “Yes, but it's more than that.”

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He frowns. “More?”

Swallowing, I gather my courage and decide to tell him the truth. “A Goblin witch cursed me. She stole my memories and would have killed me if not for Glinda.”

Ren goes very still. “How did this happen?”

“My mother almost died giving birth to me. My father was desperate. So, he made a bargain with a Goblin witch named Drusilla to save our lives.”

“A Goblin?” Ren interrupts, clearly disturbed. “Their magic is dangerous, dark.”

“I know.” I sigh. “During the ritual to save us, some of Drusilla’s magic accidentally became part of me. She realized immediately and demanded my parents hand me over so she could reclaim her power.

“But they refused, and as I grew older, the Goblin magic within me grew stronger—while hers faded. It became hard to control. Dangerous.” I glance away, shame heating my cheeks. “Glinda was the only one who could help me. She became my nanny—my protector, really. She’s a Wood Elf, and she helped me wield the magic safely.”

Ren’s amber eyes hold mine steadily. “But how did you end up hidden here?”

“Drusilla returned when I was older, determined to finally reclaim her magic.” I pause, the shadows of forgotten pain flickering at the edges of my consciousness. “I don’t fully remember what happened. According to Glinda, the Goblin murdered my

family and tried to take my power back through a dark ritual.”

Ren’s jaw tightens, his eyes darkening with quiet anger. “That must have been terrifying.”

“I—” I look down at my hands. “I don’t remember. All that I’ve told you is what Glinda told me about what happened. The Goblin’s spell took my memories. It nearly took my life, too, but Glinda stopped her before it was complete. She brought me here to hide me from Drusilla.”

He’s quiet for a moment, clearly digesting my words. His eyes remain kind, warm. “And now you have no memories at all of your life before this tower?”

“Only fragments.” My voice drops to a whisper. “Bits and pieces. Sometimes I dream of people and places that feel familiar, but never clearly.”

Ren’s gaze shifts to the ivy holding him. “Is this your magic at work?”

Lifting my head, I meet his eyes evenly. “Glinda always warned me it’s not only the witch I must fear. She says the outside world is filled with dangerous people. And that my magic should be kept hidden because people might try to use me for it.”

But Ren isn’t demanding answers. There’s only curiosity in his eyes, something warm and unguarded. And I cannot ignore the urge to test him. To show him the truth and see if I can trust him with it.

Taking a deep breath, I call forth my power. I open my left hand, and a glowing ball of green light hovers over my palm. With a flick of my wrist, I direct the magic toward the bindings wrapped around his wrists, urging the small leaves to grow and expand.

He smiles, admiration lighting his eyes. “Your power is incredible. Like the Elves and Fae.”

Warmth flutters in my chest. “Glinda insisted this magic could be dangerous—a weapon in the wrong hands. She’s always claimed it’s safer for me here.”

Ren tilts his head to regard me, doubt easily read in his expression. “But if beings like Elves and Fae wield similar magic openly, why must you hide? Why can Glinda come and go freely while you remain trapped?”

His questions give me pause. Uncertainty knots my stomach, but I push it aside as my mind flickers with small, treasured glimpses of fractured memories: Glinda watching over me when I was a child, humming as she brushed my hair, holding me tight when I woke from nightmares, promising to always protect me from harm.

“She—” I look away, hating myself for the seeds of doubt beginning to take root. “She is doing all she can to keep me safe,” I finally say. “And I trust her.”

As the words leave my mouth, they sound weak, even to my own ears.

“Forgive me,” he says. “I did not mean to upset you.”

Forcing down my unease, I decide to change the subject. “Where are you from?”

Before he can answer, a loud rumble of thunder shakes the tower. Heavy rain pelts the window as lightning flashes, illuminating the room in a stark white glow.

Instead of moving on, the storm only seems to be getting worse.

Ren shifts, causing the vines to dig into his wrists as he tries to relax back on the mattress. “Would you mind loosening these a bit before I sleep?” He glances at the

ivy coiled tightly around him. “I promise I won’t try to escape.”

He does appear rather uncomfortable. With a wave of my hand, I direct my magic to relax the vines holding him, so he’s not stretched quite so taut.

“Thank you.” Settling back in bed with a sigh, he closes his eyes. He cracks one open again and flashes a handsome grin. “I’m going to sleep now. Goodnight, fair Rapunzel.”

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I nod and look away to hide the warm flush of my cheeks. It's embarrassing how easily I blush in Ren's presence.

Since the bed is already taken with our new guest, Finik is asleep atop the bookshelf across the room. Exhaling, I move to the sofa and curl up on the cushions. I glance at Ren, determined to remain awake for at least another hour to ensure he doesn't try to escape.

It's foolish really. There's no way he could slip out of the vines. But I cannot ignore Glinda's warnings that whisper in the back of my mind about strangers. And while Ren may not seem dangerous, I'm not quite ready to free him.

With his eyes closed, I allow myself a moment to study him. He is masculine perfection made flesh—strong jaw, relaxed mouth, his features softened by sleep. There's something about him that draws me in. It's not just that I've dreamed of him, it's more than this. I feel connected to him in a way... as if he were someone I could trust. Somebody who is safe.

Sighing, I lift my gaze to the ceiling. Although I know I should release Ren and send him on his way, part of me dreads him leaving. Perhaps it is simply that I'm lonely. I've lived here for three years with only Glinda and Finik for company.

I picture his eyes once again. It cannot be mere coincidence that I've dreamed of him before. I've always been drawn to the idea of fate—of destiny bringing two souls together. It's rather romantic, I think. And I can't help but wonder if our paths were somehow destined to cross.

CHAPTER 5

REN

When I wake up, my gaze travels over the room. The faint light of dawn filters in through the window, covering Rapunzel in a golden glow as she lies sleeping on the sofa, across the way.

Her hair drapes over the side of the couch, and I wonder again at its surprising length. Although it's braided, there is so much of it I can only imagine how much longer it would be if she left it unbound.

With my arms and legs still restrained, she believes I cannot escape. I could easily free myself by either using my claws or shifting to my fox form, but the last thing I want is for her to be afraid.

No. I will remain this way for as long as it takes for her to feel safe with me.

Trust is a fragile thing. After our conversation last night, I get the impression that if I push too hard, or say the wrong thing about Glinda, it will only cause her to pull away from me.

And I cannot afford that. Especially if I hope to have any chance of convincing her to leave with me and eventually become my mate.

When she explained why she's here and about Glinda, a sense of dread settled deep in my gut. I don't trust her Glinda or the explanation she's given my fated one about why she's in this tower. Rapunzel's story has too many cracks. It doesn't make sense.

I grit my fangs, staring into the fire as it crackles low in the hearth.

Why would the witch steal her memories? Why would Drusilla not simply kill her to regain her power? And why would Glinda insist upon keeping Rapunzel here in the tower? What would be the point of keeping my fated one locked away unless—

Unless the real danger is Glinda instead of the Goblin witch—Drusilla.

Rapunzel yawns and stretches, ripping me back from my dark thoughts. She glances around the room. As soon as her gaze lands upon me, she stills, probably having temporarily forgotten the events of last evening as she shakes off the fog of sleep.

I offer my best smile. “Good morning.”

“Good... morning,” she replies a bit hesitantly. She rises from the sofa and heads toward the kitchen area.

“Did you sleep well?”

“I—yes.” She darts a glance at me and then looks away.

“If you let me go, I can help you make breakfast.” I flash what I hope is a winning grin. “It’s the least I can do to thank you for allowing me to stay here last night.”

Her head snaps to me, and she frowns as if considering. “All right,” she finally says. “But if you try anything, I’ll use my magic to bind you again.”

She raises her hands to presumably use her magic, but I extend my claws and slice the bindings on my wrists before freeing my ankles. When I look up, I find her gaping at me.

CHAPTER 6

REN

“How did—” She blinks several times. “If you were able to do that, why did you remain bound all night?”

“Because I didn’t want to scare you.” I meet her eyes evenly. “I would sooner end my own life than ever hurt you, Rapunzel. But I also understand that actions matter more than words, especially among two people who are relative strangers to each other. So, I chose to stay bound to show you that I mean you no harm. Now or ever.”

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She hesitates a beat before replying, “I’m not entirely sure you’re a stranger.”

“Oh.” My ears perk up. Perhaps I was wrong. Maybe she does sense the bond between us.

“Your eyes,” she continues, her voice barely more than a whisper. “They—”

On the edge of my seat, I wait for her to continue. When she does not, I gently press.

“What about my eyes?”

“They are familiar to me,” she admits. “I’ve dreamed of them almost every night for the past three months.”

Cautious hope fills me. Perhaps this is how the bond manifests in humans—through visions of one’s fated mate. “I’ve dreamed of this place.” I gesture to the room. “Of this tower.” She inhales sharply as I continue. “I’ve been searching for it for a little over a year now.”

“What do you think it means?”

I could tell her of the fated bond, but I’m not sure how it would be received. She doesn’t remember anything of her past beyond fragmented memories, and she believes the outside world is dangerous. Worried that I will only add to her fear by speaking of fate and destiny, I instead reply, “I’m not sure.”

Now that she is no longer afraid that I’m some sort of villainous bandit, I must find a way to convince her to leave this place and come with me. “Tell me, Rapunzel: have

you ever thought about what's beyond this tower?"

"Many times," she says wistfully. "I want so much to see the world."

This is what I need.

"You asked me where I'm from," I remind her. "Would you like me to tell you about my home?"

"I'd love to hear about it."

"I'm from Cambryn. The capital, Valmere, is tucked deep in the Golden Mountains. This time of year, the trees are beautiful in their autumn colors, with leaves of gold, crimson, and amber."

I watch her as I speak, imagining her walking those same paths. "The wind smells of spice and pine—it's the kind of scent that stays with you long after you leave."

"The castle is carved right into the mountainside, streaked with veins of gold that catch the light, making it appear as if it's glowing."

She leans in, listening, and I let my voice soften further. "There's a market at the heart of the city, where merchants come from every corner of the world. At night, their lanterns glow like starlight come down to earth."

My gaze lingers on her face, imagining us there. Together.

Rapunzel exhales softly, longing in her gaze. "It sounds... beautiful. I wish I could see it for myself."

I tilt my head, studying her. "You can, you know."

My pulse quickens as her eyes widen with excitement at my suggestion. Gods, her smile hits me like a physical blow. I want to be the one who gives her the world, who makes her eyes light up with wonder and joy.

But what if this excitement fades once we leave this place? She's lived a sheltered life these past three years, and once we leave the tower, there will be many males who have none of my scars—strong, powerful males who aren't damaged and insecure beneath a confident mask.

My heart clenches painfully at the thought. I want to trust this bond, and believe that she'll see past my flaws, but fear whispers relentlessly in the back of my mind. My scar throbs like a fresh wound, and dread coils in my gut. What if she rejects me because of it, the way Fox females would?

I swallow hard, pushing away the tight knot in my throat, forcing a casual smile onto my face. I'll just have to prove myself. Somehow, I'll make her see that I'm worthy. That I'll be everything she needs, if only she'll let me.

She frowns. "But Glinda says the outside world is dangerous."

"Yes, there can be danger in some places," I reply honestly, "but there is also beauty and kindness as well."

Hope fills her expression. "Do you think I could find someone out there that might be able to help me regain my lost memories?"

"It's possible," I offer. There are Elven and Fae Healers who specialize in reversing the harmful effects of dark spells. "If magic took your memories, we may be able to find someone who can restore them."

She smiles brightly. This is good. Perhaps, it will not be so hard to convince her to

leave here with me after all.

“Have you ever seen the ocean?” she asks, curious.

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“Of course,” I say casually, testing her interest. “And I even have a distant cousin who’s a pirate.”

Her eyes widen with fascination. “Do you truly?”

I can’t help but grin, realizing I have her attention. “Allow me to regale you with a tale of my travels with him aboard his ship, the Siren’s Fool.”

She blinks at me. “Why that name?”

“Well,” I say with mock seriousness, leaning closer, “because that’s what he is, of course. Had his heart broken by a beautiful human female from a land far away. He’s been sailing the seas ever since, trying to forget her.”

Her lips part in surprise before she laughs, the sound soft and melodic. “Oh, you’re teasing me.”

“Maybe I am.” I flash a grin. “Or maybe he’s out there right now, pining for her as we speak.”

She laughs again, the sound filling the room and making something warm stir in my chest. Her laughter is like sunlight breaking through clouds.

If she chooses me, I will make it my mission to ensure she smiles and laughs every day.

“My home is not very far from the sea. If you’d like, you’re welcome to come with

me one day and see it for yourself.”

“Maybe,” she says, softly biting her lower lip. “But how would I get through the magic barrier?”

“With this.” I hold up my green gemstone pendant—the gift from my grandfather. “It is charmed to allow me to pass through almost any magical ward.”

“That must be how you managed to step through the barrier last night, during the storm,” she murmurs. “Do you think it will work for both of us?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes dim as she looks down at her hands. “I’m not sure if Glinda will approve of me leaving the tower.”

“You don’t have to decide anything right now,” I add, before she spirals into hesitation and doubt. “But if you’d like, you can come with me when I leave.”

She chews on her lower lip, considering. “Could Finik come with us? For I cannot possibly bear to leave him behind. I love him too much.”

“Finik?” Fierce possessiveness flares brightly within as my entire body goes tense. Clenching my jaw, I force a smile to my face. “Who is this Finik?” I ask, trying to keep my voice even. I don’t even know this male, but I already want to claw out his eyes. “Does he visit you often?”

If she has a beau, I should not stand in her way. As much as it may kill me, it is the honorable thing to do.

“He sleeps with me almost every night,” she replies casually. “He’s my—”

“Hewhat?” My thoughts come to a screeching halt.

Honor be damned, this male is going to die.

CHAPTER 7

REN

My eyes snap to the bed, and I tip up my chin, scenting the air. I don’t detect the smell of another male and yet... My hands curl into fists at my sides as jealousy rages within. I’ll track him down and—

“There he is!” she exclaims happily.

I jerk my head toward the window, expecting to see my rival, ready to challenge him for her affections. Instead, a blur of brown fur and floofy tail bounds toward us. A heavy sigh of relief escapes me as I recognize the small squirrel.

He leaps into her lap, leaning into her palm as she strokes his soft fur. “This is Finik.” She smiles.

Finik turns to me, his tiny whiskers twitching with curiosity.

Squirrels, by nature, are wary of foxes, but as I reach out and pet him, he rubs his head against my hand.

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“He likes you.” She gives me a beaming smile.

I’ve never been one to appreciate fluffy-tailed rodents, but I must admit that this one is rather cute. Besides, he’s important to Rapunzel.

“Of course, he can come.”

Even as I promise this, I’m already wondering how I’m going to keep my cat from eating him. Sir Whiskers—as my sister affectionately named him—is an avid hunter, not to mention a bit of an attention hog.

I’ll need to find a High Elf to speak with Sir Whiskers, explaining that Finik is a friend and not food.

High Elves are one of the few races who can commune with animals, and I’m already thinking up a list of potential Elves I can recruit for the job when Rapunzel’s voice pulls me back from my thoughts. “Thank you, Ren.”

“For what?” I ask, confused.

“For telling me about your home and for offering to take me and Finik with you, if I choose.”

My heart stutters and stops as her lips curve into a stunningly gorgeous smile.

“Of—of course. It’s not any—I mean... it would be no trouble at all.” Seven hells, I’m so far gone I can barely string two words together. This female has already

captured me: heart, mind, body, and soul. Now, I just have to convince her to leave this tower, accompany me to my kingdom, and become my mate.

I grin. “Does this mean you’ve decided to come with me?”

She considers for a moment before answering, “Can I have a few days to think about it?”

I bite back a smile. This is a good sign. “Of course.” It also means I have a couple of more days to spend getting to know her before we travel. I long to know everything about my fated one.

“What do you normally do during the day?” I ask.

“After I finish my chores, I usually read.” She walks to the bookshelf across the way. “Glinda often brings me new books when she visits.”

As I peruse the titles, I realize most of these are romance novels. I’m not ashamed to admit that I’ve even read a few of these myself. “This is a good one.” I pull the book from the shelf and hold it out to her.

“You’ve read it?”

“Twice.”

Her entire face lights up. “It’s one of my favorites. I think I’ve read it at least six times.” She reaches for another book. “If you like this one, I believe you’ll love this.”

I grab another one, and a small notebook I hadn’t noticed falls from on top of it. “What is this?”

Flipping the book open, I scroll through the pages. “A sketchbook,” I murmur, perusing the colored charcoal images. “Did you draw all of these?”

Rapunzel snatches it from my hands and clutches it protectively to her chest. Whatever these drawings are, they are important to her.

“Forgive me,” I murmur. “I did not mean to pry. I—”

“It’s all right.” Her skin tinges pink, and I realize she is embarrassed for some reason. “I just... don’t like anyone to look at them.”

“Of course.”

She sets the sketchbook back on the shelf and then pulls out another novel, changing the subject. “Have you read this one?” she asks. “It’s really good.”

When I shake my head, an idea occurs to me. “Would you read it to me?”

My request is rewarded with another one of her beautiful smiles. She takes a seat beside me on the sofa and begins to read aloud. I try to focus on the words but all I can think of is her. I hate that she has been locked away here all alone for so long.

Even if Glinda turns out to not be the villain I suspect her to be, I’ve already decided that I still do not like her simply for the fact that she has made Rapunzel so afraid of the outside world.

And I vow that when we leave here, I will do my best to show her the marvels and the beauty that exists beyond this tower. To experience the world for herself and understand that there is so much more than Glinda has shared with her.

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When the sun begins to sink below the horizon, it isn't long before Rapunzel begins to nod off. She offers me the bed, but I refuse to take it. When she finally drifts to sleep, I carefully slip one arm behind her back and another under her knees, lifting her from the sofa.

Finik is asleep in her lap, and I take great care not to disturb him as I deposit them both on the bed. I arrange her hair as best I can so that it hangs off the side of the mattress and out of her way.

Her eyelids flutter open, and my heart stutters as she gives me a sleepy smile before closing her eyes again.

Finik yawns and moves to a nest of blankets near her pillow. A smile tugs at my mouth as he crawls beneath them, only the tip of his fluffy tail sticking out.

I tuck the comforter up under Rapunzel's chin and around her shoulders to make sure she remains warm throughout the night. Now that she's asleep, I take a moment to truly study her.

Her long hair shimmers in the firelight like fine strands of silver. She is the most beautiful female I've ever seen, and I am already completely taken with her.

The seer's words return to me, sharper now, weighted with meaning I hadn't fully grasped before. She is the one who told me I must search for an enchanted tower. She said it would contain my destiny, and a great treasure that would save my kingdom.

And now, not only have I found my fate one, but the moment I witnessed Rapunzel

using her magic, I knew. It isn't just a gift, it's a lifeline.

Last winter was brutal. Fields that had thrived for centuries withered beneath the unusually heavy frost, leaving our food stores half empty. We've planted extra crops this season, but my father fears it may not be enough.

North of our kingdom lies the Troll territories. And it seems their harvests suffered as well. They've increased their attacks upon our borders, stealing food from our granaries.

Rapunzel's magic could be the answer. If it is, however, that presents an entirely different set of problems. If word of her powers were to reach the Trolls, they would want her. They might even try to steal her away. Especially if she were a member of the royal family of Cambryn.

The Trolls hate our people. They rejected the last offer of peace my father made last year.

My hands curl into fists. I will die before I let them touch her.

Sitting on the edge of the sofa, I run a hand roughly through my short hair. Such worries are for later. For now, I need to work on convincing Rapunzel to leave with me. And the sooner I can get her to my kingdom, the better.

Once we reach Cambryn, I can ensure she is safe from any who may seek to harm or control her.

CHAPTER 8

REN

Buttery morning light spills through the window. I lean casually against the wall, arms crossed, watching Rapunzel as she makes tea. I offered to prepare breakfast, but she declined, claiming I'm her guest.

I bite back a grin as her gaze keeps flicking toward me, fast and guilty—like she's trying to memorize me without getting caught.

Little does she realize I'm as fascinated with her as she seems to be with me.

She hands me a cup of tea, and I pretend to study it thoughtfully. “Well, this is rather forward of you,” I muse. “In my culture, tea is sacred. Sharing it is basically a marriage proposal.”

Her eyes widen as I continue. “So, I'll accept your proposal.” I give her a roguish grin and wink. “But only if there's honey.”

Without missing a beat, she pushes the small jar of honey across the counter, further away from me.

I burst out laughing, and she does the same. I'm delighted that she feels comfortable enough to joke with me.

“Rapunzel!” A woman's voice calls out and we both freeze. “Let down your hair!”

Her gaze snaps to the window. “It's Glinda,” she says in a panicked whisper. “You need to hide.” She grabs my arm. “She can't know you're here.”

“Hide?” I echo, but she's already pushing me toward the wardrobe in the corner of the room. She's surprisingly strong for someone so small as she practically shoves me into the cramped space.

The scent of wood and lavender fills my nose, and I crouch low as she seals me inside. Through the thin crack between the doors, I see her whirl around the room, tidying up the space and hiding the extra dishes and cups that I've used.

“Rapunzel, let down your hair,” Glinda calls out again.

“Just a minute,” she replies before moving to the window and looping her hair around a large hook near the ledge before tossing her very long braid over the side.

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Rapunzel's hair goes taut as Glinda presumably begins to ascend.

I don't understand why she wouldn't just use the stairs instead. Perhaps she does this in the hopes of keeping them hidden in the event that a stranger—like myself—happens to stumble upon this place, to make it harder for someone to access the tower.

A human hand appears on the window ledge and my hackles rise as the scent of licorice floats in on the breeze.

Glinda's shoulder-length golden hair glints in the sunlight. Her features are delicate and flawless. She appears rather young for someone who supposedly was a nanny to Rapunzel when she was a child. She appears human, but her distinct smell tells me otherwise.

Sickly sweet, the cloying scent is unmistakable, and I wonder how I didn't notice it earlier. Rapunzel said that Glinda visits her every few days, so it should have been all over this tower. It weaves through the air like a warning, setting my teeth on edge.

She's a Goblin. She must be.

"Hello, my sweet girl," Glinda croons, her voice syrupy and false as they embrace. "I've missed you so."

"I've missed you too," Rapunzel replies. "You've never been gone for so long."

"It would have been longer," Glinda replies, "But, thankfully, I managed to cut my

trip down to three weeks so I could return to you sooner, my dear.”

She’s been gone for almost a month. No wonder I didn’t detect her scent before now.

Glinda suddenly stills, her nostrils flaring. Her gray eyes narrow, and my stomach twists in a knot as she sniffs the air.

I hold perfectly still. I’m not sure how good a Goblin’s sense of smell is, but I know it’s more acute than a human’s.

“Has anyone been here?” Glinda asks, voice sharp beneath its honeyed exterior.

“No,” Rapunzel denies. She wrings her hands behind her back as Glinda’s gaze travels around the room, eyes narrowing in suspicion.

Goblins are powerful beings; many of them dangerous. Every muscle in my body is coiled, my hands flexing at my sides as my claws extend. I struggle to remain calm and quiet as my inner fox snarls and rages beneath my skin, ready to spring forth and tear this creature apart.

After a moment, Glinda relaxes again. She moves to the sofa and motions for Rapunzel to sit on the floor, in front of her. “Now,” she says. “Let’s do something about all this hair, shall we?”

Rapunzel nods and leans back against the sofa as Glinda undoes her braid and then begins to stroke a silver comb through her long silken hair.

Glinda hums a gentle tune, and Rapunzel closes her eyes, relaxed as Glinda brushes her hair. Her movements are slow and deliberate. A faint glow emanates from Glinda’s hands, a deep purple shimmer that pulses at her fingertips.

My protective instincts flare and I bite back a growl. This is magic, but I don't yet know her intent.

Even so, I don't trust her. I'm about to push out of the wardrobe when Rapunzel's eyes snap to mine. Subtly, she shakes her head.

Clenching my jaw, I force myself to remain where I am. Rapunzel trusts this woman, and I do not want to do anything to upset her. Not without definite cause.

And while I suspect, based upon her scent, that Glinda is a Goblin, I'm not entirely sure. Even if she is what I suspect, not all Goblins practice dark magic. I admit to being wary of them because they are so powerful, but I also know that there are many Goblins who only use their powers for good.

Rapunzel yawns, sagging against the cushions as Glinda continues to sing to her.

"Glinda?" Rapunzel's voice is barely above a whisper. "It's been almost three years. Don't you think it might be safe for me to leave the tower now?"

My ears twitch.

Glinda stills for a moment before resuming her slow, rhythmic strokes. "Oh, my dear," she coos. "What a dangerous thought."

Rapunzel turns her head back to look up at her. "Surely the Goblin witch isn't searching for me anymore?"

Glinda shakes her head. "Rapunzel, darling, do you think a creature of darkness simply gives up?" She tuts, clicking her tongue in disapproval. A slow pulse of light flickers over her hands. "No. I'm sure the Goblin witch has armies of vile minions who would tear the world apart to find you. You are far too important to her."

Ice floods my veins.

“Besides,” Glinda continues. “Your power must be kept secret. If people were to find out you had this, you wouldn’t be safe.”

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“But you’re safe,” Rapunzel counters. “And you have magic.”

“Mine is not nearly as strong as yours,” Glinda replies smoothly. “So, I am not as much of a target for those who want power.”

A frustrated look crosses Rapunzel’s face. But instead of arguing her point further, she says, “I just want to see what’s beyond this tower. That’s all.”

“The world is a cruel place, child,” Glinda chides. “Besides, you have everything you could ever want here. Why long for the unknown?”

“But I don’t have everything I want. I want my freedom,” she states firmly.

Glinda stills as a tense silence settles between them, a shadow crossing her features. “Do you have any idea the sacrifices I have made to keep you safe?”

Rapunzel flinches as Glinda’s fingers tighten briefly on her shoulder before relaxing again as she continues. “The world is far too dangerous, full of bandits and all sorts of monsters. You wouldn’t survive out there.” She brushes her hand along Rapunzel’s cheek. “You must trust me. I only want what’s best for you.”

My jaw tightens, and I bite back a growl. The scent of licorice seems to thicken in the room, making my stomach churn. Glinda is keeping Rapunzel here, feeding her fear, trapping her with lies.

CHAPTER 9

REN

It takes everything in me not to burst out of this wardrobe. My claws dig into my palms as I curl my hands into fists at my sides.

“I know. I’m so sorry,” Rapunzel says. “Please, forgive me.”

Glinda presses a kiss to the top of her head. “There’s nothing to be sorry for, my dear.”

Her fingers start to glow again as she resumes combing Rapunzel’s hair, singing softly. Her voice is so faint I cannot quite make out all the words, but a few of them sound like Darksyl—the shadow tongue used for incantations.

Rapunzel blinks heavily, her posture softening, as her breaths become slow and even as she begins to nod off.

I shift my ears forward, straining to hear, and wince as something shifts beneath me with a low thump.

Fates curse me.

Glinda stops, her head whipping in my direction. The glow at her fingertips vanishes instantly, and Rapunzel jerks back awake.

My heart pounds as Glinda’s gaze sweeps the room. “Did you hear something, my dear?”

Rapunzel sits up, rubbing her eyes. “No.”

“I must be hearing things,” Glinda says. She presses a kiss to Rapunzel’s forehead. “I

should go. There are things I must do. You should get some sleep.”

Rapunzel nods as Glinda rises from the sofa. Together they walk to the window and Rapunzel drapes her long braid over the hook, near the ledge, throwing it over the side for Glinda to climb back down.

“I will return soon,” she says as she drops over the edge and begins her descent to the ground below.

As soon as she’s gone, I step out of the wardrobe. My fox is on high alert, fangs lengthened and claws extended.

“She’s not what you think she is, Rapunzel.” The words leave my mouth in a rush as every instinct within demands that I take her away from this place, far from whatever evil purpose Glinda has in keeping her here.

“What are you talking about?” she stares at me in confusion. “What do you mean she’s not what I think she is?”

“She’s lying to you,” I snap, my voice coming out much firmer than I intended. “The world isn’t nearly as dangerous as she wants you to believe. She’s keeping you here for a reason, and I don’t think it’s because she cares about you. We need to go.” Worry claws at my chest. “We need to get as far away from this place as possible.”

“Why?”

“Because she put you under some sort of spell, Rapunzel.” I grip her shoulders, desperate to make her understand. “Whatever she was doing to you—it wasn’t right. We have to go. Now.”

“No.” She steps back, shrugging my hands from her. “I can’t just leave. I—”

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“Rapunzel?” Glinda’s sickly-sweet voice calls out from below, cutting off whatever she was going to say next. “Let down your hair, my dear. I forgot something.”

Cold dread slams into me, hard and fast. “Rapunzel,” I whisper urgently. “Don’t let her back up here. You cannot trust her. She—”

“Stop,” Rapunzel cuts me off. “I don’t know why you’re saying these things, but you’re not even supposed to be here.” She glances back at the window. “If she catches you here—”

“Rapunzel?” Glinda calls out again. “Let down your hair,” she demands. “Right now.”

“Go.” My fated one gestures animatedly to the wardrobe. “Hurry.”

I don’t like this, but I do as she says, tucking myself back into the wardrobe as she drapes her long braid over the hook near the window before tossing the rest of it over the side for Glinda to ascend.

Rapunzel is not a Fox Shifter. She doesn’t feel the fated bond like I do. I’m still a relative stranger to her. One who has yet to fully gain her trust. And until I do, I must be careful how I speak to her about Glinda.

Rapunzel obviously doesn’t realize what’s being done to her. Seven hells, I’m not even sure what the witch is doing to my fated one. I only know that whatever it is, it cannot be good if Glinda is using her magic to lull Rapunzel into sleep as she weaves spells while combing her hair.

As Glinda climbs in through the window, I struggle to remain still as my Fox paces back and forth beneath the surface, like a caged animal.

Glinda's shoes click against the stone floor as she walks to Rapunzel and takes both her hands. "Rapunzel. Are you certain no one has been here?"

Rapunzel's gaze flicks toward the wardrobe before she shakes her head.

I grit my fangs. It's a small glance, but it's enough to alert her captor.

"Liar," Glinda snaps, her words cutting through the air like a blade.

Lightning fast, I shove the doors open and leap out, my Fox ready to burst forth and defend my mate as I position myself between her and Glinda.

"What have we here?" Glinda narrows her eyes. "Tell me, Fox. Just how did you manage to find this place?"

A faint shimmer of light ripples across her hands, revealing short, black claws, that vanish in a flash, returning to blunt, human nails. It happens so quickly, I doubt Rapunzel even saw it.

"Goblin," I murmur under my breath, and her eyes widen as I straighten to my full height, baring my fangs. "Drop the disguise, witch."

"What... what is he talking about?" Rapunzel blinks at Glinda in confusion.

Glinda's lips pull back in a snarl, revealing two rows of white fangs as her entire form ripples. Her golden hair changes to lavender as her pale skin turns violet. Silver reptilian eyes replace human ones, narrowing as she glares at me, extending her dagger-sharp black claws.

Rapunzel staggers back. “Glinda?”

My Fox bristles with rage as my protective instincts flare brightly. “Stay behind me, Rapunzel.”

The Goblin witch smiles, her sharp teeth gleaming like a predator savoring its prey. “So, you’ve found a protector, my little bird. How sweet,” she says, tone mockingly affectionate. “I certainly hope you’ve not become too attached to him.”

Glinda cocks her head, her unnerving silver-rimmed eyes flicking over me, assessing, calculating.

My claws lengthen as I glare at her in return.

Her gaze flicks to Rapunzel. “How could you allow a stranger into your tower?” She tuts, shaking her head. “I thought I raised you better than that.”

“I don’t understand,” Rapunzel’s voice quavers. “Who are you really? And why have you been lying to me?”

“Oh, my dear, please forgive me. I couldn’t tell you the whole truth.” She gives Rapunzel a sad look. “But I promise you that everything I did was for your protection.”

My jaw tightens. This Goblin is trying to manipulate her. “Protect her from what?” I challenge. “From some supposedly evil witch that wants to capture her?” Glinda levels a dark glare at me as I continue. “You’re the one keeping her captive here.”

Anger blisters through me as I recall Rapunzel’s story of how she came here under Glinda’s protection, and everything falls into place. “You’re Drusilla, aren’t you?”

The Goblin's eyes widen in shock before her lips curl in a feral snarl. "Don't listen to him, Rapunzel. He's a fox. A trickster. Do you truly believe he stumbled upon you by accident?"

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“You used dark magic on her,” I say accusingly, refusing to let her poison my mate against me. “I saw you. You were weaving a spell as you combed her hair.” I bare my fangs. “It was you, wasn’t it? You’re Drusilla. And you stole her memories so she wouldn’t remember it was you all along.”

“Lies,” she grinds out. “Don’t listen to him. He’s lying to you. He’s a Fox Shifter. They are not to be trusted.” She extends her clawed hand to my mate, beckoning. “I will protect you from—”

“You. Will. Not. Touch. Her,” I growl.

CHAPTER 10

RAPUNZEL

“If you dare come any closer, I will rip you to shreds,” Ren snarls.

Goblin. The word echoes in my mind as I study the woman I thought I knew. Even her name was a lie. All this time, I feared Drusilla—the Goblin witch who murdered my family. And now, I know that Glinda is her. She always was. Her glamour has dissolved, and silver reptilian eyes blaze with anger as she glares at Ren.

“I don’t understand,” I take a small step back, shaking my head. “Why did you lie to me?”

Her eyes flick to mine, her expression softening just enough to make me doubt myself. My stomach churns as I recall every bedtime story, every kiss on the

forehead. “Did you ever truly care for me?”

“Of course, I did. But do you have any idea what you hold, Rapunzel?” Drusilla’s voice shakes, desperation leaking through her cold composure. “Your magic is mine—taken from me when I used it to save your life. I could have killed you to reclaim it, but I didn’t. Instead, I took your memories, keeping you blissfully ignorant and safe while I’ve been trying to find a way to reverse the spell that gave you my power. What I did was a kindness.”

“You claim it was kindness?” Ren challenges. “When you murdered her family, stole her memories, and have held her captive all this time?” He shakes his head. “No. The truth is that you feared if you killed her, your magic might be lost to you forever. And you weren’t willing to take that chance.” He growls low in his throat. “Isn’t that right, Drusilla?”

“Such a clever Fox,” she says mockingly. “But you are wrong.” Her sharp gaze sweeps to me. “Whatever you think of me, know this: I am not a murderer. Your family is alive.”

I inhale sharply. My family is alive.

“I knew that if I told you this, you would demand to be returned to them,” she continues. “And I needed you to be compliant while I have searched for a way to reclaim my magic.”

She pauses. “I disguised myself and became your nanny—a servant in your family’s household.” She gives me a pleading look. “Have I not cared for you? Kept you safe? Brushed your hair lovingly, like a mother would her own child?”

“You didn’t do this out of love. I watched you,” Ren grits through his fangs. “You were speaking words of Darksyl—shadow speech. Why?”

Her expression darkens. “It is the only incantation I’ve found that can return bits of my magic back to me. And with enough time, it may even allow me to reclaim it all.”

“But at what cost?” I ask, sick to my stomach as I stare at the woman I once thought of as a mother figure. “Tell me,” I demand.

Drusilla clenches her jaw. “Your memories.”

Sorrow tightens my chest. Her explanations always felt hollow. Now I know why. Her protection and care were always laced with lies.

She gives Ren a dark look. “You think you’ve ruined everything, Fox, but you haven’t. A quick spell, and she’ll forget this foolish rebellion. This isn’t the first time I’ve had to deal with this.”

Her words hit me like a physical blow. The room spins as I realize what she’s saying.

How much of my memory has she stolen from me?

“You won’t touch her,” Ren snarls, his fox ears flattened against his head and his tail bristling with anger. He glances back, and his amber eyes meet mine, an unspoken vow to protect me blazing in their depths. “Not this time.”

Drusilla smirks. “Oh, you foolish Fox,” she croons mockingly. “You think you can stop me?”

She raises her arms, sparks of magic arcing across her fingers. The fire in the hearth shrinks, its golden glow snuffed out as shadows ripple across the walls. “I believe you’ve forgotten who it is you have threatened.”

“Get behind me!” Ren cries out.

The air explodes around us as a blast of violet energy surges from Drusilla's hands, crackling like lightning. Fear rips through me as it strikes Ren, curling around his body in powerful flames.

My jaw drops as he stands before me, unfazed. The magic washes over him before dissipating into the air like mist.

He straightens to his full height, tipping up his chin in defiance. "Did you forget something, Goblin?" His voice is low and lethal, his fox-fire eyes glinting like sharpened steel. "My kind are immune to magic."

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A shiver moves down my spine as her gaze shifts to me, cold and calculating.

“Don’t even think about it, witch,” Ren snarls. “She is mine, and I will end you before I allow you to harm her.”

My mouth drifts open at his statement, but it quickly snaps shut as Drusilla laughs darkly. “Oh, my poor Fox,” she tsks. “You think you are safe, but you’re not.”

Lightning fast, she flicks her wrist, sending out an arc of magic. It wraps around the bookshelf, lifting it effortlessly and throwing it across the room, straight toward Ren.

Without hesitation, he spins and pushes me out of harm’s way, narrowly avoiding the heavy object before it slams to the floor, sending books and parchment scattering.

Drusilla laughs with wicked delight. “Your magic may protect you from a direct attack, but it doesn’t protect you from the indirect effects.”

She lashes out with her power, directing it toward a heavy chair, sending it barreling toward Ren. He spins out of the way, barely missing the wooden chair as it smashes against the opposite wall.

“Stop it!” I yell. “Leave Ren alone!”

Drusilla’s head whips toward me, her eyes narrowing. “Enough!” she snaps. She raises one hand, a ball of purple magic hovering above her palm. “One spell and you won’t even remember his name. And things can be as they were.”

“No!” I cry out in panic, realizing her intent as her dark magic hurtles toward me.

In a blur of movement, Ren snatches a silver platter from the table, and leaps in front of me. Drusilla’s magic hits the polished surface with a thunderous boom.

Ren flies backward, slamming against the wall with a sickening crack at the same time the dark magic ricochets back at her in a brilliant arc, knocking her off her feet.

She crumples to the floor, her body limp as the spell’s energy crackles faintly around her.

Panicked, I rush to Ren and fall to my knees beside him. My hands tremble as I touch his face. “Ren.” His entire form is still. Too still. “Please, wake up.”

He groans, and relief moves through me as he opens his eyes.

“Rapunzel,” he rasps, wincing as I help him sit up. “Did she hurt you?”

My heart squeezes in my chest. Even despite his obvious pain, he’s more concerned about my welfare than his own.

“I’m fine. You saved me.” I brush the hair back from his face. “I thought you were dead.”

His lips curve up in a faint grin. “You’ll be pleased to know that Foxes are very resilient... not easily killed.” He arches a playful brow. “And obviously quite brave.”

I laugh at his teasing even as relief floods my chest that he feels well enough to joke with me.

“Do you think you can stand?”

He nods and then groans low in his throat as I help him get to his feet.

Ren walks over to Drusilla. Her eyes are closed, but the slight rise and fall of her chest means she's alive.

"Still breathing," he mutters. His expression hardens. "Perhaps we should change that."

"No!" I move to his side. "Please, Ren. Don't kill her."

His jaw tightens. "Even after everything she's done to you? After what she planned to do... you would spare her life?"

"I... know she's not a good person, but—" Emotions war deep within as I stare down at her. Anger. Betrayal. Sadness. Part of me hates her, but another part cannot let go of who I thought she was—a woman who cared for me like a daughter. "I just want to leave," my voice shakes as I blink back tears. "That's all I've ever wanted."

Swallowing against the lump in my throat, I turn back to him. "Besides, her spell backfired on her. When she awakens, she won't even remember anything of what she's done... of all her lies."

The firelight flickers between us, painting sharp shadows across his face. "She is a Goblin, Rapunzel. Even in her weakened state, without full use of her magic, she is still powerful. I doubt the dark enchantment will erase her memory. If we're lucky, it will buy us half a day at most before she recovers."

I understand what he's saying, and I know it's foolish, but I don't want to see her killed. "Please, Ren. Let's just go."

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His intense gaze holds mine a moment before he releases a heavy sigh and scrubs a hand through his tousled red hair. “All right.” He glances around the room. “Let’s gather some food and supplies. We should leave here before she awakens.”

CHAPTER 11

RAPUNZEL

The cool night breeze caresses my skin as I gaze out the tower window to the ground far below. My long, silver braid is looped securely over the iron hook near the ledge.

I thought about using my magic to have the vines help us down, but using my powers always takes so much out of me. I don’t want to be tired at the start of our journey.

Glinda has climbed this way many times before, but I’ve only ever taken the stairs.

I wish we could use them now, but Ren is right. It’s better to hide the door with the bookcase. Even if the memory spell only works on her for a few hours, it will give us more time to get away from here before she remembers how to escape the tower.

“Are you ready?” Ren's voice is low and soothing, pulling my attention back to him.

Nervously, I nod. This is what I’ve always wanted. Freedom. But now that it’s here, I can’t help but feel a bit of trepidation. I don’t remember anything about living in the outside world.

Ren braces himself against the window ledge, his sharp claws digging into the

weathered surface. He glances at the iron hook embedded in the wall, where my braid is looped and knotted securely. He tugs it once, then twice, testing the strength.

Ren presses his full weight on the iron hook. “Seems sturdy enough,” he murmurs before turning to me and arching a brow. “Now for the fun part.”

“I’ve never done this before,” I swallow thickly as I pat my pocket, making sure Finik is still securely tucked away inside. “I’ve always used the stairs.”

Ren steps closer, erasing any space between us. My pulse quickens as his powerful hands settle on my waist and he scoops me up into his arms as if I weigh nothing.

My hands press lightly against his bare shoulders. As I gaze up at him, my heart races, not from fear, but from something else entirely.

“Wrap your arms around my neck,” he instructs. “And your legs around my waist.”

Heat rises in my cheeks as I do as he says. His heart beats a strong and steady rhythm against the cage of his chest, a stark contrast to the wild thundering of my own, at the feel of his body pressed against mine.

He glances down at me, amber gold eyes gleaming, and I’m almost certain he’s enjoying this far too much. “Are you ready?”

“No.” The word escapes me before I can stop it.

He chuckles before catching himself, a playful smirk tugging his lips.

Worry tightens my chest as I meet his gaze evenly. “You won’t let me fall, will you?”

“Never,” he says confidently. “My vow.”

Carefully, he drops us over the side, his strong hands holding tightly to my braid. His muscles flex and bunch beneath me as we begin our descent. Halfway there, I make the mistake of looking down, and emit a small squeak of distress. My heart taps a frantic beat as I tighten my arms and legs around him.

He looks at me, his face inches from mine, and his expression softens. “It’s all right, Rapunzel. I promise,” he says solemnly. “I won’t let you fall.”

Closing my eyes, I bury my head in his chest, the scent of rain and forest enveloping me, and he continues to descend.

It’s strange how much I already trust him even though we’ve only recently met. There is just something about him that feels right... that puts me at ease.

“Are you okay?” his voice is a low rumble beneath my ear.

I nod, although my heart feels as if it will beat out of my chest at any moment.

Ren begins humming. The melody is somewhat playful and jaunty, and he catches me off guard as he starts to sing aloud.

“Oh, a clever fox, dashing and bold,

His charm and wit worth more than gold...

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His features so handsome that nary a maiden

Can resist his smile, their hearts all laden.”

I bite back a laugh. “What on earth are you singing?”

“Something I just made up.” He grins. “Do you like it?”

Before I can answer, he continues.

“With eyes of amber, his tail so sleek,

The bravest hero—though modest and meek!”

I burst out laughing. “Modest and meek? I don’t think so,” I tease.

He gasps, feigning offense even as his eyes shine with mischief. “You wound me, my Lady. Do you not like my singing?” He tips up his chin in a mock imperious look. “I believe I have a rather exceptional voice, if I do say so myself.”

“Perhaps.” I laugh and decide to tease him in return. “Though your songwriting leaves much to be desired.”

“And yet, you're smiling.” He arches a playful brow. “Admit it, you're thoroughly charmed by my song and my singing voice.”

“Hardly.” I bite back a grin. “I'm merely amused by your lack of musical talent.”

His mouth falls open in pretend shock before he heaves a dramatic sigh. “You’ve wounded my artistic soul, and I fear I may never recover.”

“I have a feeling you’ll be just fine,” I joke in return.

He chuckles, the rich sound vibrating through his chest, warming something deep inside me.

Finik peeks his head out of my dress pocket and my heart stops as he leaps onto a nearby tree. Panic spirals through me as I realize just how high up we still are.

Ren’s singing had been so distracting, I’d almost forgotten what we were doing. But now that I’ve been reminded, I bury my face in his chest and tighten my hold on him, shivering.

“It’s all right.” He nuzzles the top of my head. “We’re almost there. I promise I have you, Rapunzel.”

Despite his soothing words, my heart is still racing.

“Would you like to hear the rest of the song?” he asks, a teasing lilt in his voice.

Unable to speak, I nod against him.

He draws in a deep breath and begins singing again.

“Through moonlit woods, he bravely strides,

adventure following where'er he glides.

A wink, a grin, and a roguish glance,

leaves every heart in a dizzying trance.

Oh, clever fox, handsome and brave—”

Soft laughter escapes me, my anxiety slowing melting away as I listen to his ridiculously funny song.

“Are you laughing at me again?” he asks in mock offense.

I chuckle. “Don’t forget to mention how modest and meek the clever fox is.”

“That just so happens to be the next line,” he jokes.

I laugh even more.

“You can let go now,” he murmurs. “We’re on the ground.”

“Truly?” I ask, unable to force myself to peel away from him.

He gives me a reassuring squeeze as his other hand cups my chin, tipping my face up to his. Warm amber eyes meet mine. “You’re safe.”

Slowly, I unwind myself from his body, his strong hands gripping my waist as he sets my feet on the ground. I study him a moment. “Did you sing that song to distract me so I wouldn’t be so afraid?”

He lifts one brow. “Did it work?”

My heart flutters as he flashes a handsome grin. “Yes. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

Ren gives a firm tug to my hair and the braid slips from the hook at the top, dropping to the ground beside us.

He takes a small step closer to me, his eyes searching mine. “First of all, I want you to know I adore everything about you.” My face warms as he takes my hand and presses a tender kiss to my knuckles before he continues. “But I think we might want

to consider trimming your hair for our journey,” he says a bit hesitantly. “What do you think?”

Oh, how I wish it were possible, but it’s not. “We can’t.”

He frowns. “Why not?”

“It’s part of my curse. It’s somehow tied to the witch’s magic and cannot be cut. I’ve tried it many times.”

“All right.” He nods. “We’ll just have to take great care to keep it from catching on anything.”

Finik climbs up my dress and onto my shoulder. He twitches his little nose, and Ren reaches out and strokes his fur with one finger. “Glad to have you go with us.” He smiles. “I think you’ll make an excellent addition to our party, my little friend.”

I love that he includes Finik like this. He’s been my constant companion these past three years and means the world to me.

Ren smiles and offers me his hand. “Shall we go on an adventure, my amira?”

Despite all that has happened, I can hardly contain my excitement. I’m finally leaving. I’m going to see and experience the world outside. And, if the gods are with me, I’ll find a way to regain my memories, reclaim my life, and find my family.

Softly biting my lower lip, I slip my palm into his. “Yes.”

CHAPTER 12

RAPUNZEL

When we reach the magic barrier, I fold my braid a few times to shorten the length, tying it with several thick ribbons until it only hangs down to my ankles. It's still a heavy weight on my head, but at least it's not dragging on the ground. The last thing I want is for my hair to catch on something.

Noticing me fidgeting with one of my ribbons, Ren helps me tie it securely.

The green gemstone on his necklace pulses with light and the air hums with magic as we stand before the invisible veil that separates the place from the outside world. As I study the shimmering magic of the barrier, worry takes root in my chest. "What if we can't make it through together?"

"We will," he assures me. "This charm works for at least two people."

"What about Finik?" I glance at my furry companion, his dark eyes watching us intently. "What if he cannot come through with us?"

My heart squeezes as Ren strokes Finik's head. "Then, I'll come back for him. Simple as that."

Finik purrs, nuzzling Ren's palm.

Despite his reassurance, I cannot shake my concerns. "What if I cannot pass through for some reason? What if the witch's magic prevents it?"

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Ren takes both my hands, his foxfire eyes staring deep into mine. “You have my most solemn vow that I will not leave you behind, Rapunzel.”

“But what if—”

“If you cannot leave, then I will remain here with you, if you wish. You don’t have to be alone anymore.”

I swallow against the lump forming in my throat. We’ve only known each other for less than two days and he already understands my deepest fears. I’ve been isolated and by myself in this place for so long... I don’t want to live that way. Ever again.

“Although, I should warn you.” Ren gives me a sly grin. “I come with quirks. Questionable singing ability, excessive charm, and an unfortunate tendency to be distractingly handsome. Think carefully before proceeding.”

I laugh, warmth flooding my chest. “I suppose I can handle it. As long as you promise not to sing.”

His jaw drops comically before he presses a hand to his chest, over his heart. “Now you’re just hurting my artistic pride. Admit it—you secretly enjoy my singing.”

I shrug lightly, fighting back a grin. “It’s all right in small doses, I suppose.”

He barks out a laugh. “Alright then.” He gestures to the veil. “Shall we?”

I nod, and he bursts into song as he takes my hand and pulls me toward the barrier.

“Oh, a clever fox, dashing and bold,

His charm and wit worth more than gold—”

His words are cut off as we step through. The air shifts and a faint hum of magic moves over my skin before vanishing entirely. I blink and we’re standing in a forest.

Finik is thankfully still in my pocket and I pet him reassuringly.

It doesn’t look all that different from where we were before, but when I turn around my breath catches. I can no longer see the tower that has been my home—my prison—for the past three years.

Ren steps beside me, his presence steady and warm even in the cool night air. “It’s strange,” I whisper, scanning the woods around us. “The outside world doesn’t look all that different.”

Ren lifts my chin with one claw-tipped finger, and flashes a devastatingly handsome grin. “That’s because our adventure is only beginning, my amira.”

A shiver of excitement ripples through me as his amber eyes meet mine. I cannot deny that I’m attracted to Ren, but I’m also a bit nervous. All of this is new to me. At least... as far as I can remember.

Part of me wonders if I had someone out here. Someone who looked at me the way Ren looks at me now. Someone who loved me... someone waiting for me to return. Swallowing hard, I avert my gaze.

Ren takes a small step back and clears his throat. “If we are to travel quickly, I should change.”

Before I can ask what he means, he adds, “Don’t be afraid. I would sooner take my own life than ever harm you.”

I frown. “Why would I be afraid?”

His lips twitch like I’ve amused him, but he only shakes his head. “Most people would be the first time they see someone shift.”

A blur of red, white and gold swirls before me, like autumn leaves caught in a violent wind. The air crackles with magic, raising the hairs along my arms. I blink and then gasp when I see a massive fox where Ren once stood.

His frame is sleek and powerful, standing taller than a warhorse. His thick fur is a cascade of fiery red and winter white. His long furry tail flicks behind him, curling at the end. His amber eyes, with vertically slit pupils, expand as they lock onto mine.

He was wrong, for I am quite the opposite of afraid. I’m curious and fascinated as I step forward, drawn to him in a way I cannot explain.

Tentatively, I lift my hand and brush my fingers over the thick fur along his neck. It’s soft as silk and warm beneath my palm.

Ren leans into my touch and a low rumbling sound—like a purr—starts in his chest.

“You’re beautiful,” I whisper.

He snorts a puff of air, clearly affronted. His purr goes silent as his ears flick back.

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“Beautiful?” His voice echoes in my mind as he puffs out his chest like an indignant peacock. “I’m not beautiful, I’m strong and handsome.”

I jerk back, eyes wide. “I just heard you in my mind.”

Ren stills. “You can hear me?”

“Yes.”

His lips pull back in what I assume is a fox grin. “I knew you were the one.”

“The one?” I frown. “What are you talking about?”

His head jerks toward the forest, his ears flicking forward and his entire body suddenly tense. “We have to go.”

Worry tightens my chest. “What’s wrong?”

“No time to explain.” Ren lowers himself onto his haunches, dipping his massive frame toward the ground. “Get on,” he commands, voice urgent. “Quickly.”

Gathering my skirts, I climb onto his back, settling just below his shoulders. Our supply satchel is slung across my back and Finik is still nestled safely in my dress pocket.

“Hold on tight.” It’s the only warning I get before he surges forward, breaking into a run.

The wind whips through my hair and the forest blurs around us as we race through the woods, his muscles bunching and shifting beneath me with effortless grace.

The crisp night air cools my skin as Ren weaves expertly through the trees as the scent of pine and damp earth fills my lungs.

I lean forward and call out. “What are we running from?”

“Pixies,” he says over his shoulder.

It takes me a moment to realize he’s said this aloud instead of in my mind, and I mean to ask him about it, but when I look over my shoulder, I see dozens of flickering golden lights following close.

“Are they dangerous?”

“They may be tiny, but they have razor-sharp fangs, and very foul tempers.”

Worry fills me as they gain on us, and the angry buzzing of dozens of tiny wings fills the air. “Why are they after you?”

“I may have insulted them a few days ago. Before I stumbled through the barrier around the tower.”

That doesn’t sound quite so bad. “Perhaps you can try talking to them?” I offer. “Maybe apologize or something?”

It’s an odd sensation, but somehow I’m able to sense... to feel his hesitation before he finally replies. “I already tried, but it didn’t work.”

“What did you do?”

Ren yelps, and I glance back, eyes wide as a couple of pixies nip at his haunches, their lips peeled back, revealing tiny, dagger-sharp fangs.

He flicks them off with his tail and they slam against a nearby tree in a puff of pixie dust, letting loose a series of high-pitched squeaks that I'm sure are some rather choice words.

“You know, I tried to apologize!” He calls over his shoulder. “But I take it back. You're vermin! The lot of you! Nothing more than a bunch of pesky gnats with delusions of grandeur!”

The angry buzzing grows louder.

Without warning, the ground falls out from beneath us. A scream tears from my throat as we tumble forward, the world spinning in a blur of trees, darkness, and moonlight.

Ren shifts back to his two-legged form in a swift ripple of magic. His strong arms wrap around my waist as he tucks me against him, curling protectively around me, absorbing every jarring blow and sharp scrape as we careen down the steep incline.

When we finally come to an abrupt halt at the bottom, Ren is panting, his breath is hot against my neck and I'm fully enveloped by his large, muscular frame.

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I lift my head and the world spins a moment before settling. The furious buzzing of the pixies grows louder as they swarm down the hill, toward us.

Raw panic claws at my chest. My hands begin to tingle with a familiar warmth. Raising my arms, green wisps of magic swirl around my fingers and gather in palms.

With a flick of my wrist I send my power to the ground. The earth trembles and thick vines burst from the soil in a rush of vibrant green. Twisting and weaving together like living ropes, they form a tight, protective barrier around us just as the pixies descend.

I wince as their tiny bodies slam into the barrier. They emit a series of high-pitched squeaks of indignation at being denied their prize.

Ren's eyes are wide as he studies the foliage dome around us. "Gods above," he murmurs, voice full of wonder as he turns his gaze to me. "That was incredible."

I glance down at my hands in shock. I've used my magic before, but it's never responded so quickly. Usually, I have to focus hard before I can call it forth.

Anxiety spikes through me as I suddenly realize my dress pocket is empty. "Oh my gods, where's Finik?"

CHAPTER 13

RAPUNZEL

Frantic, I scan all around us, but I don't see him.

"He must have fallen out of your pocket when we were rolling down the hill." Ren's voice is tight with worry. "Surely, he—"

The buzzing outside stops and a faint series of squeaks fills the air.

"What is it?"

Ren narrows his eyes. "It's the Hive Queen. She says Finik is outside with them, and she wants to speak with us."

My concern is quickly replaced by protective anger, and my magic flares to life again in my palms. "Tell her that if she hurt him, I'll—"

Another series of squeaks sounds outside and Ren turns to me. "She says he's fine."

"Prove it." I grit through my teeth. "Because I swear if he's harmed—"

Several more squeaks cut me off and Ren arches a quizzical brow. "She says that he takes his afternoon tea with an extraspoonful of honey and his favorite food is the almond cake you make once a week."

My shoulders sag in relief. "It's him."

With a flick of my wrist, I direct my magic to pull back some of the vines so we can see outside. Several golden lights hover around us, but the closest one has a slight pinkish tint to it.

As it draws closer, I notice the Pixie is wearing a golden crown nestled in her dark red hair and a blush-colored dress that matches her fluttering wings. The Queen

gestures behind her, and I see Finik sitting on the ground, feasting on a pile of hazelnuts that have been placed all around him.

Her dark eyes meet mine, and her lips pull back in a smile that flashes a hint of her sharp fangs before she dips her head in a small bow.

I do the same, and then she turns to Ren, his ears flicking forward in attention as she speaks in her high-pitched voice.

“I apologize,” he says. “You aren’t even remotely similar to gnats.” He flashes a winning smile. “More like regal, majestic beings—protectors of the forest.”

I bite back a laugh as the Queen rolls her eyes and shakes her head. She turns to me and begins speaking again.

Ren nods and then translates. “She has magnanimously agreed to forgive my insults, and allow us safe passage through their territory, if you will please do her a favor.”

I blink. “What does she want?”

“Their hive tree was damaged by a severe storm. She was wondering if you could speed along its healing with your magic.”

“I... I’m not sure it will work, but I can definitely try,” I offer.

She nods in agreement.

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It doesn't take long to reach the ancient tree. I notice that its branches seem a bit bare and the leaves that remain are drooping and a sickly shade of green. A long dark scar along the bark catches my eye and I'm assuming it must have been the result of some sort of lightning strike.

My fingertips tremble as I place my hand against the rough bark. Closing my eyes, I exhale slowly, feeling the pulse of my magic stir deep within my chest. Heat tingles through my palm, spreading outward, weaving into the tree's heart like threads of light.

Ren inhales sharply beside me, and I open my eyes as fresh buds begin to sprout, vibrant green leaves unfurling, branches thickening, regaining strength and vitality as the deep scar on the side begins to fill in with new growth.

I take a small step back, my hands dropping to my sides. I'm exhausted. Using my magic always makes me tired, but as I gaze at the Hive tree and the Pixies swarming around it, I'm glad I could help.

The Pixie Queen squeaks, darting rapidly back and forth in the air. Her tiny wings buzzing with excitement. She motions to a few of her subjects, and they give us a large bag full of hazelnuts for Finik.

We thank the Pixie Queen and turn to leave, but she zips in front of us, speaking again to Ren.

"Yes, we're aware," he says grimly. "And I'd appreciate it immensely if you would find a way to direct her in the opposite direction of our travel."

“What is she saying?” I ask, curious.

“She was warning us that there is a Goblin witch in this part of the woods that disguises herself as a human.”

My mouth drifts open. She’s talking about Glinda. I mean... Drusilla, I think to myself.

“She took me from my family and stole my memories,” I tell the Queen. “She held me captive, but Ren helped free me.”

“We’re worried she may come after us,” he adds.

The Queen gestures to me as she speaks, and Ren shakes his head. “No, she is not part Goblin. But her magic came from one. The same one that held her captive.” He pauses, listening to her before he says, “Yes, it was a healing spell gone wrong. It siphoned some of the witch’s powers.”

The Pixie’s movements grow even more animated as she points at me, talking to Ren.

His face pales. “Is there anything we can do?” he asks her.

Worry slithers down my spine. “What is she saying? What are you talking about?”

He turns to me, expression grim. “She says that because your magic came from Goblin, she will be able to track you if she is close enough.”

“How close?”

The Pixie Queen shakes her head and then says something else to Ren. “She’s not sure,” he says, “But like calls to like, and since your magic is the same as hers we

need to get as much distance from the witch as we can.” He gives me a pointed look. “We need to leave.”

“But I don’t know where to go,” I tell him. “I don’t remember anything from before. I—” I glance at the Pixie Queen and give her a pleading look. “I have a family out here somewhere and I need to get back to them. But I don’t recall where I’m from. Do you know how to restore my memories?”

Closing her eyes, she raises her hand. Pink magic threads between her fingers before it moves toward me, surrounding me like wisps of smoke. When she opens her eyes again, she gestures to my satchel.

When I open it, she flutters closer and points at my sketchbook. When I pull it out, she opens it, turning the pages to a couple—a man with dark hair and kind brown eyes and a woman with silver-white hair and blue eyes, like my own. I’ve dreamed of them many times. I think they’re my parents.

She flips to another image, and my face heats in embarrassment. It’s one of me, standing before a mirror, wearing an elegant blue gown with embroidered silver flowers shaped like stars scattered across the bodice. I look every bit like one of the regal princesses from my favorite stories.

The Pixie Queen gives me a sympathetic look as she speaks.

“She says the truth is locked inside your mind.” Ren translates. “She says you are beginning to remember.”

Hope sparks in my chest. “Does this mean they’ll come back soon?”

She gives me a sad look, and Ren’s eyes are full of pity as he translates, “It may be days or even years,” he says. “They will either return or they won’t.”

My chest tightens as I give her a subtle bow. “Thank you, your Majesty.”

Although I didn’t find the answer I was hoping for, I still discovered something.

The Queen speaks to Ren and he looks over at me. “She says they will do all that they can to slow Drusilla down and misdirect her if she crosses their path.” He turns back at her and dips his chin in a subtle bow and thanks her again.

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As we walk away, determination fills me. I have a family out there somewhere... parents who love me. No matter what happens, I will find out the truth about who I am. And I will do whatever it takes to find my way back to them.

CHAPTER 14

REN

My Fox is on heightened alert as we move between the trees, constantly scanning the forest for danger. Rapunzel's weight is very slight as she rides on my back. The ground is soft beneath my paws and the smell of damp earth and pine floods my nostrils.

We must get as far away from that cursed tower as possible. Drusilla may have been struck by her own spell, but as soon as it wears off, I have no doubt she'll come after Rapunzel.

Guilt gnaws at me. I haven't told Rapunzel that I'm the second prince of Cambryn. It was a harmless omission in the beginning. I wanted to know how she'd respond to me without knowing my title. But now, after all she's been through, I worry that when she discovers the truth, she'll consider it yet another lie from a person who claims to care about her.

I must tell her soon. Perhaps tonight. I don't want any more secrets between us.

Rapunzel's grip on my fur loosens, and I sense her exhaustion. We've been traveling for hours, and I know she needs rest.

Up ahead, I spot a large oak tree. Its thick branches form a natural shelter, shrouding the area from prying eyes. I duck beneath the leafy curtain and come to a halt. “We’ll rest here for the night.”

Rapunzel slides from my back, stumbling. Immediately, I shift back to my human form, catching her elbow to steady her. Her eyes are heavy with fatigue as I guide her to a soft patch of moss. “Come, sit here while I make camp.”

“I can help.”

“No need, my amira.” I pull a blanket from our satchel and drape it over her shoulders. “Allow me to care for you while you rest.”

When I hand her a small plate with dried meat, cheese, and bread, Finik immediately pops his head out from her pocket, his nose twitching with interest.

“Here you are, my friend.” I set down a napkin with some cheese and dried fruit. He leaps from her shoulder and rushes over and begins stuffing his little cheeks.

“Oh, Finik,” Rapunzel laughs. “You eat as though we’ve been starving you.”

When I place a cup of water beside him, he sniffs it and then gives me a disapproving look.

“What?” I ask. “It’s water.” Remembering what he told the Pixies, I add, “Unfortunately, your majesty,” I tease, giving him a slight bow, “you’ll have to do without your tea and honey while we’re traveling.”

Rapunzel chuckles, but Finik looks far from amused.

I hold back a smile. I know the squirrel understands what we’re saying.

The last time the High Elf King Caelen came to visit our court, he had a rather lengthy conversation with our cat. Apparently, Mr. Whiskers had many funny stories for the King and his human mate—Queen Lyana. He even aired a few grievances, complaining that he wasn't given fish as often as he liked since he much prefers it to chicken.

“But I'll make sure you have plenty of tea and honey as soon as we're able,” I assure him, and his little ears perk up.

“Thank you,” Rapunzel says when she finishes her meal. She leans back against the tree. “Using my magic always leaves me drained,” she admits.

Worry fills me. I don't like that it has this effect on her. Rapunzel's magic is more powerful than I realized, and there are many who would covet such power.

Her magic could be a blessing for our kingdom's prosperity. Even so, I will not allow anyone to use her for her gift. If she chooses to use her powers, it will always be on her terms. For now, however, I think it would be wise if it remained a secret.

“It might be best not to use or mention your magic around others.”

She nods, and then shivers, pulling her blanket tighter around her. “Can we have a fire?”

“No.” My chest tightens. I hate that I cannot provide this for her. “A fire would draw attention we cannot afford. But that doesn't mean you can't be warm.”

I shift back into my fox form. Rapunzel's eyes travel over me in awe, and my fox preens under her gaze.

Settling beside her, I curl my larger body around hers. I love how she doesn't hesitate,

and instead nestles in, pressing into my warmth like she belongs there. “Is that better?” I speak directly into her mind.

“Yes,” she sighs, relaxing against my side. “Thank you.”

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A contented purr rumbles in my chest. I love how comfortable she is with this side of me and hope that someday soon she'll feel equally at ease with my human form.

Rapunzel reaches for her satchel, pulling out her sketchbook. She was very protective of this when I found it on her bookshelf, but now she holds it out for me to see. She flips to the drawing of the couple the pixie queen pointed out and traces her fingers over the image.

“I think these are my parents,” she murmurs. Turning through the pages, she shows me sketches of palatial gardens, a sitting room with a roaring fire on the hearth, a street lined with shops and carts full of freshly cut bouquets of flowers, and a library full of books and scrolled parchments. “All of these are from my dreams,” she explains. “I think these are my memories, Ren.”

She turns another page and my heart stops when I see a sketch of my eyes—golden amber with vertically-slit pupils, surrounded by shadows.

“Except for these,” she murmurs, flipping the pages to reveal several more just like it. “I’ve dreamed of your eyes for the past three months. I didn’t realize then that I was seeing my future.” Her small brow furrows as she stares down at the image. “And now I wonder how many of my dreams are memories and which ones might be visions.”

“I dreamed of the tower before I found you,” I admit. “At the time, I wasn’t sure what it meant. But then a seer told me it was destiny—my fate to find it.”

“Why?”

Indecision wars within me. I could lie to her and say I don't know. Or I could tell the truth—that she is my fated one. I open my mouth, but the words lodge in my throat. I'm worried that she'll reject me.

Her kind do not normally have fated mates. Besides that, I am scarred. No female Fox will have me because of the jagged mark on the right side of my face. And even though Rapunzel is human, I worry that once she understands how such things are looked down upon among my people, she may decide she does not want me as well.

I like to think of myself as brave, but when I think of all the rejection I've faced because of my scar, my bravery fails me. "I'm not sure." The lie is bitter on my tongue as I choose the path of less pain. "But I am glad that my dreams helped me to find you."

A crimson flush colors her cheeks. "I am too."

She flips another page, and my breath catches when I see a drawing of a young man's face. Jealousy stirs deep within, and I bite back a growl. "Who is this?"

She bites her lip thoughtfully. "I believe he's a family member. In my dreams, we're always laughing together, but I don't know at what." She sighs. "I wish I could remember more detail. He feels close, important, but not in a romantic sense."

Relief fills me as I note the familiarity in their features. He has the same silver-white hair and blue eyes. Perhaps he's her brother or possibly a cousin. Even so, I cannot help but ask, "Are there others in your dreams who you feel might have been... important to you?"

Immediately, I regret the question as she turns to a new page, revealing a handsome man with shoulder-length, black hair with silver tips, and piercing blue eyes. He reaches desperately toward her, his face etched with panic.

“I feel like he’s important to me, but I’m not sure how. I’ve dreamed of him many times,” she explains. “When I do, he’s always reaching for me. As if he’s afraid I’ll fall or be taken from him.” My ears prick up as she continues. “Maybe this is a memory of when Drusilla took me. Maybe he tried to stop her.”

I study the male’s image more carefully, noting every detail. Her explanation is plausible, but I worry that there may be more to it than this.

Her memories consist of fragmented dreams, and I worry that her heart may have already been claimed by another. And if it has... I wonder if I will have the strength to let her go.

“At least now I know,” she says, interrupting my dark musings.

“Know what?”

“That these dreams are real. They’re memories.” Vulnerable hope shines in her eyes as they meet mine. “For so long, I believed my family was dead. But now I know they’re alive. They’re still out there, looking for me, Ren.”

She looks down at her sketchbook again, blinking back tears. “But what if I never remember fully? What if I cannot find them?”

I nuzzle her temple and whisper in her mind. “Do not lose hope, Rapunzel. The Pixie Queen said you were already starting to remember.” I jerk my chin toward her drawings. “These prove that not all of your memories are lost. The answers are out here, somewhere. We just need to find them.”

She nods. “I just feel so lost.”

“You’re not lost.” I meet her gaze evenly. “You have been found. And I will remain by

your side for as long as you wish. You're not alone."

"Thank you," she whispers. "But I worry that I'll be a burden to you."

"You are no such thing," I reassure her.

"But I—I don't even know where to start," she says. "Where will we go?"

"To Cambryn," I tell her. "To my home. The capital city—Valmere—is a hive of trade and commerce. Perhaps we can find someone who recognizes something from your sketches to help us figure out where you're from."

She smiles, but it falls away. "What about your family? Will they be all right with you bringing me to your home?"

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My family will adore her. My mother has been desperate for me to find a mate. “They’ll love you. Especially my younger sister.”

I should explain to her about the bond, but as we continue to talk, I cannot find the courage to speak the words.

Tomorrow, I will tell her. I’ll find a way to bring it up and brace myself for whatever her answer may be. And I will accept whatever she decides... even if it shatters my heart.

CHAPTER 15

RAPUNZEL

As we rest beneath the sprawling branches of an ancient oak, I sigh in frustration, tugging at the knots in my braid. After our travel today, it has become terribly unruly.

Ren shifts back into his two-legged form and kneels beside me. “May I?”

Surprised, I nod. His touch is gentle as he undoes my braid, combing through the silken strands with his fingers, carefully working out the tangled knots.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“Of course.”

As he continues to brush out my hair, Ren tells me stories about his life. He’s

hilarious and I find myself laughing almost every time he opens his mouth. I can't remember the last time I felt such joy.

When he's finished, I twist ribbons back into the length as I rebraid it, to make sure it doesn't drag on the ground when I walk. When I'm done, Ren shifts back into his massive Fox form.

As I lean against him, I find my thoughts drifting to Glinda—Drusilla, I keep reminding myself. Sadness stabs at my chest. I cannot stop thinking about her betrayal.

Ren lays his foreleg over my waist, draping his tail over my body like a blanket to protect me from the chill night air. With a heavy sigh, I nestle into his thick fur, his warmth and masculine scent a soothing comfort for my troubled thoughts.

“Are you warm enough?”

Unable to speak through my sadness, I nod.

He is silent for a long moment, tilting his head to one side to regard me. “What's wrong?” His voice hums through my thoughts again.

I squeeze my eyes shut against the pain. “Everything I thought I knew was a lie.” My throat tightens. “I thought Glinda was protecting me. That she saved me.” I shake my head. “But she was Drusilla all along. I cannot believe I was so foolish to trust her.”

A soft, rumbling sound vibrates through his chest. Not quite a growl, but something close to it.

“Do not blame yourself,” he murmurs. “She manipulated you so you wouldn't question her.”

I shake my head. “The other thing I cannot understand is: why did she wait so long? She had years to take me and leave. All those opportunities she must have had—why didn’t she seize them sooner?”

Ren’s expression grows thoughtful, his fox ears twitching. “Perhaps she was hesitant because she knew how fiercely your family loved you. Maybe she believed that taking you sooner would’ve brought unwanted attention and danger to her plans.”

He brushes his muzzle along my shoulder, reassuringly. “Pretending to protect you—working for your family—it gave her a measure of control. She probably thought it was the safest way to remain close to you at the time.”

I nod slowly, processing his words. Even so, I’m ashamed of how naïve I was. “She told me I was safe with her, that the world beyond my tower was full of danger and people who would hurt me. That the evil Goblin witch was still out there, searching for me.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “But the bad witch was always her. And I never even saw it.” I look at him. “But you did. And I’m not sure I would have believed you if she hadn’t revealed her true nature.”

His breath is warm against my skin as he nuzzles my side. “You cannot blame yourself, Rapunzel. She stole your memories to imprison your mind. She made you dependent upon her so she could keep you in the tower.”

“But that’s just it. I’m free, but I’m not.” I shake my head. “Without my memories, I still feel like I’m trapped. I may have escaped the tower, but my memories are still held hostage by Drusilla’s spell. How can I move forward when I don’t even know who I truly am? Where I’m from?”

“When I was a kit, I wandered too far from home once. My mother always warned

me about human trappers, but I didn't listen. I thought I was fast enough. Clever enough to avoid any danger."

He lets out a small huff of amusement. "But I was most definitely wrong." He shakes his head. "I got caught in a steel trap. Not one that snapped closed, thank the gods, but one meant to hold its prey alive." He shudders. "I remember the feel of the cold metal against my fur. Panicked, I clawed at the bars until my paws ached and bled. But nothing worked. I was trapped. I've never felt so helpless."

My heart aches for him. "That must have been terrible."

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“The worst part wasn’t the cage itself. It was the waiting.” His voice softens, something raw beneath the words. “I was scared and alone. I didn’t know what would happen to me. Whether I’d be sold, killed, or left there to starve.”

My chest tightens as I imagine it. “How did you escape?”

“My father found me. And he didn’t scold me for running off or tell me I was foolish. He freed me from the trap and carried me home.” He turns his gaze to me. “And when I told him how scared I had been, he told me that ‘a fox is not meant to be caged.’”

He exhales slowly. “I still remember the moment I stepped out of that metal prison. I promised myself I would never be trapped again.”

“And you never were?” I ask, curious.

Ren tilts his head, considering. “Not physically. But I’ve been trapped in other ways. By duty... by the weight of the expectations of my family.” His ember-bright eyes flick to mine. “But it was different from when I was caged, because I had a choice. And now, so do you.”

I swallow back the lump forming in my throat. It doesn’t feel like I do. Not really. Without knowledge of my past, how can I navigate my future? Drusilla stole so much from me.

I’m desperate to recover my lost memories. I want to claw through the fog in my mind, to piece together the fragments of my past, hidden by dark magic.

“I wish I could remember,” my voice quavers as I curl my fingers in Ren’s fur, anchoring myself to the only person I can trust. “I want to know the truth about who I am.”

“We won’t stop searching for answers.” His voice is quiet but firm. “Whatever she did to you, whatever she tried to bury—if there is a way to uncover it, we will find it.” Ren nuzzles me again. “I’ll do whatever I can to help you find the truth. To help you break free of every cage she ever put you in, Rapunzel. Not just the tower. Not just her lies. But every part of you that she tried to keep locked away.”

A lump forms in my throat as I blink back tears. “Thank you, Ren.”

“Always, my amira.”

Despite his words of conviction, I still worry. “What if Drusilla comes after me?”

A low growl rumbles in his chest. “I will die before I allow her to ever harm you again,” he says, and something about his vow fills me with warmth. “As soon as the sun rises, we’ll head for my home. The farther we get from the tower, the better.”

For so long, I felt so alone—a person with no past and no future. But now... there is Ren. I don’t know what the future holds, but I have hope, and I know that I’m not alone.

CHAPTER 16

REN

The earth is soft beneath my paws as we make our way through the forest. I lift my head and scent the air. It will probably rain tonight and I need to find shelter before it comes.

“Are you sure I’m not a burden?” Rapunzel asks from her perch on my back. “I can walk if you need to rest.”

My Fox chuffs at the idea that my mate believes me so weak as to be unable to carry her. If a female Fox questioned this, it would be an indication that she is having reservations about our courtship. No female will accept a mate who is not strong.

It is one of the reasons why my scar marks me as undesirable. In my culture, they are considered evidence that a male cannot adequately defend himself, much less a mate and any kits they may have.

“I am fine. Your weight is very slight. It is no hardship to carry you. Besides, we can travel much faster this way.”

Scanning the forest, my nostrils flare as I detect the scent of a deer somewhere nearby. The instinct to hunt for my mate, to show her I’m worthy, strong and able to provide, is a primal urge that is difficult to ignore. “Are you hungry?”

“A bit, but I can wait until we stop for the evening.”

My ears prick at the distant rustling of leaves, and as when we reach a clearing, I notice a magnificent stag grazing idly, oblivious to our presence.

I go perfectly still, my muscles bunching in anticipation. My Fox believes now is the perfect opportunity to prove my worth. “Slide off quietly,” I instruct, excitement building in my chest at the thought of showing her how capable I am.

“It’s magnificent.”

My Fox agrees. It will make an excellent meal.

Rapunzel carefully slips off my back.

“Stay right here, and try to be very quiet.”

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“What are you doing?” she whispers, suddenly wary.

Tilting my head up, I puff my chest out with pride. “I’m going to get your dinner.”

“What?” she blurts. “Ren, no!”

I freeze mid-step, bewildered. “Why not?”

“You can’t kill that poor deer,” she says incredulously. “Why would you even do such a thing?”

Well, this is certainly not going as planned. I arch a brow. “Rapunzel, just where exactly do you think that dried meat in your satchel comes from?”

She grimaces. “I... prefer not to think about it.”

My mate has a tender heart. I shift back into my human form. “All right. No fresh meat then.” I give her an indulgent smile. “Let’s just rest for a bit and eat some of our travel rations. We need to find shelter before nightfall.”

Rapunzel tilts her head curiously. “Why before dark?”

“Because ogres roam these woods, and they’re more active at night.”

Fierce protectiveness surges through me as she visibly shudders, and I move closer, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “It’s all right. We’re not very far from an empty cottage I stayed in when I passed through here before. We’ll make it before the

sun sets.”

Movement catches my eye as the stag races away into the woods. When I turn to where he was standing, I freeze. Another stag steps into the clearing—huge, majestic, and much larger than any ordinary deer.

“Ren,” Rapunzel whispers, eyes wide, “why is that one so big?”

My ears twitch forward, my muscles tense and coiled tight in silent readiness as more emerge from the trees, their massive bodies dwarfing even the largest horses and their pointed antlers razor-sharp.

“Those aren't regular deer,” I say in hushed whisper. They are far more dangerous. “They're Stag Shifters.”

Grasping her elbow, I pull her back toward the hidden shelter of the trees. But Rapunzel suddenly stops, urgently tapping my shoulder. I glance where she points and dread twists deep in my gut.

Finik is busily stuffing his cheeks with berries, entirely oblivious to the Stags looming around him.

Worry ripples down my spine. They may appear like large deer, but Stag Shifters are anything but prey.

“Seven hells,” I mutter under my breath before I call out to him as quietly as I can, hoping and praying the shifters don't hear me. “Finik, come back here!”

The little traitor pauses and looks directly at us, before he deliberately continues eating, defiantly ignoring my urgent pleas.

Gods above, I'm going to strangle him.

My breath freezes in my chest as one of the Stags steps forward, lowering his head curiously toward the squirrel. Stag Shifters are predators—they hunt and catch prey like any Fox or Wolf Shifter.

Oblivious to the danger he's in, Finik immediately goes on the defense, chittering loudly and flicking his tail as he defends his berry bush.

The Stag emits a deep growl, baring two rows of gleaming white fangs.

Finik lets out a terrified squeak and bolts back to us.

Rapunzel gasps, and five large heads whip in our direction. I step in front of her as the terrified squirrel scrambles back to her pocket, blocking her from their view.

There are five Stag Shifters and only one of me. I'm not sure I like those odds. So, I decide to use my charm.

“Hello, gentlemen.” I flash what I hope is a friendly grin. “Lovely weather today, is it not?”

The closest one pointedly glances up at the dark clouds blanketing the sky and then looks at me as if I've gone soft in the head before narrowing his eyes.

Not one to be deterred, I force a smile to my face and continue. “Perfect for a casual stroll in these beautiful woods that are obviously”—I swallow hard—“home to a herd of Deer Shifters. And everyone knows that Deer Shifters and Fox Shifters have nothing but respect for one another. Don't you agree?”

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They snort and stomp their hooves.

Tough crowd. I clear my throat. “Well, it seems as though you gentlemen are not ones for small talk. So, I suppose it may be best for us to simply part ways as friends. What do you say?”

They freeze abruptly, heads lifting as they scent the air. My gut clenches as they look around me to Rapunzel, eyes widening.

Oh, no.

In a whirl of magic dust and wind, all five of them shift into their two-legged form.

A low growl rumbles in my chest as they stand unabashedly before us, not even bothering to conjure the illusion of clothing to hide their nudity, proudly showing off their antlers, and their lean, muscular physiques.

The closest one runs a hand through his shoulder-length, tousled, chestnut brown hair, making sure to flex his biceps as his bright green eyes travel over Rapunzel with a look of intense fascination.

She gasps, and I shift my stance to block her again from their view. “Have you never heard of pants?” I snarl.

Stag Shifters covet human females. Their kind are known to use their illusory magic to travel through villages and cities, hiding their antlers and pointed ears, searching for a bride. Humans are so prized in their culture that I’ve heard it is not unusual for

several Stags to sometimes share a female as their mate to form a family Clan.

The largest Stag Shifter smiles, revealing a dazzling flash of white fangs. “Clothing is unnecessary.”

I cross my arms over my chest, flicking my tail in irritation. “I vehemently disagree.”

“What’s wrong, Fox?” He chuckles. “Are you worried the human female will like what she sees?”

I bare my fangs at him.

His eyes sparkle with amusement as he peers past me to my mate. “What is your name, beautiful human and why are you traveling with this Fox?”

Rapunzel presses closer to my back as he continues. “I am Aelric, leader of our herd. You must know it's dangerous here. Ogres prowl these woods at night. A lone Fox can't possibly offer you the protection of an entire herd.” His gaze flicks briefly back to his companions. “Return with us, and we shall make you our queen. We will worship you as you deserve.”

I bristle, jealousy flaring hot and sharp through my veins.

“My name is Rapunzel.” She moves to my side and takes my hand. “And this is Ren. Thank you for the offer, but I’d prefer to stay with him.”

My chest puffs out with pride as my Fox preens at her words.

Aelric tilts his head, nostrils flaring again. He frowns thoughtfully. “You do not carry his scent or his mark. Are you sure you do not want to stay with us, fair maiden?” He glances at his companions and they each nod. “You would be revered and—”

“Make no mistake.” I growl. “She. Is. Mine.”

Aelric narrows his eyes. “We ran into a Wolf Shifter not far from here. He was looking for a Fox Shifter traveling with a human female.” He arches a brow. “Said she’d been abducted from her home and that there was a reward for her safe return. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that now, would you, Fox?”

I snarl at him, my muscles rippling beneath my skin, readying to shift back into my Fox form as my fangs descend and my claws lengthen in anticipation of an attack.

Aelric and his companions stalk forward, growling and baring their fangs as they begin to close in on us.

“Wait!” Rapunzel steps out from behind me. “You don’t understand.”

They turn their attention to her. “Is he holding you against your will?” One of them asks.

“No. Ren saved me from a Goblin witch that held me captive. If someone is searching for us, they had to have been sent by her.”

I wince inwardly. My mate is far too trusting. For all we know, this could be an elaborate trap; the Stag Shifters may be working for Drusilla.

“She may be telling the truth.” One of the other Stags turns to Aelric. “The Wolf Shifter smelled faintly of licorice—a Goblin’s scent.”

Relief floods my veins. It seems they aren’t in league with Drusilla after all.

I step forward. “Then, the Wolf must have been sent by the Goblin witch to recapture her. How long ago did you see him?”

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“Less than two hours ago,” Aelric replies. “He was heading this direction. I believe he is tracking you.”

Unease curls through me, and Rapunzel stiffens at my side.

I dip my chin in acknowledgment. “Thank you for the warning, friend.” I look at Rapunzel. “We need to leave if we’re to find a decent shelter before nightfall.”

“A storm is fast approaching,” Aelric says. “It would be safer if you both stayed with us tonight.” I start to protest, but he adds, “Even if the Wolf followed you to our village, I doubt he would risk challenging an entire herd.”

Thunder booms overhead as I glance at the darkening sky. He’s right, but I don’t like it. I’ve heard that Stag Shifters can use charm spells to bewitch human maidens—much like the Fae—luring them away from their villages and enticing them to become their mates.

These may just be rumors, but Aelric and his companions clearly covet Rapunzel. The thought of her surrounded by even more Stags makes my fur itch.

“Ren?” Rapunzel whispers in a voice so low I nearly miss it. “What do you think we should do?”

My chest tightens at the complete and utter trust she has in me to keep her safe. Sighing heavily, I push down my jealous pride and turn to Aelric. “Fine.”

“We’ll travel faster if we shift.” He looks at Rapunzel. “And if you ride on my back,

it will help mask your scent.”

Rapunzel turns to me with a questioning look.

My Fox hates this idea as much as I do. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell them she’s riding with me, but I bite it back, because he’s right. It’s safer for her to travel with him. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Aelric gestures to the male beside him. “And you should ride with Rikan.”

My Fox makes an indignant chuff, but I clench my jaw, and nod. “All right.”

CHAPTER 17

REN

I grit my fangs as I trail behind Rapunzel while she rides astride Aelric’s back, laughing at something he said.

Jealousy rears its head as he practically prances about, antlers gleaming.

I need to be rational. He’s a Stag. I’m a Fox. And Foxes are far more charming, witty, and handsome.

Despite telling myself this, when Rapunzel laughs again, a deep growl rumbles in my chest.

Rikan chuckles beneath me. “Try not to take it so badly, Fox,” he says. “Aelric is very charismatic—a natural flirt. You should see the way all the Does practically throw themselves at him.”

“Then, why hasn’t he settled with one yet?”

Rikan sighs. “He has it in his head that he’s destined to be mated to a human.”

“Well, he can’t have mine,” I snarl.

“Ah, but she’s not yet technically yours, now, is she?”

A low growl rises in my throat, and he laughs again. “Be calm, Fox. I’m only teasing you.”

I bite back another snarl, not sure I believe him.

It doesn’t take long to reach Aelric’s herd. Their village is surrounded by a high wood and stone walls. As we approach, the gates open, and we’re greeted by at least a dozen Stag warriors welcoming their leader, his brother warriors, and his guests home.

The village is not as small nor as primitive as I thought it might be. Beautiful wooden homes and businesses carved with intricate designs line a wide, bustling street. Deer Shifters move gracefully about in both human and animal forms, their curious eyes watching as we pass.

My hackles rise as several of the males begin blatantly showing off. One tosses his long golden hair, another stretches dramatically, flexing his bulging muscles.

Aelric walks beside us, his stride casual yet confident as he carries Rapunzel proudly on his back. “You’ll stay in one of the guest rooms in my home.”

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“Thank you,” Rapunzel says. “That’s very kind.”

“Not at all,” he replies. “You’ll be treated like a queen.”

I narrow my eyes at him, and he smirks, clearly enjoying getting a rise out of me.

When we reach Aelric's rather large and unfortunately, impressive house, he lowers himself to allow her to easily slide off his back. As soon as she’s on her feet, he leans in close, and whispers in my ear. “If you're open to sharing a mate, Fox, we’d gladly accept you into our family Clan.”

A possessive growl escapes me. “Foxes do not share.”

Aelric darts a glance at Rapunzel. “Ah, but it’s not your decision, now, is it?” I bristle as he chuckles lightly, stepping back with raised hands, his eyes full of mischief. “Just an offer, my friend. If you change your mind, let me know.”

Looping my arm around Rapunzel’s waist, I tug her to my side, pleased when she practically melts against me.

“Foxes.” Aelric sighs and rolls his eyes. “So possessive.”

Aelric’s house is nothing short of grand. A large wooden structure with tall ceilings and beautiful carvings throughout. A servant leads us up the stairs to the second floor. It overlooks the main entry and a large open dining area with several long tables and a massive hearth on the far wall with a roaring fire.

The servant gestures at two doors, side by side. “Your rooms,” she says. “If you need anything, let me know.”

Rooms? It’s on the tip of my tongue to demand that we stay together, but I hesitate, waiting to see how Rapunzel reacts. I know she trusts me, but I’m not sure how she feels about me as a potential mate.

My fox is already as set upon her as I am. But that means nothing. Aelric’s right: The choice is hers.

Absently, I reach up and trace the long silver scar along the right side of my face. I still don’t even know how she feels about this. I’m not sure how humans regard such things. For all I know, she may find me just as undesirable as the female Foxes do back home.

Rapunzel glances at me as she moves to the door on the right. “Finik and I are going to get settled.”

She’s made her decision. We’ll be sleeping in separate chambers.

“I’ll be right here if you need me.” I gesture to the room on the left.

I’d much prefer to share a bedroom, especially among so many Stag shifters posturing, trying to snag her attention, but I will not press the issue.

After a quick bath, I collapse back on the bed, staring up at the wooden ceiling overhead. My ears perk as I listen for any sounds of Rapunzel next door. My claws extend as I think of Aelric and his companions. If any of them try to tempt her away from me while were here, I’ll claw out their eyes.

A soft knock at my door startles me and I bolt upright. “Come in.”

I'm surprised when Rapunzel enters.

"Rapunzel?" Instantly, I rush to her side. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." A lovely blush stains her cheeks. "I just... missed your company."

She missed me. My chest warms, my earlier panic forgotten.

"It felt strange being alone in that room. Aside from Finik," she adds.

Speaking of Finik... "Where is he?"

"He's already asleep in the bed."

I note that she's wearing a new dress. The cream-colored silk shimmers in the candlelight. It clings to her like a second skin, accentuating the luscious curves of her body. Desire floods my veins. "You look beautiful."

She glances down, shyly smoothing the fabric. "Aelric gave it to me as a gift." Nervously, she tucks a stray tendril of hair behind her ear. "I think they were serious about treating me like a queen. They drew me a bath and offered to give me a massage afterward, but I declined."

Jealousy flares bright in my chest, my claws extending. They're all going to die today.

"I remembered something," she says, pulling me back from my dark thoughts.

“What is it?”

She holds out her sketchbook and flips to the page of the male with shoulder length, dark hair with silver tips on the ends and piercing blue eyes. The one reaching for her in her dreams.

Dread coils in my gut as Rapunzel flips to another page, this one of a large stag with black and silver fur.

“I think he’s a Stag Shifter,” she says. “He has the same vibrant blue eyes even,” she adds. “I want to ask Aelric about him. Perhaps he knows who this is.” She tilts her head to one side. “What do you think?”

As loath as I am to even see Aelric after all his flirting with my fated one, she’s right. Perhaps it might reveal some answers to her past. “I agree.”

A servant knocks on the door and then steps into the room, bowing low. “Pardon the intrusion, but you’ve been invited to dinner with Lord Aelric as his guests of honor.”

The dining hall is enormous, filled with robust laughter and rich, savory scents. Long tables are laden with large platters of food and drink. I grind my teeth as one of the servants guides Rapunzel to the seat next to Aelric and then gestures for me to sit further down on the opposite side.

Aelric’s Stag warrior brothers surround her immediately, offering Rapunzel choice cuts of meat and filling her glass with wine. I watch them like a hawk, irritation prickling my skin as they hover around her, hanging on her every word as she

describes her captivity with the Goblin witch and our journey thus far.

When she's finished, Aelric places his hand atop hers. "You are safe here, Rapunzel. And welcome to stay as long as you like." I growl low in my throat as he darts a glance at me, a smirk playing on his lips. "You and your Fox. And I hope your rooms are comfortable," he adds. "Anything you want, you need only ask."

"Thank you," she replies. She takes the opportunity to pull out her sketchbook, opening it to the page with the dark-haired man. "Does he look familiar to you?" She flips to the image of the Stag as well, along with a few other images of the same man. "The Goblin witch took my memories, but I sometimes have dreams of people... places," she adds. "And I'm not sure if they're memories or simply figments of my imagination. But I figured it wouldn't hurt to ask."

Aelric's brow furrows deeply as he studies both images carefully. He exchanges a glance with the other males and they each nod before he turns back to her. "I believe he may be a member of the royal family of Sylvalis. They are known for their black and silver hair and bright blue eyes."

"Where is Sylvalis?" Rapunzel asks. "Is it very far from here?"

Although the kingdom of Sylvalis borders Cambryn, my people have very few dealings with the Deer Shifters, and I know little of the royal family. There is a long history of distrust between us, so we try to avoid each other as best we can.

"It's not very far beyond Cambryn," I tell her. I turn to Aelric. "Have you met any of the royal family of Sylvalis?"

He shakes his head. "We are of different herds," he explains. "Our King and his family are distantly related to theirs, but I've never traveled to their kingdom."

“What else do you know of them?” Rapunzel asks, eager for more information.

“Not much, beyond that the king and queen have two sons.” He frowns thoughtfully. “Perhaps that is one of the princes.” He pauses. “I know someone who might be able to tell us. If you leave this drawing with me, I will show it to her and see what she says.”

Rapunzel hands him the sketch. “Thank you.” She smiles. “Do you happen to know the names of the Sylvalis Princes?” she asks.

One of the other Stag’s answers. “The crown prince Theron and his younger brother, Falen.”

“Theron,” she murmurs, her gaze fixed on the far wall. “It sounds familiar...”

“Perhaps you know him,” Aelric offers. “Although, if you did, I doubt he would have let one so lovely slip through his fingers.” I bite back a growl as he leans in and tucks a stray tendril of hair behind her ear. “Can I interest you in more wine?”

She shakes her head. “No, thank you.”

One of Aelric’s warrior brothers offers her a pastry. When I see him trying to feed it to her with his hand, I snatch it away and give it to her myself.

If anyone’s going to feed her, it will be me.

Another male flexes his biceps as he passes her a plate of fruit. I roll my eyes as a third begins reciting poetry, his gaze locked upon hers with a look of longing.

When a fourth starts massaging her shoulders, my patience snaps, and I shoot to my feet. “All right,” I snarl. “I think that’s enough for this evening.”

They glance at me, mildly startled by my outburst, then chuckle dismissively and return their attention to my fated one.

She sways as she stands from the table. “I feel a bit strange,” she murmurs. “As if I’m floating.”

Aelric moves to help her, but before he can intervene, I sweep her up into my arms. “I think it’s the wine, love.” I know for a fact that she only had one goblet, but it was rather strong. “Your body isn’t used to it.”

She nods and loops her arms around my neck as I carry her back to our rooms. When we reach the top of the stairs, she gazes up at me. “Your eyes really are quite mesmerizing, you know,” she murmurs dreamily. “Such a lovely color.”

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“Why, thank you. I’m quite fond of them myself,” I quip, trying to distract myself from the heat rushing to my face.

My knees nearly buckle as she traces her fingers along the seam of my mouth. “Have you ever kissed anyone, Ren?”

Before I can answer, she reaches up and lightly strokes my left fox ear. “I love your ears.”

My eyes cross as pleasure shoots down my spine, and I stumble sideways, slamming into the wall with an agonized groan.

“Are you all right?” Concern furrows her brow. “Did I hurt you?”

“Quite the opposite,” I rasp, my pulse racing. “Fox ears are very sensitive. Even to the slightest touch.”

Undeterred, she trails her fingers along the outer edge of my ear again and my eyes roll back in my head as I bite back a growl of arousal.

I open the door to her room and kick it shut behind me before walking to the bed. My Fox is clawing beneath the surface to break free, desperate to claim and mark her as our mate.

Pulling back the comforter, I lower her onto the mattress. But when I try to release her, she grips my shoulders, and I lose my balance, tumbling onto the bed beside her.

Before I can move, she snuggles into my side, resting her head on my shoulder, placing her delicate hand on my chest, directly over my heart.

“Rapunzel?”

“Goodnight, Ren,” she murmurs sleepily, closing her eyes.

Carefully, I pull the blankets over us both, trying not to disturb her. When she nestles closer into my side, I bite back an agonized groan.

Gazing down at her sleeping form, I brush the hair back from her face, tucking it behind the curved shell of her ear. “Goodnight, my amira,” I whisper.

CHAPTER 18

RAPUNZEL

I wake up surrounded by warmth. Stretching my arms and legs, I yawn loudly but then go still when I feel something tighten around my waist.

Still a bit foggy, it takes me a moment to realize it’s Ren’s arm. I twist my head back to look at him. His body is pressed along the length of mine and his eyes are still closed in sleep. The warm mint of his breath whispers across the back of my neck.

I don’t remember falling asleep with him last night, but I’m reluctant to move. His masculine scent of fresh pine and earth surrounds me.

Slowly, I turn in his arms to face him. His lashes flutter and his golden, fox-fire eyes meet mine. “Amira,” he says, voice rough with sleep.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“It’s all right.” He gives me a sleepy smile. “You can wake me anytime.”

His short, red hair falls across his eyes. Tentatively, I reach up and comb it back from his face. He’s the most handsome man I’ve ever seen. My gaze travels over the scar that cuts across the strong line of his right brow and down to his cheek. Without thinking, I brush my fingertips over the faint silver line. “How did you get this?”

A shadow of pain flickers across his features as he wraps his fingers around mine, pulling my hand away.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s fine.” Ren looks down, swallowing hard. “I’m just... I”—he sighs heavily—“I suppose I’m just sensitive about it.”

“Does it ache?”

“Only when someone looks at it too hard.” Sadness laces his voice. “A scar is a sign of weakness among my people.”

“Why?”

“It’s a primitive thing, I suppose,” he says bitterly. “It means I couldn’t defend myself. And if I cannot do that, then it’s assumed that I would be unable to protect a mate or any kits we may have.”

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Indignation flares through me. “That’s ridiculous. You’re beautiful, Ren.”

He huffs out a laugh. “Beautiful, huh?” he smirks playfully, despite the vulnerability lingering in his expression. “Just what every male wants to hear from a female.”

“You’re handsome and you know it,” I tease. “Don’t pretend you don’t know.”

He arches a brow. “Am I?”

“Yes,” I whisper as I reach up and lightly touch his scar. He goes still beneath my hand. “It doesn’t make you any less in my eyes, Ren.”

Hesitantly, he brushes his fingers along my jaw, staring at me in wonder. “It truly doesn’t bother you?”

My heart squeezes at the raw, earnest hope in his voice. “No.”

Relief floods his expression, melting away the lingering shadows. His smile is soft, hesitant, filled with fragile longing as he brushes his thumb lightly across my cheek.

As his gaze holds mine, something inside me makes me bold, and I lean in.

We’re so close that we share each breath. My heart hammers as I brush my lips lightly against his. He goes still and I lose my nerve. Uncertain if he wants this, I start to pull away, but he cups the back of my head and I stop.

His eyes search mine a moment before they drop to my mouth. “May I kiss you, my

beautiful amira?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

He presses his mouth to mine in a tender kiss, gentle and coaxing. His hand slides into my hair, angling my head as he deepens our kiss, stealing the breath from my lungs.

His lips are warm and demanding, reverent and hungry all at once. He slips his tongue into my mouth and finds mine, curling around it. My entire body hums in awareness of his as he pulls me closer.

I gasp as he rolls me beneath him. With one leg between mine, the hard length of his manhood presses insistently against my inner thigh.

I’ve never felt anything like this before.

He groans as I trace my hand down his back, exploring his body, feeling the muscles along the length of his spine.

Our kisses grow hungrier and I arch up against him, loving the weight of his body as he presses me into the soft mattress. He pulls back and drops his forehead to mine, eyes closed as we lie together, breathless and panting.

“Tell me to stop,” he murmurs. “And I will.”

I nod and then cup the back of his neck, pulling his lips back down to mine.

He captures my mouth in a searing kiss, and I open to him, our mouths meshing repeatedly as he devours me with his lips and his tongue.

Arching against him, I'm lost in sensation. A deep growl vibrates in his chest as he fists the back of my gown and rolls his hips against mine, creating a delicious friction between us.

He groans as I tangle my fingers in his hair, but when I stroke his ears, he jerks back as if burned.

I blink, breathless and flushed as he stares down at me, his amber eyes wide. "We need to stop," he rasps, his chest rising and falling with ragged breaths.

His words are like a slap to the face and I freeze.

"Oh." I blink up at him. "Did I do something wrong?"

Anxiety spirals through me, embarrassment scorching my cheeks. I've never done this before and I worry that I've messed up somehow... done something I shouldn't, but I don't know what.

"Rapunzel, I—"

A knock pounds at the door, cutting him off and startling us both.

Ren's jaw clenches. "Not now," he growls under his breath.

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Another knock, more insistent this time.

“Ren? Rapunzel?” Aelric’s voice drifts through the door. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything important...”

Ren’s entire body goes tense.

I wrap the blanket tighter around myself like armor. I’m too embarrassed to even look at Ren, still not sure what I did wrong.

Eager to escape this new awkwardness between us, I slide off the bed and rush to the door. When I open it, Aelric’s golden eyes rake over my disheveled state and his nostrils flare.

“I apologize for the interruption,” he says, “but I have found someone I think you may be interested to talk to.”

“Who?”

“Someone who recognized the male in your drawing.”

CHAPTER 19

RAPUNZEL

I change as quickly as I can and then rush back into the hallway, where Ren and Aelric are waiting by the stairs. Ren’s shoulders are tense, while Aelric appears

unbothered, his arms crossed as he leans against the banister.

“I’m just suggesting,” Aelric drawls, eyes sparkling with mischief, “perhaps try smiling instead of growling at everyone. You’re a Fox. Aren’t your kind supposed to be charming and witty?”

Ren scowls. “Maybe I would smile if I wasn’t surrounded by Stag Shifters prancing around, showing off their antlers and flexing their muscles.”

“Jealousy suits no one.” Aelric smirks.

Ren opens his mouth for another sharp reply but stops abruptly as his gaze meets mine. His expression softens and his lips curve in a slow smile that melts away my earlier embarrassment.

Aelric offers me his hand, but Ren steps in front of him and slips his arm around my waist. My heart flutters as his possessive gesture as we walk downstairs with Aelric.

When we reach the dining hall, several platters are already set out for our breakfast, but it’s the woman sitting at the table that captures my attention.

From the sharp points of her ears and the graceful way she moves as she stands to greet us, I realize she is a Doe Shifter. She’s beautiful with vivid honey-colored eyes and light brown hair that cascades down her back.

“My name is Elaena.” She smiles warmly. “Aelric mentioned your... unique predicament,” she says rather delicately. “He said you needed help possibly identifying someone of the Sylvalis royal family.”

“Do you know them?” I ask.

“Not well,” she replies, “but enough that I believe I recognize the male in your drawing. Tell me, do you have any other pictures so I may confirm?”

I pull out my sketchbook, flip it open to the images of the Stag and a few more drawings of the man I believe is him, then slide it across the table to her.

“Oh.” She gazes in awe at the images. “Your skill is quite good. There is no question about it.” She flips back and forth between the man and the Stag. “This is definitely Theron, the Crown Prince of Sylvalis.”

The world tilts, my pulse thundering in my ears. Beside me, Ren goes utterly still.

“What can you tell us about him?” I ask.

“He has quite a tragic story actually.” Elaena frowns. “He lost his betrothed a few years back.”

My heart stops.

“What happened to her?” Aelric asks.

“I’m not quite sure of all the details, mind you.” She turns to me. “I heard the story in passing, when I went to visit my cousin in Sylvalis a few months ago.”

I’m on the edge of my seat as she continues. “Apparently, Theron’s betrothed fell into a river on his family’s estate. She was swept away by the current and drowned.” She sighs. “The poor prince was beside himself. And since they never found her body, he refuses, even to this day, to believe that she’s truly gone.” She shakes her head. “They say he still searches for her, refusing to give up hope.”

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Unease ripples down my spine. “Do you... know anything else about her? The woman he was promised to?”

“All I know is that she was human and it’s said they were deeply in love.”

My chest tightens, and I feel like I can barely breathe as I gaze at the drawing of Prince Theron.

Could it be? Could he truly be my betrothed?

Closing my eyes, I remember my dream. He reaches for me as I’m falling. But as I struggle to recall anything else, no memories rush forth... only shadowed images that vanish like wisps of smoke as I try to hold onto them.

But what if my dream is real? What if I’m his? I gaze at the picture and trace my hand across the page. What if I’m the one he is looking for?

The sketchbook trembles in my hands, and I clutch it tighter, as if it could somehow anchor my swirling thoughts.

I can sense Ren’s gaze upon me. And when I finally lift my head, I see the same questions burning in his eyes that I cannot bring myself to voice.

For the first time, since leaving the tower, I have finally found something that could lead to the truth. But as Ren’s gaze holds mine, I feel so lost.

I have no idea who I truly am or who my heart truly belongs to.

CHAPTER 20

REN

As I gaze at the drawing of Prince Theron, jealousy twists like a blade in my chest. What if the Stag prince holds a place in her heart she can't yet remember? And even worse... what if the day comes when she does?"

"Prince Theron could be the key," she whispers, "He might know who I am. This could be the answer I was looking for."

I rest a hand on her forearm, offering support. Gods help me, as much as I want her to find the truth, I cannot help but hope that this regal, handsome, blue-eyed Stag Shifter Prince isn't it.

Because if he is... if she truly is Prince Theron's lost betrothed, then I may lose her.

I want her as my mate. More than anything I've ever wanted in my entire existence. But what if she is already claimed by another?

After breakfast, Aelric and his warriors lead us to the edge of their territory, the weight of everything unspoken pressing hard on my chest. The forest around us is still as dark clouds loom overhead, promising rain.

When we reach the edge of the woods, Aelric turns to us. "Some of my warriors scented the Wolf again last night."

Dread fills me. "How close?"

"Too close." He looks at Rapunzel. "We took one of your dresses and laid a false trail northward. It should buy you some time to reach the river crossing safely."

Aelric may have tried to woo my mate, frustrating me to no end, but he also helped me to keep her safe. Clenching my jaw, I dip my chin in a subtle bow. “Thank you for sheltering us and for... everything else.”

He chuckles, clearly amused by my discomfort. “Careful, Fox. Gratitude doesn’t suit your stubborn pride.” He claps my shoulder. “I wish you safe travels.”

His warriors approach Rapunzel, surrounding her like regal Stags paying worship to a forest goddess as they bid her goodbye. They even go as far as providing Finik with a veritable feast of fresh berries, cheese, and crackers for our journey. No doubt they are trying to gain her favor by showing her their care for him.

The little traitor stuffs his cheeks full of a tiny wedge of their cheese, and then shoves a few berries into his mouth as well, acting as though he’s been starved on our journey, when nothing could be further from the truth.

Aelric steps forward and takes her hand. “Farewell, sweet maiden.” He presses a kiss to the back of her knuckles, then winks at her. “Should you find that Foxes lose their charm, you are always welcome to return.”

My inner Fox bristles, and I loop a possessive arm around her waist.

Aelric laughs again, clearly amused by my jealousy. “You have nothing to worry about, my friend.” He grins. “It’s clear she has chosen you.”

His words should soothe me, but they don’t because she isn’t mine. Not truly. We haven’t performed the rites of binding. And now that she’s discovered a possible connection to Prince Theron, she may never be my mate.

Pushing down this dark thought, I shift. Fur replaces skin, claws take the place of fingers, and clarity narrows to raw instinct—the desperate need to run. To make for

the river as fast as I can to get her to safety.

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Even if she isn't mine, I vow to protect her until my last breath.

Rapunzel climbs onto my back, her fingers curling tightly into my fur as she settles near my shoulders.

"Be swift," Aelric says. "If the Wolf figures out our trick, he'll change direction."

I nod. "I will."

He dips his chin in a subtle nod.

"Hold tightly to me," I tell Rapunzel before I break into a run.

The forest blurs around us, my paws digging into the soft earth as I race in the direction of the river. I'm thankful for the gentle mist falling from the dark clouds above. Perhaps it's enough to mask our scent if the Wolf comes this way.

I send a silent prayer to the gods to grant us safe passage and vow that even if she never chooses me. Even if she is truly Prince Theron's lost love and she returns to his side... I will do whatever it takes to keep her safe, because she is my heart. Even if I am not hers.

CHAPTER 21

RAPUNZEL

Ren's steady, rhythmic pace carries us swiftly through the woods. The forest around

us is eerily silent, and my thoughts churn endlessly as I think of everything we've learned.

Now that I know who the man is in my drawings, I finally have a direction... somewhere to begin my search for the truth.

Prince Theron could be my betrothed. But if he is, what does that mean for me and Ren?

Ren is charming, witty, intelligent, loyal, and brave. He makes me feel safe and cared for. And even though we've only known each other a short while, I'm already halfway in love with him, and I don't know what to do.

How can I build a future with him when I don't remember my past?

Ren comes to an abrupt stop near a stream, interrupting my troubled thoughts. "We should rest for a bit and have something to eat," his voice echoes in my mind. "The river is still a ways off."

When Ren shifts back into his human form, it's easy to see the exhaustion shadowing his amber eyes. We stand facing each other awkwardly, the distance between us feeling larger than mere steps.

"I—" we both begin simultaneously and then stop.

A faint smile tugs at Ren's lips, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "You go first."

"No. It's all right," I reply a bit nervously. "Please. You, first."

He hesitates a moment, his shoulders tense, as if unsure where to begin. He runs a hand through his hair. "About this morning... I need you to know something." His

gaze holds mine as he takes a small step closer. “You did nothing wrong. I pulled away because I wanted you too much. Because I was afraid of losing control.”

I frown. “What do you mean when you say you’re afraid of ‘losing control?’ ”

“Like Wolf Shifters, my people are both animal and man. The two halves of our nature in a constant battle for dominance,” he explains. “I did not want to lose myself in the moment and risk pushing you to do anything you are not ready for... or anything you do not want.”

He shakes his head. “I haven’t been entirely truthful with you, Rapunzel. I—when I first saw you, I felt the pull of the fated bond. And then when you were able to hear me speak in your mind, I knew it was true. Only fated mates can speak to each other in this way.”

“Can you hear me like this?” I try to project my question to him.

“Yes,” he replies in my mind. “I can hear you like this.”

I inhale sharply. “Can you read all of my thoughts?”

“No. I can only pick up the ones you specifically send to me.”

Ren continues. “Humans do not have fated bonds, and... I wasn’t sure how you’d react, so I kept it a secret.”

“Why?”

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He looks down at his hands. “Because I was afraid you would not want me.”

“Because of your scar,” I murmur, more to myself than to him. Reaching up, I cup his cheek. “But I’ve already told you: that doesn’t matter to me.”

“I know that now, but I didn’t then.” Guilt mars his features. “And it’s not the only truth I withheld.”

Unease prickles my flesh. “What else have you not told me?”

“I am not just a simple Fox Shifter, I’m the second prince of Cambryn.” Shock ripples through me as he continues. “Even though I feared your rejection, I worried that if you knew that I was royalty...” His voice trails off.

“That I would choose you because of your title,” I finish for him, and he nods.

“But then we kissed. You chose me for me.” A sad smile crests his lips. “You actually wanted me for me. And for a moment, I lost myself. My inner Fox already considers you ours, even though we’ve not officially bonded. I worried that if we went any further, he would claim you and mark you as our mate before I could even explain to you what it would mean.”

“What would it mean, Ren? Tell me.”

“We mark our mates by biting them, creating a scar that alerts others of the claim,” he explains. “The mark is then sealed with a mating.” His amber eyes meet mine evenly. “And Foxes mate for life. I’ve never wanted anything as much as I want you,

Rapunzel.”

My breath catches, warmth blooming deep within.

“Please, forgive me,” he pleads. “I should have told you the truth from the start.”

Even though it hurts, I understand why he withheld the truth. And if I’m being entirely honest with myself, my heart has already forgiven... from the moment he first confessed.

But it doesn’t matter anymore. Not now that I know there may be someone out there waiting for me. How can I give myself to Ren when I don’t even know who I really am and when it may mean betraying a vow I made to another?

The truth of Theron’s existence is an invisible wall between us, a boundary that I don’t yet know how to cross.

“I forgive you, Ren.” Sadness tightens my chest at the hope that fills his eyes. I want so much to be his, but I cannot. I hate knowing that my next words will only hurt him. “I want you too. More than anything. But it’s not that simple. Not anymore.”

“Because of Theron,” he murmurs, devastated.

I nod.

“What if we’re wrong, Rapunzel? What if you aren’t his missing betrothed that everyone believes is dead?”

I’ve considered this, but until I go to Sylvalis, I cannot know for sure. “But, what if I am? I cannot simply ignore the possibility, Ren.” I search his eyes, pleading for him to understand. “He’s not just a dream anymore. The man in my drawings is real. And

now that I know who he is, I must find him.

“He’s a connection to my past. And even if I cannot fully remember it, I can’t pretend it’s not important. There are people I left behind, people who might be searching for me even now. I might have loved him. And if my memories return, what if those feelings return as well?”

I blink back tears. “What if I regain my memories, and I find myself a completely different person? That this version of me is not who I truly am? How can I give you my heart when I don’t even know if it’s still mine to give? How can we build a future when I don’t remember my past?”

A terrible ache builds in my chest as I speak the words I know must be said. The last thing I want is to cause Ren any pain. Fates curse me, I’m already halfway in love with him, but I cannot ignore what I’ve learned of Prince Theron. If I am his lost betrothed, I can’t allow myself to fall for Ren.

Until I discover the truth of my past, I must do whatever it takes to guard my heart... for both of our sakes. “I’m sorry, Ren.” I shake my head. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“It’s all right,” he murmurs, voice rough with emotion. “I understand.”

Sadness tightens my chest. “I know I’ve no right to ask this of you, but—”

“What is it?”

“Will you please take me to Sylvalis?” I ask. “Will you help me find Prince Theron? To learn the truth of my past.”

“Of course,” he replies solemnly. “I will always help you, Rapunzel.”

Sadness lances my chest. I open my mouth to speak, but I cannot seem to find the words.

Before I can say anything, continues, “Besides,” he adds. “I think you’d miss my company if you had to travel on your own. Especially my singing.”

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He smiles, but it doesn't quite touch his eyes, and my heart breaks a little more.

I offer him a faint smile in return. "Especially that," I agree.

CHAPTER 22

REN

We're almost to the river, and I'm exhausted. Not because the journey has been physically demanding, but because I'm devastated beyond words. To make matters worse, my Fox has been snarling and thrashing beneath the surface, wounded, and confused, refusing to accept that she is not ours. Not truly.

And because I'm in my Fox form as we travel, it is even harder to reason with him. It's taking every bit of my strength to force him into submission, while he howls in agony, demanding that we claim her.

Rapunzel shifts on my back, her fingers clutching my fur. The small, unconscious gesture tightens the ache inside me.

She is my fated one. Even if she were not, I would still desire her as mine. She is kind, intelligent, brave, and beautiful. All the things I could possibly want in a partner. Even if she chooses Theron, my heart will remain hers, for my Fox will accept no other as his mate.

My troubled thoughts are interrupted when Finik scrambles atop my head and settles between my ears, chittering as if I'm his personal steed.

Rapunzel laughs. “Finik seems to have found a new perch.”

“He seems to have forgotten I'm a fearsome predator, not a pony,” I tease.

She laughs again, and it's such a rich and beautiful sound, easing some of the pain in my chest.

I flick my ears forward, detecting the sound of rushing water up ahead. “We're nearly there.”

When we reach the river, worry prickles my skin. It's wider than it was when I passed through here a little over a week ago. Heavy rains in the north must have made the water level rise.

The turbulent water churns dangerously. White-crested waves crash against several partially submerged boulders, scattered across the riverbed.

If I try to cross with Rapunzel on my back, she could easily be swept away.

“The current is too strong. We need to find another way across.”

Her grip tightens. “All right.”

Trotting along the riverbank, I move further downstream. In the distance, I spot a wooden bridge. It's narrow—barely wide enough for my Fox form—but it appears sturdy.

With Rapunzel and Finik still on my back, I carefully make my way across. The wood groans beneath us, but holds steady. We're at the halfway point when a sharp scent drifts toward me, on the wind.

I still. My ears prick forward, body tense, as I scan the opposite shore.

Someone is here. I'm sure of it. But whoever it is, they are hiding.

"Rapunzel," I project. "I need you to slide off my back."

She hesitates. "What's wrong?"

"Someone is watching us."

The acrid smell of her fear floods my nostrils as she dismounts, her feet barely hitting the wooden planks before a massive Wolf emerges from the trees across the way.

He's enormous, easily matching my size, heavily muscled, with thick, gray-black fur and bright golden eyes.

"Who are you?" I call out, although I fear I already know. He must be the one the Stags warned us about.

"My name is Sevryn," he says, his voice deep and rumbling. "I've come for the girl."

Instinctively, I place myself between Rapunzel and the Wolf, my every muscle tense as I stare him down, growling low in my throat. "You cannot have her."

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“Run,” I whisper urgently in her mind. “I’ll hold him back.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” she projects. “I can help.”

Raising her hands, sparks of green magic flicker across her palm before suddenly dissipating into wisps of smoke. “I—I don’t understand.” She shakes her head and tries again, but her magic fizzles and fades quickly. “I cannot access my powers.”

The Wolf cocks his head to one side. “Did you really think the witch would send me to capture you unprepared?” He glances at a glowing purple charm hanging around his neck. “This pendant binds your magic. You cannot use it here.”

Fierce protectiveness surges through my veins as the Wolf advances. Ears back, fur bristling, I bare my fangs. “Take one more step and I’ll end you.”

“We’re evenly matched, Fox,” he snarls. “But I doubt a Prince of Cambryn has seen as much battle as I have.”

Ice cold dread fills my veins. If he knows who I am, then Drusilla does as well. Which means, she knows where we’re going.

“Give me the girl,” he demands. “And I will let you live. If you fight me, you will die.”

He underestimates my abilities. As a second son, I have trained my entire life to be warrior—to command the armies of our people for my older brother when he assumes the throne.

Still, I'd prefer to avoid a direct conflict if I can. If I fall here, Rapunzel will be at his mercy.

"You don't have to do this," I state firmly. "Whatever the witch promised you, it's not worth this."

"You think I have a choice?" He snarls, bitterness flashing in his eyes. "I made a bargain, Fox. She called it in."

Perhaps he's not the villain I thought he was. Maybe he can be reasoned with. "What could she possibly offer to make you hunt down an innocent woman?"

A shadow of pain crosses his eyes, but it's quickly masked by anger. "My tongue is bound by her spell. Just hand her over, and I won't have to kill you."

"Is your bargain fulfilled once we fight?" I ask, just to be sure. Knowing he is under the influence of a dark enchantment, I don't want to have to end him if it can be avoided. "Even if you are beaten?"

"Yes, but the spell will not allow me to concede nor simply allow you to best me. She will know and then—" His mouth snaps shut, and I realize it must be the witch's dark magic at work, holding back his words. "Now, hand her over," he demands.

"Never." I will protect and defend her until my last breath. "As long as I draw breath, you will not touch her."

"So be it," he says darkly.

"Rapunzel, run!" I cry out as the Wolf launches forward in a blur of powerful muscle.

CHAPTER 23

REN

“Rapunzel, run!” The words tear from my throat as I charge at the Wolf.

We clash in the air, tumbling to the ground in a tangled mess of limbs and fangs. Sharp claws rake across my side, slicing through me like white-hot knives.

He howls as I sink my fangs deep into his shoulder, warm blood filling my mouth as he writhes beneath me, desperate to escape.

The bridge groans as the wooden planks begin to fracture and splinter under our combined weight, each of us fighting to gain the upper hand as the river roars below.

Searing agony rips through me as he swipes out, his sharp claws raking across my chest. My vision blurs, and blood soaks my fur as we remain locked in a deadly embrace, neither of us willing to surrender.

I cannot fall. I will not fail her.

A scream shatters through the violence. “Ren!”

I whip my head toward Rapunzel, and my heart stops as the boards give way beneath her.

“No!”

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Terror filled eyes meet mine a moment before the river swallows her whole.

Without hesitation, I leap toward her. The breath explodes from my lungs as I crash into the ice-cold water, the violent current catching me and dragging me under.

Still in my Fox form, my muscles burn with every stroke as I fight to stay above the surface. Raw panic claws at my throat as I scan the river, searching for her. “Rapunzel!”

In the distance, I see Finik balanced atop a submerged boulder. He leaps onto a hanging branch overhead and scrambles to the shore.

Through the churning chaos, I catch a glimpse of Rapunzel’s silver hair shimmering beneath the turbulent waves. Shifting back into my two-legged form, I dive beneath the water and grasp her long braid, dragging her up from the riverbed.

She breaks through the surface, gasping for air, her eyes wide as she clings to me.

“Hold tight,” I instruct as I wrap one arm solidly around her, navigating the current to swim to the opposite side.

When we reach the shore, I push her up onto the riverbank as she coughs several times, violently expelling the water from her lungs.

Without warning, white hot pain sears across my back as sharp claws dig into my flesh and the Wolf Shifter jerks me away from her and back into the water.

“Ren!” Rapunzel calls out from the shore as Sevryn pulls me under.

We’re both in human form as we fight beneath the churning water, tumbling along the riverbed as the current drags us downstream.

Kicking out, I manage to free myself and push up through the surface. Dread coils tight in my chest when I see the water disappearing over the edge of the cliff up ahead.

Sevryn crashes into my back, but I spin and punch his shoulder, pushing him away and closer to the waterfall.

“Ren!” Rapunzel calls out.

I whip my head toward the sound of her voice, watching in wonder as magic arcs from her hands, and a thick vine explodes from the riverbank. Leaves unfurl and flowers bloom as it thickens into a living rope, stretching toward me as the river drags me closer to the steep drop off. “Grab hold of it!” she yells.

I reach for the vine, barely managing to grasp the end. Gripping it firmly, I struggle to pull myself toward the shore, fighting against the strong current, but my weight is too heavy and it snaps.

Time slows, my pulse pounding in my ears. Rapunzel’s eyes lock onto mine, wide with horror, as the current drags me over the edge of the falls.

CHAPTER 24

RAPUNZEL

Raw panic floods my veins as I race along the riverbank to the edge of the cliff. Finik

clings to my shoulder, his tiny claws digging into my skin, but I barely feel it as I scan for any sign of Ren.

Fog-like mist rises from the waterfall, obscuring most of my view of the churning river and forest below.

“Ren!” His name rips from my throat in a feral cry that’s swallowed by the thunderous roar of the falls.

Devastated, I fall to my knees. “Ren, please.” Tears stream down my face. “You can’t be gone.”

Finik chirps mournfully in my ear, climbing slowly from my shoulder down to the ground. My heart aches as he shuffles to the edge of the cliff and peers over, his tiny nose twitching with confusion and sorrow.

“I know, Finik.” The words escape in a broken sob. “He’s gone, and I never told him—”

Emotions lodge in my throat and I cannot speak around them as crushing regret settles deep in my chest. I never told Ren how much he truly meant to me.

Tears blur my vision as I think of his smile, and how my pulse would race each time his eyes danced with mischief whenever he teased me. How I wanted more than anything to give him my heart, despite the uncertainty of my past.

Silent sobs wrack through me. “I should have told him.”

“Told me what?” Ren’s voice echoes nearby.

My head snaps up, my heart freezing in my chest.

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“That I’m incredibly handsome?” he continues. “Charming? Witty? Or that I have rather impressive skill at surviving impossible situations?”

“Ren?” Scrambling to the cliff’s edge, I peer directly over the side, searching desperately for him, praying I’m not imagining the sound of his voice. “Where are—”

My breath catches when I see him clinging to a large boulder, protruding from the rushing water, near the top of the falls. Water streams down his face, slicking back his red hair, his fox-amber eyes locked onto mine. Despite his precarious position, he flashes a teasing grin. “Did you miss me?”

“Oh, Ren.” Relief washes through me, and Finik squeaks excitedly, hopping up and down at my side, echoing my joy. “You’re alive.”

Worry grips me anew as water pounds relentlessly against the rock he’s clinging to. “Hold on. I’ll use my power to help you up.” I raise my hands, struggling to call upon my magic. Exhaustion drags at me, but I force myself to push through. “Don’t move.”

“No problem.” He exhales a rough, breathless laugh. “I’ll just wait right here, shall I?” he teases. “And when you rescue me, you can finish telling me all the things you wished you’d said when you thought I was gone.” A handsome smirk curls his lips. “I’m dying to hear all the details.”

Embarrassment heats my cheeks but I push it back down as I concentrate. Closing my eyes, I draw in a deep and steadying breath. Heat fills my palms as magic swirls between my fingers like wisps of green smoke before I send it into the ground.

Green vines surge up through the soil, unfurling and thickening as they stretch down to Ren and coil tightly around his waist. Once I'm sure they're strong enough to hold onto him, I raise my hands, directing the vines to pull him back to safety.

My arms tremble as I set him on the riverbank beside me.

Soaking wet, he collapses onto his back, panting heavily.

For a moment, I can't do anything but stare at him, still in disbelief that he's alive. My shock gives way to joy, and he lets out a startled 'oof' when I throw myself into his arms.

"Sorry." I start to jerk back, remembering his injuries too late, but he tightens his hold, embracing me just as fiercely in return.

Finik scurries up onto Ren's shoulder and nuzzles his cheek.

Ren huffs a tired laugh, his amber eyes flicking between the two of us. "Perhaps I should almost die more often. I've never been greeted this enthusiastically before."

I lightly swat his shoulder. "That's not funny."

He winces, and guilt stabs through me again. "I'm so sorry, Ren." I sit up, my gaze traveling over his battered and bloodied form. "You're hurt. We need to—"

"I'll be fine," he assures me. "It's not that bad."

Not that bad? He looks like death warmed over. "We need to find you a healer."

"My kind heal quickly. I'll be all right." His gaze shifts to the forest around us. "We need to move. We must find shelter before nightfall."

“Do you think Sevryn survived?” Worry tightens my chest as I think of the Wolf Shifter. “Do you think he’ll come after us?”

“Yes.” Tension lines Ren’s features as he gives me a grim look. “And I doubt he’s the only one the witch sent to hunt us.”

A chill runs down my spine.

He pushes himself to his feet. “We need to get you out of those wet clothes before you freeze.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice our travel pack, caught on a fallen limb at the edge of the water. Ren follows my gaze and then moves to retrieve it. He picks it up, staring at it curiously when he realizes it’s still dry, along with the contents inside.

“How did this survive the water?”

“It was Drusilla’s. She used it to bring me supplies,” I explain. “She spelled it to protect it from the rain.”

I take it from him, slinging it across my shoulders. “I can walk,” I tell him, not wanting him to feel as though he needs to carry me while he’s injured.

Ren shakes his head. “We need to travel fast.”

Before I can argue, he shifts back into his Fox form and crouches down, lowering his back for me to climb up.

I scowl. “Ren, you’re wounded. You shouldn’t carry me. You need to rest.”

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His ears flick, unimpressed. “There’s no time, love,” his voice slips into my mind. “We need to go. Now.”

I gather my drenched skirts and climb onto his back. Finik settles between Ren’s shoulders, in front of me, holding tightly to his fur.

Once we’re secure, he breaks into a run, his muscles rippling beneath me as he races through the forest.

My clothes are still damp from the water, and I shiver as the wind whips around my form. “Just hang on,” Ren’s voice whispers in my mind. “As soon as we find shelter, I’ll make a fire to keep you warm.”

Closing my eyes, I think of what happened. Ren could have been killed. I almost lost him today. And the thing that terrifies me most is the knowledge that this may not be the only trial we face in my quest for the truth of my past.

The witch is still hunting us. We are not safe.

CHAPTER 25

REN

Desperately, I search for any place to shelter as Rapunzel shivers again. Through my thick fur, her body is like ice against mine as her wet dress clings to her form. I can even hear Finik’s little teeth chattering as he trembles with cold.

And if all this wasn't already bad enough, dark clouds gather overhead and torrential rain begins to pour down in thick heavy sheets as the wind howls through the trees.

The only positive thing about this weather is that at least it may serve to hide our scent if the Wolf Shifter—Servryn—or anyone else is tracking us.

My entire body is still sore and it won't fully heal until I can rest, but I don't tell Rapunzel this. The last thing I want is for her to worry about me. Pushing my discomfort aside, I quicken my pace.

The last of the sun's rays spear through the forest, lengthening the shadows of the trees. Although we have already crossed the river, I'd prefer not to be wandering around at night. I don't think Ogres frequent this part of the woods, but I could be wrong.

I'm also concerned about the Wolf. If Sevryn survived, he'll come after us. He has no choice. The witch has called in his bargain.

Lightning fingers through the clouds, illuminating the path ahead and revealing a burned-out farmhouse. The skeletal remains of its structure stand in sharp contrast beside a small stable with its roof and walls still intact.

Relief crashes through me as I lope toward the entrance. The heavy wooden doors hang askew, but the inside is dry, the scent of old hay thick in the air. My nostrils flare. This place smells as if it has been abandoned for a while. Whatever happened here that caused the farmhouse to burn, and its inhabitants to leave, it must have been long ago.

Scanning the stable, I notice a few old barrels, rusted tools, and remnants of tack and blankets. In the center of the space, is a fire pit, ringed with old stones, likely used to keep livestock warm in the winter. And beside it is a bundle of wood and a couple of

firestones.

Thank the gods.

Carefully, I lower myself and Rapunzel slides off my back. The moment her feet touch the ground, she starts to sway. Instantly, I shift into my two-legged form, catching her around her waist to steady her as she cradles Finik's tiny, shivering body in her arms.

The ache in my ribs sharpens as I move, but I grit my teeth and ignore it. The instinctive need to care for my mate overriding my pain.

I dig through our travel pack and pull out one of the wool blankets. Cupping her chin, I tip her face up to mine. "You need to change out of these wet clothes before you freeze."

She's trembling and her eyes are heavy with exhaustion as she nods. My heart clenches when I realize there's no worry or hesitation. Only trust as she looks up at me.

Carefully, I peel away the heavy, sodden layers, my fingers grazing over her icy skin as the heavy fabric stubbornly clings to her. When I finally slip the last of the damp material from her body, leaving her in only the barest undergarments, I avert my eyes, covering her and Finik with a wool blanket.

Satisfied that she's no longer soaked, I turn my attention back to the fire pit, arranging the wood and using the firestones to light it. Within moments, flames roar to life.

I'm thankful for the fire, but it will take a while before it heats the entire stable. My body feels like one large bruise, and it's painful to shift, but I need to warm Rapunzel

and Finik as quickly as possible.

I take a small step back and then a rush of pain and heat floods my veins as my bones shift—elongating and reshaping into my Fox form. Agony ripples through me as fur spills over my skin in a golden-red wave and my claws and fangs extend.

Careful of my injuries, I settle beside Rapunzel, curling my body around hers, draping my tail over her smaller form like a blanket.

“Gods, you’re warm,” she says, pressing against me. Her delicate hands fist in my fur as she lets out a soft sigh of contentment. “Thank you, Ren.”

Finik chitters as he nestles against me as well.

I shift and a sharp hiss of pain escapes without thinking. Her head whips toward mine, but before she can say anything, I reassure her. “I promise you I will heal. I should be recovered fully by morning.”

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Concern and sadness shadow her features. “You could have died today, Ren.”

“But I didn’t.” I don’t want her to dwell on what might have happened. I nuzzle her side. “We will rest here tonight and continue on in the morning.”

“Do you think we’re safe here, Ren?” she asks, worry shadowing her features.

I doubt the Wolf Shifter is the only one sent by the witch. I suspect there are still others out there, hunting us even now. But I cannot know for sure, and I don’t want to burden her with my fears. “Yes. The heavy rain will mask our scent and our tracks for now, making it difficult for anyone to find us.”

For now, we are warm and safe. And no matter what happens, I will do whatever I must to protect her.

She turns her gaze to the fire, her eyes blinking open and closed as she struggles to stay awake. The stable is warmer now, but I love that she still nestles into my side.

As she drifts off to sleep, I study her. I realize how dangerous this is as we walk the fine line between friends and... something more. I think of Prince Theron and the story of his betrothed. Rapunzel may be his, but there is also the chance she is not.

There’s also the risk that she’ll regain her memories and become someone completely different from who she is now. Or she may remember Theron and decide she’s not interested in me at all.

I had resolved to simply be her friend. To abstain from trying to charm her—to woo

her and convince her to be mine. But I almost lost her today. And the mere thought makes me want to hold her close and never let her go.

So, even if this can never be more than it is now. I want to enjoy it for as long as it lasts. Even if it only ends with my heart broken and shattered. If this is all I can have of her... then, I will take whatever scraps of affection that I can.

CHAPTER 26

RAPUNZEL

I'm drowning.

Cold water pulls at my skirts, heavy and relentless, dragging me deeper. My heart pounds, terror clawing through me as I fight to reach the surface.

"Rapunzel!" Theron's voice cuts sharply through the roar of the water. I kick harder, desperate to reach his outstretched hand. His blue eyes are wide with panic, his face stark with terror as he lunges into the churning river after me.

But the current is too strong. It drags me under, deeper and deeper until his face fades into the dark. The water closes around me, swallowing my screams—

"Rapunzel!" Strong hands grip my shoulders, shaking me awake. "Wake up. You're safe."

I jolt upright, gasping for air. Ren's worried amber eyes stare down at me. He's in his two-legged form again, his arms tight around my trembling form.

"Ren." I blink back tears. "I dreamed of Theron. I fell into a river, and he tried to save me. But the current was so strong. I felt like I was drowning all over again."

“Do you think it was a memory or... a nightmare?” he asks softly.

“I don’t know.” I swallow back a sob. “I was so scared.”

“Shhh,” Ren murmurs, pulling me against his chest, his heartbeat steady beneath my cheek. “I’ve got you. You’re safe now.”

Ren holds me close, gently combing his fingers through my hair. The lingering darkness from my nightmare begins to fade, replaced by the comforting strength of his arms around me.

He tucks the blanket around my shoulders and then wraps his arms around me again. “Have I ever told you the epic tale of Lord Frostfang, Destroyer of Worlds?”

“No. I think I’d definitely remember something like that.”

He grins. “Would you like to hear it?”

A faint smile crests my lips, and I nod.

“When Rowan and I were just kits, he stormed into my chambers one evening, covered head to toe in mud, and announced he’d discovered an abandoned snowcat cub. It was so tiny, it fit in the palm of his hand. But it had fur whiter than moonlight and claws sharper than any blade. We were convinced it would grow into a fearsome guardian.

“We took turns hiding him from our parents in our beds at night, sneaking milk and cream, and scraps of roasted meat from the kitchens, convinced we were raising the most fearsome beast Cambryn had ever seen.”

“And did he become fierce?” I ask, already guessing the answer.

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“Oh, he was terrifying,” he says solemnly. “To socks, curtains, and unattended plates of food. But sadly, it turned out he was just a regular kitten. The runt of the litter, in fact, and about as fearsome as a cotton ball.”

“So much for your terrifying guardian,” I tease.

“Yes, it was quite the blow,” he admits, sighing dramatically. “But by that point, we were already attached, including my parents. We named him Lord Frostfang, Destroyer of Worlds, convinced the sheer power of his name would strike terror in the hearts of any who heard it.”

I laugh. “So what happened to Lord Frostfang, Destroyer of Worlds?”

“Well...” he clears his throat playfully. “Lord Frostfang turned out to be Lady Frostfang, but we didn’t discover this until she gave birth to a litter of kittens. We kept one. My sister named him Sir Whiskers, and he’s ruled Cambryn with an iron paw ever since. You’ll meet him soon enough. Be warned: he is a tyrant.” He grins. “He spends most of his days lounging on the furniture and demanding belly rubs and food.”

“Now,” Ren continues, tilting his head thoughtfully, a mischievous glint in his eyes, “in the interest of fairness, it’s your turn. You must tell me a story about your childhood.”

My heart sinks, and my smile fades as a familiar ache blooms in my chest. Ren immediately winces, realizing his mistake. His expression softens, regret flickering across his features. “Forgive me, Rapunzel. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s all right,” I whisper, forcing a small smile. “I might not remember my own past, but I still have the stories I read while in the tower.”

His eyes spark with curiosity, his gaze softening with relief. “Stories, you say? What kind?”

My cheeks warm. “Mostly romance and some adventure.”

He arches a teasing brow, leaning closer. “Romance, hmm? Would these by chance involve a daring Fox Shifter who rescues beautiful maidens, defeats dastardly villains, and impresses everyone with his devastatingly good looks?”

I blink, caught off guard, then burst into laughter. “You’re impossible.”

He gasps dramatically, pressing a hand to his chest. “Why are you laughing? Clearly, this sounds like a tale worth telling. Fox Shifters are known far and wide for their bravery, charm, and noble hearts, after all.”

I roll my eyes, though a smile threatens to break free. “Well, most of the stories I’ve read involved human men or Fae or Elves. I don’t think I heard of any involving Shifters.”

“That’s a shame,” he tsks. “For I have heard of many. I’ve even heard true accounts about a Dragon Shifter who fell in love with a human and took her as his mate after she broke his curse.”

“Really?”

He nods. “They reside in Eryadon, in his castle by the sea.” He arches a teasing brow. “Shifters are far more interesting than human men, you know.”

“Is that so?” I bite my lower lip, fighting back laughter.

“Absolutely. And If you’ll allow me to, I can prove it to you.”

“How?”

In the blink of an eye, he shifts back into his Fox form. “If you were with a human male, you’d be freezing right now because he wouldn’t be able to shift into a Fox to keep you warm. This is just one of the many advantages of a shifter mate.”

“You’re right.” A smile curves my mouth as I decide to tease him. “I think a Dragon Shifter would be great. Especially since he could fly me wherever I wished to go.”

“A Dragon Shifter?” Ren jerks back, mock-offended. “Everyone knows Dragons have terrible tempers. You definitely don’t want one of those.”

I giggle. “Then what would you suggest?”

His intense gaze locks with mine. “I suggest a Fox Shifter.”

My heart stutters as I shake my head, a helpless smile tugging at my lips. Deep inside, my feelings swirl in confusion. Because despite how much I’m falling for Ren, the shadow of Theron, of what he possibly meant to me and who I’m supposed to be, still lingers, complicating everything.

CHAPTER 27

RAPUNZEL

I wake up surrounded by warmth with Ren’s Fox form curled protectively around me. Finik is curled into a little ball on the hay beside us, his little nose twitching as he

sleeps.

Lifting my head, I find Ren still asleep. His chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm as his warm scent of pine and earth surrounds me. Shifting slightly, I snuggle further into his side.

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Lying here with him like this, I feel so warm, so safe... so cherished.

Closing my eyes, I remember how terrified I was when he fought the Wolf. Ren could have died saving me. I almost lost him, and the thought terrifies me to my core.

Drawing in a deep breath, I try to anchor myself in this moment, curled against him, reminding myself that he's here. He's alive and we're safe. For now.

I'm pressed flush against his side, snuggled against his thick fur with his tail draped over me, sealing in his warmth and his delicious masculine scent.

I shift, and then freeze as I realize I'm in nothing but my undergarments, the wool blanket somehow discarded to the side instead of wrapped around my body. A vague memory of me pushing it away during the night so I could snuggle into Ren's side, resurfaces.

A ripple of movement runs through Ren, and he changes in an instant. His fur is replaced by bare skin and the firm press of muscles at my back. His soft, warm breath ghosts across my cheek. "Are you awake?" he murmurs.

Unable to speak, I simply nod.

Slowly, I turn in his arm. His red hair is tousled from sleep, falling over his eyes. Heat curls low in my stomach as his lips curve up in a handsome smile. "Good morning, amira. Did you sleep well?"

He stands from the bed, and my heart hammers as my eyes travel over his bare torso,

from his heavily muscled chest to the sculpted ridges of his abdomen, lean strength carved into every inch of his form. “Yes,” I reply, breathless.

Ren looks like he’s wearing trousers, but I know it’s an illusion—part of his shifter magic. Casually, he pulls out a spare change of clothes from our pack and holds them out to me.

My face feels like it’s on fire as I snatch it from his hands and drape it over myself. As if sensing my embarrassment, Ren lowers his gaze and turns his back to me.

As I pull the dress over my head, I can’t help but notice the finely chiseled muscles shifting in his broad shoulders and back as he moves to add more wood to the fire.

My gaze catches on the flex of his muscles as the firelight flickers over his bare skin, shadows dancing over the sharp planes of his arms and chest. There’s something mesmerizing about the effortless strength in his movements, the way he moves with such control and certainty.

I swallow hard, my throat suddenly dry.

When I glance up, he’s watching me. He walks toward me, grace and power evident in each step. He stops and leans in close. I forget how to breathe as his amber eyes lock onto mine and his fingers brush against my temple, threading through my hair.

My lips part, and I’m wondering if he will kiss me again when he suddenly plucks a single piece of hay from the tangled strands.

“You had something there.”

An amused smirk twists his lips and I narrow my eyes. I’m sure he knows exactly what kind of effect he has on me.

This is dangerous. If I'm not careful, I'll lose my heart to him completely.

Forcing myself to turn away from his mesmerizing gaze, I sit next to the fire and start the process of rebraiding my long hair, trying to focus on something besides the devastatingly handsome Fox nearby.

Ren crouches beside me and tilts his head. "Want some help?"

I should say no, but instead I find myself nodding. I regret my decision almost immediately when he moves behind me, positioning us so that I'm sitting between his legs, his thighs bracketing mine and my back to his chest.

I've slept next to him, but something about this feels so much more intimate as he guides me to lean back against him, the warmth of his body radiating to mine.

Closing my eyes, I surrender to his tender ministrations. "Your hair," he murmurs, almost reverently. "It's lovely—like starlight woven into silk."

Softly, I bite my lower lip as heat flares through me. A shiver of pleasure moves down my spine when his fingers brush against the back of my neck.

"You're good at this."

"One of my many skills," he teases, and I laugh. "It's not all that different from braiding a length of rope," he muses. "Same pattern and all that."

I love the sound of his voice and could listen to him talk forever. It's rich and smooth, wrapping around me like a soothing balm as he tells me more about his kingdom and his family.

When he mentions his brother—Rowan—again, something flickers in my mind. A

face, just on the edge of memory—warm blue eyes, a lopsided grin. A man only a few years older than me.

“I just remembered something,” I whisper.

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Reaching for the satchel, I pull out my notebook and flip through the pages until I find one of a young man with features similar to mine. “This is my older brother.” The words leave my mouth full of conviction as the memory returns. “I remember him now.”

Ren’s brow furrows. “Are you certain?”

A smile lights my face as joy fills my chest. “Yes.”

Ren studies the image, his gaze flicking between the page and my face. “Thank the gods.” I frown in confusion and he flashes a devilish grin. “For a moment, I thought he was yet another rival for your affections.”

I bite back a smile at his teasing even as his words threaten to break my resolve. Part of me wishes I could ignore my search for the truth of my past, and give in to my heart, which tells me that I want him and only him.

He flips between the image of Prince Theron. “You know, I feel sorry for him actually.”

“Why?”

“I doubt he’s as charming or as funny as me.” He tilts his head, studying Theron’s image. “And he’s definitely not as handsome.” He sighs dramatically. “Really, I pity him, having to compete with all of this.” He gestures to himself. “There’s simply no contest.”

I laugh. “You’re ridiculous.”

“It’s true,” he jokes. “All the males in my family are irresistible.”

My laughter fades, trailing off into silence as our eyes lock, and Ren's teasing smile slips away, replaced by something deeper, something infinitely more tender. The unspoken longing mirrored in the rapid pounding of my heart.

His gaze flicks down to my mouth and before I can second-guess myself, I lift my face and close the small gap between us. Fluttering warmth spreads through my chest as I press my lips to his, wrapping my arms around the back of his neck.

The kiss is sweet and achingly gentle. He cups my face, his thumb brushing along my cheekbone. Every gentle touch of his lips feels like a promise, tender and hesitant, filled with everything we can’t yet say aloud.

My fingers tremble as I run them through his silken hair.

He curls his arms around my back, holding me as though I’m something precious, his touch reverent, and his kiss a soft exploration that makes my heart squeeze with longing.

But suddenly, the image of Theron flashes vividly through my mind—his blue eyes haunted and desperate as he reaches for me. My breath catches, and I pull back, breaking the kiss as guilt slices through my chest like a blade.

“I—I can’t do this,” my voice comes out barely a whisper as I blink back tears. “I’m sorry. I need time. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Ren nods. “It’s all right,” he murmurs, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead. “Take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere.”

His words break my heart. “It’s not fair of me to ask you to wait while I figure this out. I feel terrible because I—”

“Do you feel anything for me?” His eyes search mine. “I know I have no right to ask, but I—” He clenches his jaw as if what he wants to say is too painful before he continues. “I need to know.”

“I do.” Sadness tightens my chest at the hope that burns in his gaze. “But it’s not that simple.” I shake my head. “How can we have a future, if I don’t remember my past? What if I was betrothed to Prince Theron? What if I loved him, Ren?”

“But what if you didn’t?” he counters. “What if you’re not his lost betrothed?”

“Until we know for sure”—I look down at my hands—“I cannot give you my heart when I don’t know if I’ve already promised it to someone else.”

“But you want to.” His words are a statement, not a question as his gaze holds mine, full of yearning.

I want so much to say yes, but I cannot. I draw in a shaking breath as devastation floods my veins. “We cannot keep doing this,” I murmur. “Not until we know for sure.”

“You’re right. Forgive me.” He dips his chin. “I vow that I will not kiss you again, unless you ask.” He offers me a faint smile that does not touch his eyes. He starts to turn away, but instead looks back at me, arching a teasing brow. “But as far as my natural charm, it’s not something I can simply turn off.”

“Of course not.” My heart clenches as I follow his lead to lighten the mood, and joke in return. “You are a Fox after all.”

He flashes a devastatingly handsome grin as he winks. “And everyone knows that Foxes are naturally charismatic and charming.”

Despite my sadness, laughter bubbles up in my throat.

“Now,” he says. “Are you ready to continue with our adventure?”

“Yes.”

As he gathers up our supplies, he begins singing his silly song, making me laugh even more.

“Oh, a clever fox, dashing and bold,

His charm and wit worth more than gold...

His features so handsome that nary a maiden—”

And that’s what terrifies me most. How easily he breaks through all my defenses. Despite my attempts to guard my heart, I’m falling for him.

Guilt fills me as I think of Prince Theron. I send a silent prayer to the gods that I’m not the one he has been searching for all these years. Because if I am, I fear I will lose my heart to Ren by the time we find each other again.

CHAPTER 28

REN

As we make our way through the forest, all I can think about is Rapunzel.

She wants me as much as I desire her.

I know it... I felt it in the way she trembled, in the way she brushed her lips to mine

before she stopped herself.

My thoughts turn to Prince Theron and a low growl rumbles in my throat. The mere idea of him touching her... owning a piece of her heart makes me want to rip him to shreds.

I told her I wouldn't touch her unless she asks, but that doesn't mean I cannot fight for her. I'll be damned if I let some worthless Stag Shifter from her past woo her away from me without a challenge.

All is fair in love and war. And this is both.

I'll carve my place so deep in her heart that it won't matter if she regains her memories and remembers him. I'll prove myself worthy of her, and earn her heart. And when she chooses me, I'll burn through every memory of him, replace every whispered word, every stolen touch, until the only name that exists on her lips is mine.

If she truly was his, he obviously didn't love her enough. Because if he did, she wouldn't have been locked in that tower, alone. If he truly cared for her, he would have found her... fought for her.

I did.

I'll prove myself to her... show her that I am the better male. I'll—

A sharp whistle cuts the air, whizzing past my head, followed by a loud thunk. Bark splinters from the tree next to us as an arrow buries deep into its trunk.

My pulse pounds in my ears. We're under attack.

"Hold on!" Fierce protectiveness surges through me as I veer to the side, quickening

my pace as we race through the woods.

“Ren!”

Hoofbeats thunder behind us, and another arrow whistles through the air. White-hot pain flares as it nicks my ear.

The strong stench of sweat, steel, and horses fills the air. Glancing over my shoulder I notice three men on horseback, but I’m uncertain if they’re bandits or mercenaries sent by the witch.

Panic claws at my throat as I push myself harder. I cannot allow them to catch us.

My stride falters and searing agony tears through my shoulder as an arrow embeds itself deep in my flesh, followed quickly by another that sinks deep into my side.

My legs buckle beneath me, and I slam to the ground.

“Ren!” Rapunzel cries out.

The world spins as I lift my head, the taste of iron and dirt on my tongue.

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Heavy footsteps rush toward us, and I release a deafening roar as three men grab her, ripping her away from my side.

Still in my Fox form, I fight through the pain and force myself to stand. Mustering my strength, I charge one of the men, sending him sprawling to the ground. Wrapping my massive jaw around his arm, I jerk my head and send him flying toward a tree.

He cries out but then falls silent as his body hits the trunk with a sickening crack.

“Ren, look out!” Rapunzel cries out as I start to turn back to face the other two men.

Another arrow pierces my flesh, just below my shoulder, and I collapse to the ground as a fresh wave of agony washes over me.

She raises her hands to call forth her magic. Vines explode from the ground, but they quickly fall away as one of the men tackles her.

Finik leaps from her pocket onto one of the men’s face. He screams and stumbles back, before he grabs Finik and sends him flying toward a nearby tree.

“Finik!” Rapunzel yells a moment before he hits the trunk and drops like a stone to the ground.

Rage blisters through me, my paws clawing into the dirt as I force my battered body back up, my muscles screaming in pain. My shoulder is on fire, my side slick and wet with my own blood, as I flatten my ears and glare at the men.

A deep growl vibrates in my chest. “Let. Her. Go.”

One of the men lunges toward me, sword in hand. Panic fills his eyes as I rip the blade from his grasp, snapping the bones and tissues of his wrist and hand like twigs beneath my powerful jaws.

A terrified scream rips from his throat as I sink my fangs deep into his shoulder, tearing through flesh and bone, twisting viciously and sending him flying back. He slams against a tree with a wet thud, crumpling to the ground in a boneless heap.

Rapunzel is still struggling with the last male. Her hands are bound with rope and she kicks out at him, kneeing him in the stomach. He recovers quickly and lunges for her, but she twists out of his grasp.

I growl and his head snaps to me. He stumbles back from Rapunzel, releasing a terrified cry.

He turns to run, but I swipe out, slicing his side with my razor-sharp claws. He falls to the ground, but quickly pushes himself back up. Pulling a blade from his belt, he charges toward my mate.

Surging toward him, I slam into him from behind and sink my fangs deep into the back of his neck until his spine breaks beneath my powerful jaws with a sharp crack.

Now that all three men are dead, I turn back to Rapunzel.

Breathing heavily, my entire body burns with agonizing pain as I stumble toward her and then collapse to the ground. With the arrows still buried in my flesh, I cannot shift back into my two-legged form.

“Ren.” She frees her wrists and rushes to my side, her eyes wide in concern as they

travel over my injuries.

The smell of blood is thick in the air and I can barely keep my eyes open, much less lift my head as darkness swims at the edge of my vision.

“Ren, please,” she sobs as she lifts my head into her lap. Finik chitters nearby and I thank the gods that he seems alright. He nuzzles my wounded foreleg as if trying to encourage me to get up, but I cannot. Everything hurts and I can barely move.

A shadow passes overhead. The scent of damp rock and earth fill my nose as wind buffets against me. I look up as a hulking figure with massive wings descends from the sky. Its taloned feet scrape against the earth as it lands on a boulder beside us.

It’s a Gargoyle. His golden eyes sweep over us, their vertical-slit pupils contracting, his expression unreadable as his tail flicks behind him.

Using the last of my strength, I bare my fangs in a feral snarl and force myself to stand. With my head lowered and my ear flat against my skull, I growl low in warning.

He takes a step closer, his gaze locked onto mine.

Gritting my fangs through the pain, I position myself between him and Rapunzel, my fur bristling as every instinct within flares to life with only one purpose—to protect she who is mine.

“You will not touch her,” I snarl.

“I mean you no harm,” he says, voice low and deep.

I bare my fangs, my vision tunneling in on him.

“Get back,” I demand.

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His nostrils flare as his gaze flicks over my bloodied and broken form, the arrows still embedded deep in my flesh.

“My name is Thalric, and I’m not here to hurt you.” He takes another step forward. “I heard your battle and followed the scent of blood. I came to offer you aid, but”—her jerks his chin toward the dead men—“I can see you already dispatched the vermin who attacked.” His golden eyes meet mine. “You are gravely injured. If you do not let me help you, you will die.”

I can barely breathe through the pain. Darkness gathers at the edge of my vision and my paws tremble as I struggle to remain upright.

“You must help him,” Rapunzel’s voice quavers behind me. “Please.”

I force my head up, locking eyes with the Gargoyle. “If you dare try to harm her, I’ll—”

“I will not,” he replies firmly. “You have my vow. But if you do not let me help you, I fear you will not live through the night.”

I’m reluctant to trust him, but I don’t have a choice.

“Shift back into your two-legged form,” Thalric orders, “so I may carry you more easily.”

Raw agony rips through me, a white-hot explosion and searing through every nerve and muscle. I’m only halfway through the shift when my body locks up in protest and

reverts back to my Fox form. The embedded arrows now hurting even worse as they remain lodged in my flesh.

Thalric mutters a curse under his breath, his wings shifting restlessly as his tail flicks behind him. Before I can even react, he strides forward and picks us both up as if we weigh nothing.

Rapunzel lets out a startled cry, clutching at me.

“I know a healer,” he says, adjusting his grip. “I will take you somewhere safe.”

I snarl weakly, my body failing me, my vision tilting.

“If you harm her, Gargoyle, I will end you,” I rasp. “Even if it’s the last thing I do.”

His lips curve in amusement. “Noted, Fox.”

The world sways and my head falls back as I succumb to the pain, and darkness swallows me whole.

CHAPTER 29

REN

I open my eyes to buttery morning light filtering in through gauzy curtains. I’m back in my two-legged form, but when I try to move, everything still hurts.

The scent of herbs and clean linen fill my nose. I’m lying in a bed... somewhere unfamiliar.

Panic sharpens my senses. Biting back a wince, I push myself up to sitting. I’m

covered with a sheet and my wounds are wrapped in thick gauze. I'm unclothed and too weak to use my shifter magic to conjure the appearance of clothing.

Struggling to recall how I got here, my gaze travels over the small but cozy room. Pale wooden beams arch overhead, vines curling around them in loose spirals. The scent of wildflowers lingers in the air, mixing with something earthy and faintly metallic. It's the dried blood staining the bandage around my torso.

Draping the sheet over my hips, I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, and sharp pain spears through my shoulder and side, stealing the breath from my lungs.

"Easy now." My head snaps toward the woman's voice as she walks through the door. "You are among friends."

Despite her words, I give her a wary look.

She's Fae. Her translucent red dragonfly wings flutter as she walks to my side. Her dark brown hair is tied back in a tight braid and she appears rather young, but as her sapphire eyes study me, I wonder if perhaps she is much older than she seems.

"I won't hurt you." She raises her hands in a show of peace. "My name is Flora. I tended your wounds."

Worry tightens my chest as myriad images flood my mind of our attack. "Where is Rapunzel?"

She tilts her head, gesturing behind her.

Relief fills me when I see Rapunzel curled up asleep on the sofa against the far wall. Finik is asleep in her pocket, only the tip of his tail peeking out. Her body is turned toward me, her hands folded beneath her cheek, her silver hair a tangled cascade over

the cushions. Dark shadows line her eyes, but her breaths are soft and even as she sleeps.

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“She refused to leave your side. She told us your name is Ren,” the Fae woman murmurs. “She only just fell asleep a few hours ago. I put a spell around her to mute sound so that she will not be disturbed as she rests,” Flora adds.

“How long was I unconscious?”

“A day and a half.”

She hands me a bundle of clothes as her gaze flicks to my face—my scar. My right hand flies up and my fingers brush over jagged, uneven ridges of skin. A sickening wave of dread floods me as I trace the ugly, twisting scar from above my brow, down over my cheek.

Still weakened from my wounds, I cannot conjure the illusion to fade its appearance.

As if reading my thoughts, she continues. “I understand what scars mean for Shifters, but your injuries were severe. Your body is still healing, so I suggest you not use any of your shifting abilities for at least two days.”

“It’s all right.” I’m not as concerned as I would have been before. Rapunzel has already seen my scar and she didn’t judge me for it. “It’s an old wound.”

But as I trace a finger over the jagged line, shame floods my system. Female Fox Shifters reject a male for their scars because it’s a sign of weakness—a symbol that the male cannot protect himself, much less a mate and kits.

I nearly failed Rapunzel. If not for Thalric I would be dead and my fated one would

have been left to fend for herself all alone. When I found her, all I wanted to do was prove myself—to show her that I was worthy to become her mate. But now, I realize that I am not.

“I live here with my sisters Lyra and Maribelle, and our adopted daughter, Aurora.”

Before I can ask more questions, a large shadow fills the doorway, drawing my attention.

It’s Thalric.

The Gargoyle’s golden eyes meet mine, sharp as steel. “We need to talk,” he says in a deep, rumbling voice like gravel.

I dip my chin. “Allow me to change first.”

Knowing how humans feel about nudity, I dress under the blanket in case Rapunzel awakens.

Pushing through the pain, I force myself to stand from the bed. I glance at Rapunzel, unsure about leaving her.

Flora must sense my hesitation because she murmurs, “Rapunzel is safe here.”

With one last glance at my fated one, I nod and follow Thalric outside.

The garden behind the cottage is small but full of vegetation, with herbs, wildflowers, and curling vines that spill from clay pots and carefully cultivated garden beds, filling the air with asweet, earthy scent. It’s enclosed by a fence of woven willow branches, separating it from the dense forest beyond. A large pine tree shades the back half of the house and the small courtyard just outside the door.

I turn to Thalric, studying him properly for the first time.

He is half a head taller than me and heavily built, like most of his kind. He is dressed in a black kilt. His gray skin appears like stone, stretched over thick cords of muscle. A long, gray, tapered tail swishes lazily behind him. Massive bat-like wings are tucked against his back. His knees are bent forward, his weight balanced on the balls of his large, three-toed feet, that end in sharp, black talons, built for gripping stone. His hands, however, have four fingers and a thumb, tipped with black claws.

Curved horns arch back from his head. Pointed elf-like ears peek up through his shoulder-length black hair. His expression is stern and his posture rigid. His facial features are a bit larger than a human's with a proud nose and thick ridges along his brows and cheekbones.

“Thank you for helping us.”

Thalric nods, then opens his mouth to speak, but he's interrupted as a woman calls out, rushing toward him. “Oh, I'm glad you're back!”

She's human and young, maybe early twenties, with long brown hair with golden highlights, sun-kissed skin the color of warm sand, and striking violet eyes.

Thalric's expression shifts in an instant, his sharp edges softening as he smiles at her.

Ah. I recognize that look. It's the same one I'm sure I have whenever I see Rapunzel.

“This is Aurora,” he introduces her, and I don't miss the way he curls the tip of his tail possessively around her ankle. “Auri, this is Ren.”

This must be Flora's daughter.

She gives me a friendly smile. “It’s nice to see you’re finally awake, Ren. Rapunzel has been beside herself with worry.” She glances around. “Where is she?”

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“Sleeping inside,” I inform her. “It’s lovely to meet you as well.”

Before she can speak again, Flora calls from the house. “Aurora!”

“I’ll be back in a bit.” She sighs and then calls out. “I’m coming, Flora.”

Thalric’s gaze tracks her as she walks back to the house, his attention only returning to me after she disappears inside. “Where were you headed when you were attacked?”

“Cambryn.”

His expression darkens. “There have been many reports of bandits between here and there. Orcs, ogres, and trolls as well.”

“And where exactly is here?” I ask.

“Oakvale. In the kingdom of—”

“Lumaria,” I finish his sentence. We share our northern border with them. “I’ve heard of this place. It’s known for the elderberry wine festival, is it not?”

He nods. “We sent word to your family.” My Fox ears prick up. “Rapunzel told us who you are, Prince Rennard of Cambryn.”

My jaw tightens as I realize his earlier question about our destination was a test, to see if I’d divulge the truth. I’m not sure I like that they know the truth of who I am,

especially since we are still being hunted. In a small village like this, word can travel fast.

As if sensing my worry, Thalric adds, “Rapunzel told us of the Goblin witch—Drusilla—and how you saved her. Don’t worry. We’ve told no one who you are, and we will keep it that way.”

“Thank you.”

“Perhaps it would be wise to remain here for a few days to ensure you are fully healed.”

“I worry that any delay will give the witch and her mercenaries more time to locate us.” I run a hand roughly through my hair. “We were fortunate the men who attacked us were simply bandits and not minions sent by the Goblin.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Thalric says ominously. “I found this on them.”

He holds out a satchel and I take it. A purple gemstone is nestled inside. “What is this?”

“My father says hunters use it to mask their smell when they are hunting prey,” he replies. “Flora sensed dark magic imbued in the stone. I discovered one of these on each of the men who attacked you. And when I removed it, I detected a faint hint of licorice on their clothing.” He growls low in his throat. “Only Goblins carry this scent.”

Ice freezes in my veins.

“I don’t believe they were ordinary bandits,” he adds, further fueling my concern.

I swallow hard. “I agree.”

“You are safe here,” he says. “The Fae sisters are powerful and my family lives nearby, in the woods.” He gestures to the forest beyond the garden fence. “We can protect you. I suggest you wait at least a full day before you leave to give yourself time to heal.” He curls his hands into fists at his sides. “If you wish to keep your mate safe, you must be at your full strength.”

Although she is not officially my mate, I do not correct him of this assumption. Instead, I nod in agreement.

Auri’s voice calls from inside the house. “Thalric!”

“Excuse me.” He glances toward her, longing easily read in his features. “I’ll return shortly.” He strides toward the house without another word.

I remain in the garden, staring down at the grass, as I run my fingers absently along my scar, the shame of my failings filling me anew.

Rapunzel’s soft voice drifts through the quiet. “Ren?”

I freeze as she walks up behind me, unable to make myself turn around. My heart pounds as I clench my jaw. She’s seen my scar in all its terrible glory. She knows what it means. After what happened with the bandits, she will realize that the rejection I’ve faced in the past, from my own people, is warranted. And I cannot bear the look I imagine must be on her face... Disgust. Pity. Rejection.

Agony spears through me as I pull at the threads of my shifter magic, desperate to weave the illusion back over my skin, to hide my ugliness and my great shame from her, but it’s no use.

Sharp pain rips through my body, sending me to my knees with a choked growl even as I bring my hand to my face, trying to shield it from her view.

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“Ren!” She drops to her knees at my side.

She reaches for me, but I flinch from her grasp. “Don’t!”

“What’s wrong?” she asks, panicked.

“Don’t look at me.”

She falls silent. Cursing myself, I open my mouth to apologize but before I can, she cups my face with both hands.

I freeze as her blue eyes search mine. “If this is about your scar, I’ve already seen it, Ren.”

I hold my breath as her gaze travel over the jagged line—the flaw that marks me as unworthy.

“It’s not just that.” Despair fills my veins. “It’s what it means... what it stands for. There’s a reason female Fox Shifters reject males for their scars—because they mark a male as weak, unable to protect a mate and any kits they may have. I just didn’t want to accept it. But I realize now that it’s true. I nearly failed you, Rapunzel.” I admit my shame aloud. “I barely defeated the bandits. If not for Thalric, I would have died, leaving you alone in a world you do not recognize nor remember.”

“Ren, you’re being too hard on yourself.”

“Don’t you see?” I shake my head. “From the moment we met, all I’ve wanted to do

is to prove myself to you. Show you that I am worthy to be your mate.” Sadness tightens my chest. “Even after I learned of the Stag Prince—Theron, I still—” I swallow hard. “I wanted you to choose me. To realize that you don’t need him. That I would be the better mate. But now I realize that I was wrong.”

Her fingers tighten as I try to pull back, but her hands are unyielding. She tilts her head, her silver hair slipping over her shoulder, catching the light like spun silk. Her thumb lightly brushes over my cheekbone, tracing over the thick, jagged mark, and I’m surprised when I don’t see revulsion or pity in her gaze.

As her blue eyes meet mine, full of warmth, I realize she isn’t staring at my scar, she is looking at me.

CHAPTER 30

RAPUNZEL

“You nearly died protecting me.” My gaze drops to the bandages around his shoulder and torso. “And if your injuries leave new scars, it will be a reminder that you survived something that others might not have. They are a testament to your honor and bravery.”

He stills, a flicker of something vulnerable in his amber eyes. “You do not believe that I failed you?”

I meet his gaze evenly. “Never.”

Impulsively, I stretch up on my toes and wrap my arms around his neck. In the back of my mind, I know I shouldn’t do this, but I almost lost him the other day. And it made me realize just how much he means to me.

He slips his arms around my waist and drops his forehead to mine. “And you are truly unbothered by my scar?” he asks cautiously.

“How many times must I say it? It doesn’t bother me, and it does not make you any less in my eyes.” A smile crests my lips as I decide to tease him. “You already know you’re handsome. I think you’re just fishing for compliments now.”

He barks out a startled laugh, and then flashes his signature grin—full of playful mischief. “You think I’m handsome?”

I smile. “You know I do.”

His expression turns serious and his gaze drops to my mouth. My heart pounds at the sudden awareness of the way his hands grip my waist as he slowly leans in. The warmth of his breath ghosts across my lips, and I close my eyes as he brushes his mouth over mine in a tender kiss.

My mind urges me to pull away, reminding me that we cannot have a future if I don’t know my past. But my heart refuses to listen. I could have lost Ren. If I had, I would have regretted not telling him how I felt. I cannot pretend I’m not falling for him. Not anymore.

His kiss is soft and tentative, as if still unsure if this is real. But when I tighten my arms around the back of his neck, he pulls me closer and his tongue finds mine, deepening our kiss.

Something rustles overhead, and a soft rain of petals flutters around us.

Ren stills against me, his breath warm against my lips as we both look up.

The cherry tree above us is now covered in vibrant blossoms that definitely were not

there before. The pale pink petals cascade through the air, swirling around us like falling snow.

“Rapunzel,” Flora calls out as hurries toward us, her expression full of concern as she gazes up at the flowers. “That tree should be dormant this time of year.” She turns to me. “You have magic, don’t you?”

Ren pulls me behind him. “And what if she does?” he asks, voice low and dangerous.

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“I’m not going to hurt her,” Flora snaps. “But you both need to come inside so we can talk. Now.”

My pulse stutters. “Why?”

“Because it’s dangerous for a human to have such powerful magic... you have no idea the people who would want you for it.”

Ren loops a protective arm around my waist as an involuntary shiver moves down my spine. All the warmth and tenderness I felt only a moment ago fades away as panic and fear swirl deep within.

CHAPTER 31

REN

Rapunzel’s entire body is tense as we take a seat at the kitchen table, worry written on her features. I hate that she is so afraid. Taking her hand in mine, I squeeze it gently. No matter what happens, I will do all I can to protect her. No matter the cost to myself.

Thalric and Aurora are already seated as well, next to two other Fae females that I assume must be Flora’s sisters.

Although I trust them not to hurt Rapunzel, the protective part of me scans the cottage interior, my inner Fox insisting we should be familiar with every exit.

The interior of the cottage is rather cozy with a main living area with a sofa and chairs with plush, green cushions that sit before a fireplace with a roaring flame. Across the room is a small kitchen with shelves full of wood and porcelain plates and cups. Dried herbs and lavender hanging from the ceiling.

A blur of brown fluff rushes toward me. It's Finik. He climbs up my leg to my shoulder, chittering excitedly as I stroke his fur. "You did well, my little friend," I murmur, remembering how bravely he attacked one of the bandits. "You most certainly have the heart of a warrior."

He makes a little chirruping purr and then leaps from me to Rapunzel, settling in the pocket of her dress. He peeks his head out, whiskers twitching and ears flicked forward in attention as Flora begins to speak.

"This is my sister, Lyra," she says, gesturing to a Fae woman with translucent green wings, long brown hair, and lavender eyes. "And this is Maribelle." She motions to a Fae with blue wings, black hair and gray eyes.

Worry prickles my skin as Flora and her sisters exchange a look, as if they know something they don't want to say.

Something about Rapunzel.

Rapunzel tightens her grip on my hand while her free one crushes the fabric of her skirt in a nervous gesture.

I lean in and whisper in her ear. "Whatever may come, we will face it together."

Her blue eyes meet mine as her lips curve up in a faint smile and she mouths back, "Thank you."

“Your magic is”—Flora frowns as if searching for the right words before finally saying— “unusual... powerful. How did you come by it?”

Rapunzel explains that when Drusilla saved her mother from dying in childbirth, some of Goblin’s magic inadvertently passed to her as a result.

“Ah,” Flora says. “Now, it makes sense why the witch had you trapped in the tower.”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

The Fae sisters share another look. That same look that sets me on edge.

“Why do you keep looking at each other like that?” I narrow my eyes. “Tell us what you know.”

Lyra’s gaze flicks to me before shifting to Rapunzel. She extends her hands, palms up. “If you will allow me to assess you, I can determine more about your magic and your... connection to the Goblin witch.”

Rapunzel hesitates only briefly before nodding. She shifts forward, resting her hands in Lyra’s.

The air changes as a soft hum vibrates through the cottage as green wisps of magic wrap around Rapunzel’s fingers, spreading up her hands to her wrists and arms in a shimmering wave.

Lyra’s head is bowed in concentration as the glow intensifies for a moment before flickering and fading, leaving behind only the crackling of the fire and the frantic beat of my heart as we wait to hear what she has discovered.

“Your magic is unique, Rapunzel. It's not just growth or healing magic—it's deeper

than that. It's life itself. Vitality, youth. Renewal."

My brows furrow in confusion. "What does that mean exactly?"

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Instead of Lyra answering, Maribelle turns to us with a grim look. “It means that Drusilla’s magic is not all that was transferred to you when she saved you and your mother on the day you were born. You also took some of her life and youth. It is no wonder she is desperate to regain this.”

Flora looks at Rapunzel, worry shadowing her features. “This also means the witch has a claim on you. She wasn’t just suppressing your memories, she was draining your life force to replenish her magic when she would comb your hair. It’s the reason you are unable to cut it. It is spelled by her dark enchantment.”

Ice fills my veins. I’ve heard of a Goblin’s claim before. They are very dangerous things. “How do we break it?”

“The witch must release her willingly,” Lyra replies. “But it would mean sacrificing any chance Drusilla has to regain all that she lost to Rapunzel.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Then, it can only be broken by death,” she says. “Hers or Rapunzel’s.”

Rapunzel flinches, a hand lifting to her throat.

“It’s how she is able to track you,” Maribelle adds. “Your magic is the same. It calls to her. Although I know this will be of little comfort, given all the years you lost, you are fortunate she did not simply kill you already. Instead, she kept you locked away in the tower and hid your memories because she was trying to find a way to reclaim it without taking your life.”

Flora leans in. “But what Drusilla does not realize is that there is no other way to regain her life force and her magic. The spell she used on you to replenish her powers is only a temporary solution. It will eventually stop working and will never fully reverse what has been done. If she cannot continue to siphon your life force as she did in the tower, the only way to reclaim it is by your death.”

Flora gives Rapunzel a grave look. “And now that you’ve escaped, and she cannot control you... if she believes that recapturing you is no longer an option, she may become desperate enough to kill you rather than lose her powers forever.”

I curse under my breath. I should have killed the witch instead of leaving her in that tower.

“What about my memories?” Rapunzel asks. “Will they return now that I’m no longer her captive?”

“They are locked away in your mind,” Lyra says. “The witch has the power to release them but if she does not... unless she is killed, they will have to return on their own.”

Hope flits across Rapunzel’s face. “Then they can return?”

Lyra nods. “It is possible, but it is not guaranteed.” She sighs. “It could be days or years, or... never.”

My chest tightens at the look of devastation on Rapunzel’s face.

“What am I supposed to do?” Her voice quavers as she looks down at her hands. “How can I plan for a future when I don’t know my past? Where do I go? What do I—”

“The plan hasn’t changed.” Cupping her chin, I guide her face back to mine. A tear

escapes her lashes, but I brush it away with my thumb. “I am here and I will not leave your side. We will travel to my home. You’ll be safe there. And after that, we’ll figure out the rest. If you want to seek out Prince Theron, we will go together.” I meet her gaze evenly. “We won’t stop searching until we find the truth of your past.”

“What about the witch?”

“I spared her life in the tower, when I should have killed her.” I growl low in my throat. “I will not make that mistake again.”

“You should be fully healed before tomorrow,” Flora says. “But you are welcome to stay with us as long as you wish.”

“Thank you for all that you’ve done. But I believe the sooner we leave, the better. My family’s castle is well protected.” I turn to Rapunzel. “You will be safer once we reach Cambryn. We’ll leave at first light.”

CHAPTER 32

REN

Standing in the doorway of Aurora’s room, I bid Rapunzel goodnight.

Before she closes the door, she turns back to me. “Where will you sleep?”

“I’ll be in the living area, on the sofa.” I glance at the bed, wishing that I could hold her again. I will miss the feel of her tucked against me as I rest.

Glancing over her shoulder, I notice Finik is already curled up on one of the pillows with his fluffy tail wrapped tight around his body. “I’ll wake the two of you in the morning.”

Stretching up on her toes, she wraps her arms around me in a hug. “Goodnight, Ren.”

Longing fills me as I embrace her in return, thinking of our kiss in the gardens. I want to know if it meant as much to her as it did to me... if she’s changed her mind and decided that she wants me, despite all the uncertainty of her past.

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All these questions burn in my mind. I want more than anything to pull her close and never let her go. So when she finally lowers her arms and steps back, I resist the urge to reach for her again and instead whisper, "I'll see you in the morning."

Unable to sleep, I walk out into the gardens. The night air is crisp. The smell of wildflowers and herbs carries on the breeze as I walk along the path.

Movement catches my eyes, and I still, my gaze flicking up to the trees.

Perched on the highest branches, cloaked in darkness, is the familiar form of Thalric. His massive, stone-gray wings are folded against his back, his glowing golden eyes staring back at me.

He is as still as a statue save for the faint shift of his talons against the bark.

It doesn't escape my notice that this particular tree is right outside of Aurora's window. A slow grin spreads across my face, and I arch a brow. "Is this where you always sleep, Gargoyle?"

Thalric doesn't move. Doesn't blink. But his eyes narrow just enough to tell me he doesn't appreciate my teasing. "Do you always talk this much, Fox?"

I huff a quiet laugh. "You wound me, my friend. I am excellent company."

Thalric exhales through his nose, but I don't miss the slight twitch of his lips.

Bracing my hands against the trunk, I climb up the tree and settle on the limb beside

him. From up here, I have a clear view of the cottage below, including Aurora's bedroom window, where she and Rapunzel are sleeping.

I glance at Thalric, my grin sharpening. "You do realize this tree is right outside Aurora's window, right?"

His glowing eyes cut to mine, narrowing again, but this time, not in amusement.

"Coincidence," he says flatly.

I hum, tapping a finger against my chin. "Of course. And I'm just here for the fresh air as well."

Thalric crosses his arms, claws flexing against his biceps. "There is nothing between us, if that is what you are insinuating."

"Nothing?" I tilt my head toward the window and then look back at him. "Because I've heard your kind are protective of their mates. And from what I've seen, I'd say you're keeping a very close eye on her."

Thalric's jaw tightens, but he remains silent.

"So... is it possible that you and Aurora are—"

"No," he states firmly, but I notice the slight twitch of his wings.

It seems I've struck a nerve. Clapping a hand on his shoulder, I tease. "You'd best make your move before someone else does."

Thalric growls low in warning as his sharp talons dig into the branch. "It's impossible," he says in a low voice. "She is human and I'm a Gargoyle."

“I knew it,” I murmur.

His glare darkens, but there’s no real malice in it.

“For what it’s worth,” I continue. “I understand, my friend. After all, I’m a Fox shifter, and Rapunzel is human. But that’s not stopping me. I still plan to make her my mate.”

Thalric’s expression shifts, surprise flickering in his gaze. “I had the impression you were already mates.”

“We aren’t.”

He gives me a questioning look.

“But we will be.”

His lips twitch again. “Bold of you.”

“Confidence is an attractive trait, or so I’m told.” I puff out my chest playfully.

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Thalric's stoic expression cracks as he snorts out a laugh. But his amusement fades as he studies me. He's quiet for along moment, gaze flicking back to the window where Rapunzel sleeps. "Be careful, Ren," he warns. "The Fae sisters are not easily shaken, but it is plain to see their worry when they discovered the truth of Rapunzel's magic. That type of power is coveted. The witch wants it back for herself, but if others found out about it, they would come for her as well."

A cold thread of determination runs through me. "I'll end anyone who dares try to harm her," I vow.

Thalric gives me a single nod. I'm sure he would do the same for Aurora.

"If you want my assessment," he says. "I suspect Rapunzel returns your feelings."

I grin, bolstered by his confidence. "I'll be sure to invite you to our bonding ceremony, my friend."

He purses his lips, but I notice the hint of amusement in his eyes as he watches me climb back down to the ground.

"And I'll expect an invitation to yours as well," I add.

Quietly, I slip back into the cottage. Pulling a quilt and a pillow from the sofa, I create a makeshift bed on the floor outside Rapunzel's door. I'm tempted to shift into my Fox form, but my wounds are not completely healed.

I trust the Fae sisters, but I still worry after what they said about the Goblin witch and

I'd rather be ready for anything.

It's also comforting to know Thalric is still in the tree, watching over Aurora the same way I will always watch over my Rapunzel.

CHAPTER 33

RAPUNZEL

Aurora shifts beside me, the tiny bed creaking beneath our combined weight. The room is quiet except for the faint crackle of the fire on the hearth, the flames casting dancing shadows along the stone walls.

Outside, the wind whispers through the trees, carrying the crisp scent of damp earth and pine. I breathe it in, trying to calm the storm inside me, but my thoughts churn restlessly as I think of Ren.

Closing my eyes, I think of our kiss in the garden. The way his lips brushed mine—soft and hesitant at first, before it became something more... something deeper.

How can I push him away when he's already stolen my heart?

Guilt and shame begin to creep in as I think of Prince Theron. I squeeze my eyes shut. I hate all this uncertainty, and I wish so much that I could remember my past. If I did, it would make all of this so much easier. A small whimper escapes me as I fight back tears.

Aurora's whisper cuts through the silence. "Rapunzel?" When I don't answer right away, she shifts so we're facing each other. "Are you all right?"

“I—” I shake my head. “I’m not sure.”

“What’s wrong?” She takes my hand in her own, studying me in concern. “Are you worried about the witch? Because if so, I doubt she will find you here. And even if she does, Lyra, and Maribelle will help keep you safe. They have powerful magic. And Thalric is very strong and—”

“It’s not that. I just... wish I could remember my past,” I admit. “I hate not knowing who I was or how my life was before.”

“Lyra said they may return on their own,” Aurora offers. “They’re not gone. They are still buried deep in your mind.”

Sadness fills me. “I have a family somewhere out there, but I cannot remember their names or where I’m from.”

“It is the same for me,” she says. “Flora, Lyra, and Maribelle said they found me on their doorstep, in a basket, when I was a baby.” She reaches for the side table and pulls out a folded parchment from the drawer. “This note was tucked beneath my blanket,” she says, eyes glossy with tears. “It’s from my parents, promising they would come back for me... when it is safe.”

“Safe? From what?”

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “And neither do the Fae sisters. But I have faith that I will meet them some day.” Aurora lifts her brown eyes to mine. “Do not give up hope, Rapunzel. I believe you’ll find your family.” She squeezes my hand. “And who knows? You may even regain your memories before you reach Ren’s kingdom.”

She continues. “If not, you can still go to Sylvalis and seek out Prince Theron... see if he can provide any answers about your past.”

“That’s the problem.” I swallow hard. “I’m scared.”

Aurora tilts her head. “What are you afraid of?”

I turn my gaze to the ceiling, tracing the uneven lines of the wooden beams overhead as tears threaten to fall. “What if I was betrothed to Prince Theron? What if we were in love? Or what if... when my memories return, my personality is not the same? What if I am a different person than who I am now?”

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The words taste bitter as they leave my mouth. The fear of the unknown, of losing who I am, claws at me. What if the person Ren kissed tonight—the person I am in this moment—is not the real me?

What if I was someone who would not even be in love with Ren? I don't voice this last fear aloud because it's too painful to even consider.

"Rapunzel." Aurora squeezes my fingers again, her voice soft but steady. "I think you're asking the wrong question."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"You keep wondering what if you were in love with Prince Theron before. But maybe the better question is: who are you in love with now?"

My breath catches.

Aurora continues. "You could spend your whole life chasing a memory that might never return. And even if it does, it might not feel the same once it's here. You've changed. Time changes people. And you've been through so much in the past three years.

"You were betrayed by someone who claimed to love you and care for you. When all along, Drusilla was actually holding you captive. She was the one who'd stolen your memories. And Ren saved you and he has been there for you through the pain of that betrayal. And in the midst of all of this, you found love."

I shake my head. “But if I belong to someone else—”

“You don’t belong to anyone,” Aurora says. “Not Prince Theron. Not even Ren. You belong to yourself. And that means you get to choose. Not based on the past, but based on who you are now.”

Her words sink in, quiet and true.

She shakes her head. “You don’t have to wait for the person you were. You can choose to live as the person you are. Right here. Right now. And I’ve seen the way you look at Ren. The way he looks at you. That’s not something you find every day.”

Tears burn behind my eyes.

“And if you keep waiting until everything makes perfect sense, you might miss something beautiful that’s already blooming. Life doesn’t pause just because the past is unclear. It keeps moving forward. And sometimes, we have to be brave enough to move with it.”

Aurora’s eyes meet mine evenly. “You don’t need permission to follow your heart, Rapunzel. It’s already yours.”

A quiet breath escapes me as her words touch something deep within. She’s right. I don’t know what the future holds. I don’t know if I’ll remember my past or discover some long-lost truth that changes everything. But in this moment, I do know this: I’m in love with Ren now, and I want to choose him.

CHAPTER 34

RAPUNZEL

The morning air is crisp and the sky is blanketed with clouds, threatening rain as we say our goodbyes.

“Stay safe,” Aurora says, pulling me into a tight embrace. “Perhaps you can come visit again someday?”

I’ve never had a friend, as far as I can remember, and it was lovely to have someone else to talk to. We only just met, but I already know that I will miss her terribly. “I’d love that.”

Thalric stands beside her, his wings folded tight against his back, his tail curled around her ankle. He clasps Ren’s forearm, and Ren does the same in return. “Safe travels, my friend,” Thalric says. “And may the gods favor you both.”

I smile at him. “Thank you.”

Aurora gives me one last hug before we leave, promising me that we’ll see each other again in the future. I hope she’s right.

It’s a fairly short walk from Aurora’s home to the main part of the village. Oakvale’s streets are bustling with early morning activity—merchants setting up their stalls, the scent of freshbread wafting from a nearby bakery, voices rising and falling in barter.

Ren walks beside me, my arm looped through his as we make our way to the village center to find the blacksmith Thalric told us about.

It doesn’t take long to find it as we stop before a two-story stone building with a heavy iron sign swinging above the door, stamped with the image of a hammer and anvil. Black smoke curls from the chimney, the tang of molten metal thick in the air.

The door creaks as we step inside, the heat from the forge wrapping around us like a

thick cloak. Tools hang in neat rows on the walls, and weapons glint from their displays—swords, axes, and knives.

Ren rings the bell on the counter, and a massive Orc emerges from the back. He looks us up and down as he wipes the soot from his hands onto his leather apron. “Greetings,” he says with a friendly smile. “My name is Brakkus. What can I do for you today?”

He is at least half a head taller than Ren and heavily muscled. He has vivid blue eyes, green skin, and his thick, dark hair tied back in a short tail. With his sharp tusks peeking from his lower lip, he appears rather intimidating and I find myself moving a bit closer to Ren.

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“I’m Ren, and this is Rapunzel.” He smiles. “We’re looking for a dagger, and we were told you’re the one to see about such things.”

The Orc opens his mouth to reply, but a fluffy orange cat leaps onto the counter beside him, rubbing against his arm. “There you are, you little menace,” he says, voice unexpectedly gentle. “I’ve been looking for you all morning.” He glances at us. “This is Ember.”

The cat lets out a small, pleased chirp, her tail flicking as she butts her head against his hand, demanding more pets.

Finik peeks his head out of my pocket and the cat’s head snaps toward him, her green eyes sparking with interest.

“Now, now,” Brakkus says. “No harassing the customers, Ember.”

As if understanding his words, the cat lies down, crossing her paws daintily in front of her as she rests on the counter.

I blink. I’ve never seen an Orc before, but Drusilla told me many stories about their supposedly bloodthirsty way. As I watch Brakkus with his cat, this is... definitely not what I expected.

Ren grins and reaches out to lightly scratch behind Ember’s left ear, and the cat purrs even louder. “She is quite lovely.”

The Orc snorts, giving Ember an indulgent look. “She knows it too.” He turns back to

us. “You said you’re interested in daggers?”

Ren nods, and Brakkus reaches beneath the counter and pulls out an assortment of blades, laying them out with care. “Take your pick.”

“Which ones do you like?” Ren asks me.

I’ve never owned a weapon, and I’m not sure where to even begin. As I study the various knives, one catches my attention. It’s a slender dagger with a polished bone grip and a curved blade.

It’s small enough to conceal in the hidden pocket of my dress, and not quite as heavy as the others. “I think I like this one.”

“We’ll take it,” he tells the Orc.

Brakkus grins at me. “Good choice.” He glances at Ren. “It’ll keep your mate safe.”

My heart stumbles in my chest when Ren doesn’t correct the Orc. I glance at him, but he’s already pulling out a few coins from our satchel to pay.

Before he can hand them over, Brakkus shakes his head. “Keep it,” he says. “Consider this a bonding gift.”

“A bonding gift?” I ask.

The Orc gestures between me and Ren. “The threads of your fate bond are exceptionally bright.” He grins. “Which means they’re still rather new.”

I blink at him. “You can actually see it?”

“Aye. I’ve had the sight for such things since I was an Orcling.”

Before I can say anything to that, Ren looks at the Orc. “I truly appreciate the gift, Brakkus, but I feel guilty not paying for such fine craftsmanship.”

Brakkus waves a large, calloused hand dismissively. “No need for coin, Fox. But if you insist on payment, perhaps you could gift me some of your famous fox luck to help me find my own fated mate.”

I frown, wondering what he means. Before I can ask, Ren leans over the counter, arching a brow. “Contrary to popular belief, my friend, fox luck isn’t actually a real thing. It’s just an overly flattering rumor spread by foxes themselves to attract mates.”

Brakkus crosses his thick arms, entirely unconvinced. “Rumor or not, I’ll take it all the same.”

“All right,” Ren sighs. “One moment and I’ll summon up some legendary luck just for you.” Clearly humoring the orc, he theatrically rubs his palms together and then makes a dramatic flourish with his hand, before tapping Brakkus’s massive forearm. He grins. “There. Luck officially bestowed. May it help you find your future mate in no time.”

Brakkus claps him on the shoulder. “Many thanks, my friend.”

Ren bows grandly. “You’re very welcome.”

As we step out of Brakkus’s shop, I glance at Ren. “You know... if it works, then word is going to spread far and wide that fox luck is a real thing,” I tease.

He flashes a handsome smile, his amber eyes gleaming mischievously. “If Brakkus

finds a mate tomorrow, I'll claim full credit. If he doesn't, obviously the problem was on his end of things.”

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I laugh, shaking my head. "Of course."

When we reach the edge of the village, instead of taking the main road, Ren veers toward the forest. "I believe we'll be safer if we stick to the woods. Less chance of running into trouble."

He shifts into his fox form and I climb onto his back as we set out into the woods.

CHAPTER 35

RAPUNZEL

After a few hours, hard rain begins pelting us mercilessly. Ren races through the trees, his muscles rippling beneath me with every graceful leap as I cling tightly to his fur.

The sound of rushing water up ahead draws my attention. Ren slows as we approach a massive waterfall, the shimmering water cascading down the cliff face wall before it spills into a large pool below.

Ren lowers himself to the ground and I slide off his back. As my feet hit the damp earth, he shifts into his two-legged form. "There's a place to shelter nearby. I found it when I traveled through this area a few weeks ago."

My cheeks heat as I track the small rivulets of water running down his bare chest before I force myself to look away. "Are you not cold?"

“I’m a Fox.” He flashes a roguish grin that stops my heart. “We’re a rather hearty people.” He offers me his hand, and I slip my palm into his without hesitation. “Now, come. Let’s get you warm.”

He leads me into a narrow passage between the cliff face and the falling water until we reach a secret cavern, hidden from the outside world.

The cave is surprisingly warm. Luminous crystals embedded in the walls emit a faint glow, guiding our path. There’s a small pool near the back, with steam rising enticingly from the surface.

Ren releases my hand. “You should get out of those wet clothes and into the warm water while I prepare some food.”

The idea of a bath is too tempting to ignore. Despite my nerves, when he turns his back, I shed my sodden cloak and dress, leaving me in only my undergarments.

I watch as Ren sets up a small fire in the center of the cave and arranges our bedding for the night. The muscles in his broad shoulder and back flex as he works, his movements graceful despite his tall, muscular form.

Finik scurries up to him. Sitting back on his haunches, he rests two paws on Ren’s foot to get his attention, his little nose and whiskers twitching as he releases a series of chirruping sounds.

Ren chuckles, and pulls out a handful of berries and some cheese from our pack. “I haven’t forgotten about you, my friend.” He sets it on a rock nearby, and Finik releases a squeak of delight, immediately diving into his feast. He shoves two berries and a piece of cheese into his mouth, his tiny cheeks puffed out comically as he chews.

My heart melts as Ren pulls out Finik's blanket and pillow from our pack and arranges it on a soft bed of moss near the fire. "There." He grins. "A bed fit for a squirrel king," he teases.

When he's finished eating, Finik waddles over to his bed and turns in a wide circle before collapsing onto his side. He curls his tail around himself and yawns as Ren strokes his fur. "Sleep well, my friend," he murmurs.

I love how attentive Ren is to Finik. He knows how important my squirrel is to me, and he always makes sure to take care of him.

"I'm going to bring you some clothes, all right?" he calls over his shoulder.

My pulse quickens as he walks toward me, purposefully averting his eyes as I approach the edge of the pool.

He kneels and dips one finger into the water, considering, before arches a playful brow. "It's a bit more rustic than an inn, but it has its charm, don't you agree?"

I laugh. "Yes."

He sets down a plate with some dried meat, fruits, and nuts from our supplies. "I'll leave this for you." He gestures to a towel and a fresh nightshift. "I'll be back shortly. I'm going to check the surrounding area to make sure we're alone for the evening. Call out if you need me, and I'll hear you. I'll make sure to remain close by."

He flashes a quick smile before leaving the cavern, disappearing into the night.

It doesn't take him long, and by the time he returns I'm dressed in my nightshift, sitting atop one of the blankets he's laid out near the fire.

His hair is damp and tousled from the rain as he sits beside me, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “Missed me terribly, didn’t you?” He teases. “I can tell by your pining expression.”

“Of course, I did,” I joke in return. “Did you miss me as well?”

I regret the question as soon as it leaves my mouth when his expression turns serious, reminding me that we still haven’t talked about our kiss in the garden.

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He pulls another blanket from our pack and wraps it around my shoulders. “Are you warm enough?”

“Yes.” My heart melts at the extra bit of care he gives me. I lift one edge of the fabric in invitation. “We can share if you like.”

He hesitates a beat before joining me in my cocoon.

I nestle against him, enjoying the warmth of his body seeping deliciously into mine. As we sit before the fire, I think of my conversation with Aurora. She said I belong to no one but myself and that who I love is my choice.

I’ve tried to keep my Fox Prince at arm’s length, scared of what my past might reveal, afraid it might take me from him. But I cannot ignore my heart. And I refuse to let a past that I don’t remember dictate my future.

“Ren?”

He turns toward me, eyes warm and attentive. “Yes?”

Nervous flutters begin in my stomach. “I wanted to talk to you about what happened in the garden the other night.”

“Of course,” he says. His face is set in a neutral mask, but it’s easy to see the sadness and uncertainty behind his eyes. He looks down at his hands. “I should apologize. I told you I wouldn’t press you for anything, and I shouldn’t have kissed you, but I—”

I place a gentle hand on his chest, stopping him abruptly, my fingers trembling as I embrace the truth that my heart has known all along. I love Ren, and I'm not going to pretend otherwise. Not anymore. "I've changed my mind."

Ren freezes, his eyes widening as if he cannot quite believe his ears. "You... you have?"

Heart pounding, I lift my hand and lightly brush the tips of my fingers over his cheek, tracing the proud line of his jaw. His gaze holds mine, something akin to hope flickering across his expression.

"I tried so hard to keep you at arm's length because I was afraid of what my past might hold, but the truth is... you've already found your way into my heart, Ren. And I don't think I can let you go." Tears sting my eyes as I cup his cheek. "Nor do I want to."

Placing his hand over mine, he leans into my touch. "From the moment we met, all I've wanted was to prove myself, to be worthy of you, my amira. To show you that I could be the mate you deserve." He presses a tender kiss to my palm. "If you choose me, I swear, I will spend the rest of my life worshipping you." His eyes search mine earnestly. "But please know, I will never rush you. I will wait however long you need to decide if—"

"I'm not going to let the past dictate my future," I state firmly. "No matter what we discover, I want to be with you. I choose you, Ren."

A strange mixture of disbelief and longing flits across his features. "Say it again," he murmurs, his intense gaze holding mine.

A smile crests my lips. "I choose you, Ren."

His amber eyes darken, studying my face like he's memorizing every detail. As if I'm the most precious thing in the world to him.

Slowly, he leans in and the brush of his lips against mine is featherlight, a question more than a claim. He's giving me the chance to pull away, but I don't.

I couldn't if I wanted to.

My breath hitches as he presses closer, his lips soft and coaxing. The warmth of his body seeping into me, setting my entire body aflame.

His fingers skim up my arm, slow and reverent, before settling at my waist. My body hums in awareness of his as he pulls me toward him and deepens our kiss.

I sigh against his mouth, my hands finding his shoulders, sliding up to tangle in his thick, silken hair. He groans as I massage the tips of his sensitive fox ears, and our kiss shifts from soft and searching to something more—something urgent and desperate.

With a low growl, he rolls me beneath him. I part my thighs and he settles between them, the hard length of his stav pressing insistently against the entrance to my core.

"Say it again," he murmurs into my mouth, tightening his arms around me, holding me as if he never wants to let me go. "Tell me you're mine, Rapunzel."

"I'm yours," I whisper.

He crushes his lips to my own in a searing kiss. Nothing exists outside of this moment. Of the delicious weight of his powerful form over mine, pinning me beneath him. He cups my left breast and sparks dance beneath my skin as he brushes his thumb over the already stiff peak.

“Ren,” I breathe, arching up into him. “Please.”

I’m not even sure what I’m asking for. I only know that I don’t want this to end.

Reaching up, I trace my fingers over the sharp point of one ear. He growls and rips his mouth from mine, panting heavily. His eyes burn with fire and hunger as I gaze up at him, my heart racing so wildly I’m sure he can hear it.

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When I reach for his ear again, he grasps my wrist, stopping me. He presses a kiss to my palm. "Careful, love," he murmurs, voice like silk. "If you keep doing that, I will be tempted to claim you."

And gods help me, I think I want him to.

CHAPTER 36

RAPUNZEL

"Kiss me." I reach up and trace my fingers over his soft, full lips. "Please, Ren."

His eyes search mine, as if still in disbelief that I want him, before he finally leans down and brushes his lips to my own. I run my fingers through his hair, my pulse racing as he deepens our kiss and trails his hands down my side, exploring me with his touch.

My heart flutters as his lips trace a path down my throat to my collarbone. His warm breath whispers over my skin with each featherlight kiss, leaving a trail of goosebumps along my sensitive flesh.

When he reaches the curve of my breast, I gasp as he flicks his tongue over the hard bead at the tip before closing his mouth over the stiffened peak. Heat ignites deep within as he begins a gentle suction.

"Ren." I arch into him, desperate for more. "Please."

I've never felt anything like this... never knew this would feel so good.

"Tell me if you want me to stop," he murmurs against my skin, eyes flicking up to gauge my reaction.

"Don't stop," I whisper. "I want you."

His pupils expand, only a thin rim of amber barely visible along the edges as he rasps. "As you wish, my amira."

He lowers his head, closing his mouth over my other breast, lavishing it with the same attention as the first.

I'm adrift on a wave of heat and aching want as he trails slow, reverent kisses down my abdomen. My breath catches as his hands slide up along my inner thighs, fingertips grazing the sensitive skin with tantalizing patience.

"Open for me, my amira," he whispers. "I want to taste your nectar on my tongue."

My heart pounds as I part my thighs, my entire body trembling in nervous anticipation as his warm breath ghosts over me. A low moan escapes me as he slips his tongue between my slick folds, stroking with maddening slowness.

I inhale sharply when he reaches the small bundle of nerves at the apex. "Ren," I barely manage, each flick of his tongue sends sparks of sensation radiating outward, as he teases my sensitive flesh.

Encouraged by my response, he focuses on that delicate center with relentless attention, unraveling me piece by piece and drawing me closer to an edge I've never known.

“I’ll never have enough of you,” he murmurs against me. “You’re perfect.”

My fingers tangle in his hair as need coils tight in my core. “Ren, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” I whisper, the rising intensity building like a giant wave deep within. “I’ve never done this before.”

“Let go,” he says, voice low and steady. “I have you, Rapunzel.”

He grips my hips, holding me steady as he devours me with decadent focus, making my pleasure spiral even higher.

“Ren, please,” I breathe, as my world narrows to the feel of his mouth, the rush of sensation threatening to overwhelm me.

He growls low in arousal and the vibrations ripple through me. My entire body goes taut a moment before I shatter, my release crashing through me in wave after wave of pleasure as I cry out his name.

Ren continues to tease me with his tongue until the last aftershock ebbs and I sag against the blanket, boneless and sated.

He moves back up my body, wrapping me in his arms, pressing tender kissing along the line of my jaw, the curve of my cheek, the corner of my mouth, before resting his forehead against mine.

His hardened length is still pressed against me. Feeling bold, I trail my fingers lightly down his chest and abdomen, tracing the firm contours of muscle. He tenses as my hand continues downward, gasping sharply as I explore the rigid length of hisstave.

A bulge of spongy tissue at the base gives me pause. I’ve seen illustrations of male anatomy, but I do not remember ever seeing anything like this. “What is—”

“It’s my knot,” he rasps.

“What is it for?”

His breath catches as I trace his knot and then curl my hand around his length. He’s so large, my fingers do not quite touch. His amber eyes darken as they stare deep into mine. “It will lock us together when we mate, keeping my seed inside you to increase the chance of conception.”

As he says this, I feel his knot beginning to enlarge. My eyes widen. He’s already so big. “Are you sure we will fit?”

“Yes,” he hisses through his fangs as I tighten my grip, and then drops his forehead to mine with a low groan. “You’re killing me,” he breathes. “If you don’t stop... I’m not sure I can hold back my release.”

I don’t want him to hold back. He shivers as I stroke the rigid length of him, wanting to see him go completely undone. The same as he did to me. “Show me how to touch you,” I whisper.

“Rapunzel,” he gasps, his amber eyes blazing with desire and hunger as I explore every ridge and contour, marveling at the power and beauty of him. “Rapunzel, you must—” His words cut off and his breathing grows ragged as I continue to stroke, his hips rocking into my touch. “If you don’t stop, I’m going to come.”

“I want you to feel as good as you made me feel,” I whisper.

His foxfire eyes hold mine, as he wraps his hand over mine, around his length, and begins to stroke. His grips tightens as he guides me, quickening our pace. He

shudders, his muscles trembling as he clenches his fangs.

I'm mesmerized, as he stares down at me intensely. His entire body goes taut and then he comes with a shuddering gasp. The thick ropes of his seed erupt from hisstav, the warm liquid covering my abdomen and pelvis.

Slowly, Ren opens his eyes. His gaze is full of fiery possession and his nostrils flare as he smooths his hand over my form, spreading his release over my body, marking me as his.

"You are mine," he growls as he pulls me close, curling his body protectively around my own.

Fully sated, my lids feel heavy as sleep threatens to claim me.

"It's all right," he whispers. "Rest, my amira. I have you."

Closing my eyes, I fall asleep in his arms.

CHAPTER 37

REN

The fire has burned down to mere embers, but our cavern is still warm. I tilt my ears forward, listening for any sounds, but all I can hear is the dull roar of the waterfall that shelters us from the outside world.

Rapunzel is still asleep in my arms, her breathing soft and even against my throat. My nostrils flare as I draw our combined scent deep into my lungs. A possessive growl rumbles in my chest. Every male will know that she is mine.

I trace my fingers along her delicate spine as I study her lovely face. She is the most precious treasure: my mate and my heart.

As if sensing my thoughts, she stirs, and her lashes flutter and open. Her sleepy gaze meets mine and a slow blush spreads across her cheeks.

“Good morning, my amira.”

She blinks up at me, her blush deepening. “Good morning.”

Cupping her cheek, I lean in and brush my lips to hers in a tender kiss. Happiness burns bright in my chest. I can hardly believe she has chosen me.

After we have a quick breakfast of dried meat, cheese, and fruit, she bathes in the warm pool in the back of the cavern while I pack up our belongings.

Finik gorges himself on a handful of berries and cheese, his tiny cheeks puffed out adorably as he eats.

After a quick bath myself, I’m reluctant to leave the safety of our cave, but the sooner we leave, the faster we’ll arrive in Cambryn and my family’s castle.

Rapunzel rides on my back in my fox form, her hands buried in the thick ruff of fur at my neck. The wind rushes past us, the forest blurring into a golden-green haze as we make our way through the woods, toward Cambryn.

“I can’t wait to introduce you to my family,” I speak in her mind. “They’re going to love you. Especially my mother and my little sister.”

She tenses. “Are you sure?”

I slow a little, turning my head to glance back at her. “Of course, I’m sure. What’s not to love?”

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She huffs a quiet laugh. “I don’t know... what if they think I’m strange?”

“They won’t,” I assure her. “Trust me, Rapunzel. The second they see you, they’ll know what I already do: that you’re extraordinary.”

She presses her cheek against my fur, exhaling softly. “If you say so.”

“I do,” I insist.

It’s been several hours of travel, but we’re just outside Cambryn, on the northern border of the kingdom of Lumaria. Up ahead, a town comes into view, and Rapunzel tenses. “Where are we?”

“This is Greendale,” I explain. “We’ll rest here tonight and then continue on to Cambryn in the morning. We should reach my family’s castle by midday.”

When we reach the edge of the forest, I lower myself to the ground so Rapunzel and Finik can climb off my back, before shifting into my human form.

She turns to me. “Do you think it’s safe to stay here?”

“Yes. The last time I traveled through here was during the harvest festival. The people in this town are very friendly and welcoming to travelers.”

When I offer her my hand, I love that she takes it without hesitation. The last rays of the sun are beginning to sink below the horizon when we step out onto the main road. As we crest the gentle rise, Greendale comes into full view.

It's a rather lovely town. The lanterns are already aglow in the twilight along the cobbled streets, casting golden halos on cozy cottages and charming stone buildings with slanted roofs painted in shades of lavender and sky blue. Flower boxes spill vibrant blooms from every windowsill, and colorful banners flutter in the evening breeze.

The scent of freshly baked bread and woodsmoke permeates the air. Rapunzel leans closer, wide-eyed, studying the town with quiet wonder. Warmth blooms in my chest at her delight as we leisurely stroll through the bustling streets.

Villagers walk along the cobbled pathways, a few smiling at us in friendly greeting. Fairy lights are strung overhead, illuminating the winding path to the town's center. A tavern with an inn, across the way, catches my attention, and I guide Rapunzel toward it.

The door swings open to a cheerful burst of music and warmth. The scent of roasted meat and honeyed bread drifts through the air, rich and inviting, mingling with the faint tang of ale and smoke.

Several patrons are gathered around tables, their laughter and the clatter of tankards echoing throughout the space. The golden glow of lanterns flickers against the wooden beams, casting shadows that dance along the walls.

Rapunzel pulls her hood over her head, hiding her features as we approach the counter. A Dwarf male short brown hair and striking green eyes greets us with a smile. "Welcome! I'm Merlyn. What can I do for you today?"

"My mate and I would like a room and a meal."

"Aye, of course." He grins and hands me a key. "That'll be four gold coins for the evening."

After I pay him, he guides us upstairs. As soon as we reach our room, he turns to me. “Whenever you’re ready, simply come downstairs and you can either eat in the main hall or bring your food back up to your quarters.”

When he leaves, I seal the door shut, making sure the lock works properly. The room smells of lavender and jasmine. It’s sparse but clean, with a four-poster bed, a table with two chairs and a sofa that is positioned across the room, next to the fireplace.

A door on the opposite wall enters into the cleansing room with a claw foot tub, sink, and a toilet near the back.

“I’ll go downstairs and retrieve our food for the evening while you and Finik make yourselves comfortable.”

We stopped for lunch, but it was only a meal of dried meat and cheese. I glance at Finik as he climbs out of Rapunzel’s pocket and waddles onto the window ledge, fluffing his tail.

If I’m not mistaken, he’s gained a bit of weight on our journey. Just this afternoon alone, he ate a hearty meal of crackers and fruit, and polished off half a wedge of cheese, but I’m sure the little rascal won’t pass up an evening snack if I find something for him downstairs.

Rapunzel nods and I make my way back down to the tavern. As I wait for Merlyn to prepare our meals, I sit at the bar. Several posters are tacked on the wall behind him: illustrated notices of people wanted for crimes and a few of those who’ve gone missing, their loved ones desperate for their safe return.

The tavern door creaks open as more customers arrive and the cool night air slips inside, curling around the old notices, making them flap in the breeze.

One poster lifts, revealing another beneath it, and I freeze at the face staring back at me on the worn and yellowed paper.

I leap over the bar. Shoving the newer notice aside, my fingers tremble as I tear the older one free, my heart pounding as my gaze travels over the poster of a woman with delicate features, silver-white hair, and blue eyes that I'd know anywhere.

The shape of her face, the softness of her expression... even the way her hair drapes across her shoulders. The likeness is undeniable.

It looks exactly like Rapunzel.

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The writing across the bottom of the poster is difficult to read. Most of the ink is faded and smudged, worn away by time and weather. Squinting, I can just make out a few surviving words: missing... Prince offers reward... safe return.

My heart stutters and stops. The Prince mentioned on the faded lettering could be referring to Prince Theron—the Stag Shifter Prince of Sylvalis.

This could be the confirmation she's been searching for—a tangible link to her past.

CHAPTER 38

REN

My fingers tighten against the wood as I stare at the image on the poster. Footsteps draw my attention, and I look up as Merlyn walks toward me with a tray of food. I fold the parchment and tuck it under my arm.

A sharp, gnawing dread curls in my gut as I carry our food upstairs, the parchment heavy as a stone. My heart pounds painfully against my ribs. This could be the truth she's been searching for—her chance to reclaim her stolen past.

But what if it's not? What if it's only a coincidence? A cruel twist of fate, taunting us with the hint of an answer that's not really hers at all?

I know what I should do. I should march upstairs to our room, and hand this poster to Rapunzel. She deserves answers. She deserves the truth, even if I'm not entirely certain what that truth is.

Worry coils tight around my chest. What if this fragment of the past steals her from me? I cannot deny the selfish, ugly panic gripping my heart.

What if she sees this and believes it's proof she belongs somewhere else? With someone else? The thought feels like a dagger in my heart.

I've never felt anything as terrifying as this—this desperation, this bone-deep fear of losing her.

"I love you, Rapunzel," I whisper to the empty hallway, my voice harsh with the raw truth of it. "If I show this to you, what if I lose you forever?"

My jaw tightens as I glance back at the poster, the faded image haunting me with painful uncertainty. If she sees this, she might leave to search for a past that might not even exist anymore. And if she leaves, I lose everything.

The paper feels heavy in my grasp, like it's made of stone. Taking a shuddering breath, I fold it carefully and tuck it deep into my tunic. My chest aches because this feels wrong... cowardly even.

But another thought occurs to me: what if I show her this and I'm wrong?

Rapunzel trusts me.

How devastating would it be for her to dangle the hope of having found a link to her past, only to find out I'm mistaken, and the woman in the image isn't really her at all?

My heart squeezes painfully as I make my way back up to our room, each step heavier than the last.

Gods, how do I tell her this without breaking her heart? And mine along with it?

Guilt claws at me, a bitter taste rising in my throat as I pause at the door, struggling to compose myself. I promised to protect her, not just from harm, but from pain. And now, if I make the wrong decision, I'm the one who could hurt her most deeply.

When I walk into the room, I discreetly tuck the poster into our satchel, and set the tray with our meals on the table. Rapunzel wraps her arms around me from behind, pressing her cheek against my back. "Thank you for getting our food. I'm starving."

I turn in my arms to face her and she stretches up on her toes and presses a tender kiss to my lips. Tightening my arms around her, I pull her closer, every instinct deep within me demanding that I claim her right here and now.

She must taste the desperation in my kiss because when she pulls back, her small brow furrows. "Ren, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just a bit tired." I regret the lie as soon as it leaves my mouth.

After our meal, Finik curls up in his blanket on the sofa by the fireplace, while we lie down in the bed. Rapunzel rests her head against my chest, her fingers drawing idle patterns across my chest.

"Are you sure you're all right? You've been rather quiet since you came back upstairs."

She knows me better than I realized. I should tell her what I found, but I'm afraid of what it might mean. I don't want to lose her. So, instead of telling her the truth, I arch a teasing brow. "Are you saying I'm normally very loud?"

"Of course not." She laughs. "But you do usually love to talk. And sometimes even sing."

“Miss my singing, do you?” I grin. “Well, perhaps I’m thinking up a new version of my ballad about the charming and brave Fox Shifter.”

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“Is that so?” A lovely smile curves her mouth. “Let’s hear it then.”

Drawing in a deep breath, I begin:

“Oh, a clever fox, dashing and sly,

Till one fair maiden caught his eye.

With hair like starlight, locked away,

In a tower tall, she’d sing all day.

He scaled the tower with dashing flair,

Got tangled—just briefly—in her hair.

She stole his heart; he stole a kiss,

His roguish charm she couldn’t resist!

Now he’s smitten, head over paws,

Breaking all his bachelor laws.

Amber eyes gleam with adoring pride,

His heart now hers, he cannot hide.

She thinks him brave, bold, and strong,

Though modesty has him sing this song:

“A hero handsome, yes that’s true,

But oh, sweet maiden, he’s yours through and through!”

Oh, clever fox, no longer free,

Captured willingly, as you can see.

For one fair maiden, brave and bright,

Has tamed this rogue—and set things right!”

Rapunzel’s laughter is golden and bright, melting my heart.

She grins. “I’ve captured and tamed a roguish fox, have I?”

I’m so afraid I’ll lose her. I force a smile to my face despite my despair. “You have, my amira.” I tuck a stray tendril of hair behind the delicate shell of her ear. I have never loved anyone as I have loved her. “I’m completely and utterly yours, and I have been from the very beginning.”

“And I’m yours as well,” she whispers.

Sadness claws at my chest, and I lower my gaze, afraid she’ll see the truth. That she’ll know I’m keeping something from her. I know I should tell her, but when I open my mouth, the words die in my throat.

I can't risk hurting her with false hope. I'll verify the poster first. Once I know for certain, then I'll tell her everything.

"Ren." She touches my face. "I feel like something's wrong. Please, tell me. What is it?"

I close my eyes as guilt threatens to overwhelm me. When I open them again, I lower my forehead to rest it against hers. Drawing in a deep breath, I force the words past my lips. "What if we found something about your past? What if we found evidence that you were betrothed to Prince Theron? What would you do?"

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“I already told you,” she whispers. “It wouldn’t matter.”

I search her face, my throat tight. “You’re sure?”

She nods. “I do still want to go to Sylvalis and meet with the Stag prince. I may not be the woman he’s searching for, but perhaps he knows something about me... about my past.” She frowns. “There must be a reason why his face haunts my dreams.”

“What if when you see him, it triggers your memories? What if you remember that you love him?” I ask, unable to let this go. “What if—”

She presses a finger to my lips, silencing me. “I’ve made my decision.” She brushes her fingers over my jaw. “I love you, and I choose you, Ren.”

For one wild, selfish moment, the idea of marrying her—making certain she stays by my side forever—flashes through my mind. But as quickly as it appears, guilt and honor swiftly extinguish it. She deserves honesty, freedom, and a choice.

After dinner, she falls asleep in my arms. Although it’s been a long day, I stare up at the ceiling, my mind refusing to rest as I think of the secret I keep and the possibility of more mercenaries sent by the Witch to steal my beloved.

A few hours before dawn, I awaken her and Finik. I throw our satchel over my shoulder as she scoops a sleeping Finik from his bed. He yawns but dutifully climbs into her pocket and curls himself into a little ball of fluff before he nods off again.

The streets are quiet as we make our way through town. The temple is near the edge

of the city. Once we make it there, it should be relatively easy to slip through the gates behind it and out into the countryside again.

It's not far from the tavern and yet it feels like it takes forever to reach it. But perhaps it's my shame that makes the trip seem so long.

When we reach the temple, the waning moonlight reflects off the marble stone and a statue of the goddess of family stares down at us with a serene expression. My guilt grows heavier as she keeps her hand clasped in mine. She gazes at me. Her lips curve up in a lovely smile, her eyes so full of trust it nearly breaks me.

Movement catches the corner of my eye and I turn to see a Wolf Shifter walking toward us.

Ice freezes my veins. It's Sevryn—the Wolf that was sent by the Goblin witch.

Lightning fast, I pull Rapunzel behind me, baring my fangs in a feral snarl. “Get back or I'll end you right here and now.”

“I'm not here to harm you.” He raises his hands in surrender. “My bargain with Drusilla was fulfilled when I fought you in the river and lost.” He narrows his eyes. “I nearly died going over those falls and you didn't even bother to check if I lived.”

“In truth, I'd hoped you hadn't survived,” I reply bluntly. “If you're not here on behalf of the witch, then why are you following us?”

“Wolves and Foxes,” he mutters, his gaze darting briefly to Rapunzel. “We are not all that different from each other. I understand what it is to want to protect your mate. So I came to warn you.” He glances over his shoulder to the forest beyond the city walls. “If I could find you here, so could others. I'm not the only one Drusilla sent to hunt you.”

A chill runs down my spine.

“Change cloaks with me,” he tells Rapunzel. “I will lead the others in the opposite direction of your travels.”

Despite his offer to help, I’m not sure I believe him. “Why should we trust you?”

“Because you don’t have a choice,” he says grimly. “I’m offering you a chance. But if you do not wish to take it, then there’s nothing more I can do for you.”

Before I can reply, Rapunzel steps out from behind me. “Here.” She offers him her cloak and he hands her his in return. “Thank you,” she murmurs. Her eyes cut to mine, in a look that I understand means I shouldn’t argue about this, before she looks at the Wolf again. “We appreciate your help.”

He dips his chin in a subtle bow. “Travel safely.” With that, he turns and runs toward the southern entrance of the town.

I look at Rapunzel. There is still so much I need to tell her—to confess. But right now, I need to get her to Cambryn as soon as possible. Until I do, she won’t be safe.

“Stand back,” I murmur as I step away from her. In a whirl of wind and dust, I shift into my fox form and then lower myself so she can climb onto my back. “If we leave now, we can make it to my family’s castle before midday.”

As soon as she’s settled between my shoulders, I slip quietly through the streets, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. It doesn’t take long to reach the northern gates of the city and out to the forest beyond.

Indecision weighs heavily upon me. I feel like a coward for not telling her what I’ve discovered. Every moment I delay, I risk losing her trust forever. But how can I bear

it if telling her means losing her completely?

Clenching my jaw, I resolve to give her the truth when we reach my family's castle. There will be time enough then to confess my sins. But for now, all that matters is getting my amira to Cambryn.

Sending a silent prayer to the gods, I pray this decision doesn't end up costing me everything. But deep in my heart, I fear I might lose her after all.

CHAPTER 39

RAPUNZEL

We traveled all through the night and finally crossed the border of Cambryn about an hour ago, shortly after sunrise. Ren insisted we stop for a break to eat, but he's barely touched any of his food.

He's seated across from me. Finik is perched on his leg, snacking on a tiny platter of cheese and fruit. Absently Ren strokes Finik's fur.

He's much quieter than usual. And last night he was acting so strange. And now, I know he's worried we're being followed, but this feels like it's more than that.

Something is different.

"We should leave soon." His shoulders are tense as his amber eyes scan the forest. "These woods eventually turn into farmland up ahead and we'll be forced to travel on the main road. Keep your hood up, and your head down if we pass anyone."

I nod as Finik hops from Ren's leg and waddles over to me, his tiny cheeks stuffed full of crackers as he climbs back into my pocket.

In the blink of an eye, Ren shifts. The transformation is seamless as he turns from a man to a sleek, powerful fox with glistening copper fur. He shakes once, his tail flicking, then nudges me with his nose, urging me to climb onto his back.

I climb up, my fingers threading through the thick fur at his scruff. The moment I'm secure, he moves, muscles rippling beneath me as he bounds forward.

Despite the lingering unease in my chest, I lean into the warmth of him.

Whatever awaits us, we will face it together.

After a few hours, the forest gives way to rolling hills and lush farmland, forcing us back to the main road. It winds through fields and orchards with quaint farmhouses interspersed between them.

Up ahead is another forest. The trees are ablaze with a riot of fiery hues: rich golds and vivid crimsons, deep ochres and rusted oranges. A cool wind whispers through the trees, rustling the fallen leaves that carpet our path.

“This is beautiful,” I murmur, in awe of our surroundings.

“These woods are preserved around the city for our people,” Ren speaks in my mind. “We cherish running wild in our Fox forms. It’s in our blood, to feel the earth beneath our paws and the wind in our fur.”

I breathe in the rich scents of damp earth, sweet moss, and the fresh, crisp smell of the woods. Fallen leaves swirl around us and light filters through the canopy, gilding each leaf until they seem to glow from within.

The trees part, revealing a stone bridge crossing a wide river, connecting the woods to the city.

“Welcome to Emberwylde,” Ren says in my mind. “The capital of Cambryn.”

It’s nothing short of breathtaking. Sunlight dances over rooftops of silver and deep mahogany, and buildings adorned with ivy and cascading blossoms spill from balconies.

Ren shifts into his two-legged form. He offers me his arm and I loop mine through his as we approach the city gates. Two of the guards straighten as soon as they notice him. “Welcome home, Prince Renard,” one of them says in a deep voice, bowing his head.

“Thank you, Travys,” Ren replies. “It is good to be back.”

“Shall I send someone ahead to alert your family of your arrival?”

Ren smiles. “Thank you, but I think I’d prefer to surprise them.”

The guards all bow again and open the gates for us to pass through.

As we make our way through the city, several people bow in greeting, recognizing their prince. This place is just as lovely as Ren described. The curving streets are lined with carved stone archways and market stalls draped in fabric of every color imaginable.

A great river, shimmering like molten sapphire, cuts through the heart of the city, spanned by bridges of white stone. High above it all, perched on a cliff overlooking the valley, is the castle—Ren’s home.

It’s a masterpiece of architecture. Turrets of pale stone rise into the sky, their pointed spires capped in polished silver. Great glass windows catch the light, throwing fractured rainbows onto the cascading waterfalls that spill down the cliffside, feeding into the river below.

As we approach the castle gates another set of guards bows low as they greet Ren. “Welcome home, my prince,” one of them says.

“Thank you, Danyr,” he replies with a smile. “Do you happen to know where my

parents are?”

The guard opens his mouth to answer, but someone calls out. “Ren!”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:33 am

A young woman with auburn curls and golden eyes barrels toward us from the castle courtyard. She throws herself into Ren's arms, and he laughs in delight, spinning her around before setting her down with a fond ruffle of her hair.

"I missed you too," he says, his voice thick with affection. He turns to me. "This is my sister, Rielle," he introduces her. "Rielle, this is my fated one, Rapunzel."

Two of the guards snap their heads in our direction, their eyes wide as they stare at me in awe.

"Fated one?" She flashes a brilliant smile. "Oh, Ren! I'm so happy for you!" She pulls me into a warm embrace. "It's so lovely to meet you, Rapunzel."

Ren told me his family would like me, but I never expected such a wonderful welcome, and I cannot stop smiling as well.

"Oh, we have so much to talk about." Rielle's joy is infectious as she loops her arm through mine. "Come, Rapunzel. I'll introduce you to everyone. Mother and Father will be thrilled!"

I glance back at Ren, as his sister practically drags me into the castle, and he smirks, his eyes dancing with amusement as he follows us inside.

Rielle leads me to a sitting room. It's grand but inviting. Sunlight streams through tall windows draped in gossamer curtains. A fire crackles in the hearth, casting a golden glow over the richly woven rugs and dark wood furniture.

I recognize Ren's parents immediately. He has his father's bearing and his mother's eyes.

His parents sit side by side, their keen eyes studying me with surprise that quickly melts into delight as Rielle introduces me.

Ren stands beside me, his hand resting on my lower back as he confirms to his family that I am his fated one.

Another young man stands nearby—Ren's older brother, Rowan, I realize. His features are sharper, more serious, yet softened by the same amber gold eyes they all seem to share. An elderly couple sit beside him. Rielle introduces them as their grandparents.

Ren's mother steps forward and pulls me into a hug. "Welcome to the family, my dear."

They all take turns embracing me warmly, making me feel so welcome and wanted.

I'm so happy, I could burst.

When they ask how we met, I tell them about Drusilla and my time in the tower. Of my missing memories and my search for my family and the truth.

As his grandmother starts asking more questions about our journey, Ren's arm tightens around my waist. "We've been traveling all day," he says. "Perhaps we might rest for a bit and then meet you all for dinner later?"

"Of course." His mother nods. "We'll have plenty of time to talk then."

Ren takes my hand, leading me through winding hallways until we reach his

chambers.

His room is large but has a cozy feel to it. A massive bed sits against one wall, draped in dark green and gold, its frame carved with curling foxes. A fireplace crackles in the corner, the scent of cedarwood filling the air.

Floor to ceiling windows along the far wall reveal a breathtaking view of the vast forest beyond, its dense canopy stretching into the horizon. The space feels lived in, warm, and undeniably Ren.

I turn to him. “Is it all right for me to stay here with you in the same chamber?”

His gaze softens. “I can have another room prepared for you if you’d prefer.”

“No.” Warmth flushes my cheeks. “I’d rather stay with you.”

Something akin to relief flickers in his amber eyes. “Good.” He presses a lingering kiss to my forehead before pulling back. “I need to speak with Rowan while you get settled,” he murmurs. “But I’ll return soon. Then we can go to dinner with the family.”

I nod, watching as he disappears through the door.

Happiness blooms in my chest. I may not remember my past, but here... it truly feels like I’ve finally found a home.

CHAPTER 40

REN

My mind is a storm of chaos as I exit the room. Each step that carries me away from

Rapunzel is heavier than the last as I make my way through the castle to find my brother.

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The weight of my secret is almost more than I can bear. I have to tell Rapunzel the truth, but I don't know how. Worry twists my stomach. How can I explain that I've kept something so important from her instead of telling her right away?

I need to speak with my brother. Rowan and I have always been close, and I value his counsel. We are bound not only by blood and duty, but also by the quiet understanding that we can tell each other anything. No matter what.

When I reach his chambers, I push open the doors to Rowan is standing by the hearth with a goblet in his hand, watching the flames. His smile is immediate when he sees me, but it slips just as fast when he takes in my expression.

"Ren." He sets down his drink. "What's wrong?"

I rake a hand through my hair, exhaling sharply. "I need your advice."

Rowan frowns and gestures for me to sit, but I don't. My muscles are tense and my stomach is twisted in a knot. "Is this about Rapunzel?"

I nod, staring down at my hands before I force myself to meet his gaze. "As we mentioned earlier, the Goblin witch stole her memories. But I think"—I swallow hard—"I believe I've figured out who she really is... the truth of her past."

Rowan straightens. "Who?"

I brace myself. "She's the lost betrothed of Prince Theron of Sylvalis."

“The Stag Prince?” Rowan’s brows draw together in disbelief. “Are you certain?”

“I found this.” I hand him the faded poster with Rapunzel’s face and the promise of a reward from Prince Theron for her safe return. “I discovered it in a tavern in Lumaria last evening. The lettering is faded”—I gesture to the writing on the bottom—“but it mentions a reward and a prince. And the image looks exactly like Rapunzel.”

“But she’s your fated one.”

“Yes.”

“Does she know?”

“I... haven’t told her yet.”

“What?” Rowan’s expression morphs into alarm. “Ren. Please, tell me you’re not serious.”

“I didn’t know how to tell her.” I shake my head. “I mean... what if I’m wrong? What if it’s not her? What if I tell her about this poster and then it turns out that it’s not even her?” I swallow hard. “She’s happy. We’re happy,” I emphasize. “She already agreed to become my mate a few days ago and I... I’m so afraid to lose her.”

“So you just decided to lie to her instead?” His voice sharpens. “Ren—”

Before he can finish, bright laughter echoes down the hall. A moment later, Rielle walks into the room, her arm looped through Rapunzel’s, as my younger sister grins, tugging my amira along.

“There you are, Ren,” Rielle says. “You’re a terrible mate, keeping Rapunzel waiting while she’s starving,” she teases. “You’re supposed to be feeding her, not catching up

with Rowan.”

Rapunzel laughs. “I’m not that hungry—” But then, as if to contradict her words, her stomach growls.

Rowan and I exchange a look, but I force a smile and step toward her. “Forgive me. My sister is right. I should take better care of you,” I murmur, my hands curling around her waist as I pull her to me. Guilt, sharp and unrelenting, coils in my gut.

My heart shatters as she smiles at me. She trusts me and I am so undeserving of her.

Dinner is loud and full of laughter. My family dotes on Rapunzel and my sister is already spoiling Finik. The squirrel already has his own bowl of food and water on the nearby ledge, just above the one for our cat—Sir Whiskers.

As conversation flows around the table, I catch a blur of white and brown out of the corner of my eye. Rielle gasps when she sees Sir Whiskers chasing Finik. “Sir Whiskers, no!” she cries out, leaping from her chair to intervene. “Leave him alone!”

Rapunzel rushes toward them as well, and Finik scrambles up her dress to her shoulder just as my sister grabs the cat.

“You cannot eat him,” Rielle lightly taps Whisker’s nose. “He’s family now.”

Finik chitters angrily while Sir Whiskers practically glares at him, his fluffy white tail swishing back and forth behind him in agitation.

“She’s right,” I add. “You must behave yourself. Where are your manners, Whiskers?”

His ears flatten and he narrows his eyes. I’m sure if I could converse with him, he’d

have a few choice words about what a traitor I am for bringing said squirrel into the family.

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By the time dessert comes out, my grandmother has told Rapunzel several rather embarrassing stories from when I was just a small kit, while my amira listens, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

“We’re so glad to have you here, my dear,” my mother says to Rapunzel. “I’ve heard that humans do not have fated bonds, so how did you know that my son was the one for you?”

Rapunzel’s expression softens. “It was his kindness and his charm, and the way he makes me feel safe.” She looks down at our joined hands. “He’s proven himself to me over and over again.” Her eyes meet mine, full of affection. “It’s the reason I know I can trust him with my heart.”

Rapunzel squeezes my hand under the table, her smile radiant and open as she gazes at me.

And my heart breaks all over again.

After dinner, my mother pulls Rapunzel aside, already discussing dresses for an official bonding ceremony.

Shame fills me, and I glance at Rowan to find him staring at me in disapproval.

“Mother,” I interrupt. “Let’s talk about this later. Rapunzel just arrived. Let’s not overwhelm her with wedding plans just yet.”

“Nonsense.” My mother waves me off, laughing. “Every girl dreams of her

ceremony. Don't you, dear?"

Rowan grips my arm. "If you'll excuse us a moment. I need to borrow my brother."

Rapunzel nods, and he practically drags me out of the dining hall. He doesn't stop until we step into a narrow side hallway.

Rowan turns to me. "Even if you aren't sure it's her on the poster. You have to tell her. The longer you keep this secret, the worse it will be in the end."

I drag a hand roughly through my hair. "I know." Reaching into my pocket, I pull out the illustrated poster with Rapunzel's face. "That's why I brought this. I just need to find the right time to... the right way to tell her."

"Well, you need to do it soon." Rowan crosses his arms. "You can't keep lying to her, Ren. You need to tell Rapunzel the truth."

"I will," I hiss. "I just need to figure out how to—"

"What truth?" Rapunzel's voice interrupts, and I freeze.

Rowan stiffens beside me, and we both turn to see her standing a few feet away, confusion etched in her features.

"Rapunzel." I take a small step toward her. "Perhaps, we should talk in private."

"No," she says, voice soft but firm. "Tell me now."

Worry tightens my throat, but I somehow manage to force the words out. "I... found something at the tavern, last night."

“What is it?”

I hold the folded poster out to her. “I discovered this hanging behind the bar. It—” I swallow hard. “It looks like you. The lettering is faded, but I believe it may be a reward offered for your safe return to Prince Theron. It’s dated roughly three years ago.”

Silence hangs heavy in the air as she stares down at the parchment. When she finally lifts her gaze to mine, sadness is easily read in her expression. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I didn’t know how. I—” I step closer, desperate. “Deep down, it felt wrong, but I—”

“You knew how much it meant to me to remember. To know who I was. This could be the first real confirmation we’ve found... a link to my past.” Betrayal burns in her gaze. “And you kept it from me?”

“Rapunzel—”

Her eyes shine with tears as she takes a small step back. Off to the side, I notice my sister. From the look on her face, I assume Rielle must have heard everything. Or, at least, enough to know what I’ve done.

“You lied to me,” Rapunzel says, voice shaking. “Why, Ren? I don’t understand.”

“Because I was afraid I would lose you. If I was wrong, I could hurt you by giving you false hope. But if I was right, you might choose to leave me.” As the words leave my mouth, I realize how hollow they sound. I hate that I’ve caused her so much pain.

“I knew you were acting strange.” A tear slips down her cheek.

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“Please.” I reach for her. “Let me explain.”

She flinches away. “Don’t touch me.” Her voice breaks. “I trusted you, and you lied to me.”

“Rapunzel, please. I—”

“Leave me alone!” she snaps and then turns on her heels, her skirts swirling around her as she rushes back down the hallway.

Everything inside me wants to go after her. To beg her to let me explain. But when I move to follow, Rowan puts a hand on my shoulder, stopping me. “Let her go.”

“But I—”

“Give her a moment to come to terms with what you’ve done.” Rielle gives me a pitying look. “Then, go to her and explain yourself. If she will let you.”

“And what if she doesn’t?”

My heart sinks when he doesn’t answer.

I never wanted to hurt her. I wanted to protect her. To love her. To keep her safe. And now... I fear I may have lost her forever.

CHAPTER 41

RAPUNZEL

My heart is shattered. I'm not even sure where I'm going as I walk away from Ren. I only know that I need to get as far away from the pain as possible.

Tears blur my vision. It's happening all over again. The familiar ache of betrayal twists through me, dragging up memories of Drusilla—all of her lies replaying in my mind.

Ren's deception is an even deeper devastation because he knows what I've been through. He looked me in the eyes, held me close, and made me believe I could trust him.

And still... he lied. Just like she did.

A broken sob escapes my lips as I stumble down another passageway. I thought I'd finally found a home here, but now I'm not so sure.

Pushing through a set of double doors, the crisp night air stings my skin as I step outside into the castle gardens. The scent of damp earth and night-blooming jasmine fills my lungs, and moonlight spills over the stone walkways, illuminating my path.

Finding a nearby bench, I collapse onto the cold wood as a flood of emotions overwhelms me. Leaning forward, I press my face into my palms, my shoulders shaking with quiet sobs as grief and betrayal threaten to swallow me whole.

I trusted Ren. With all my heart.

Footsteps crunch along the gravel path, and I don't need to look to know who it is.

Ren.

His steps slow as he draws closer, hesitant to approach.

Lifting my head, I try to brush away my tears, but more fall to replace them.

Ren's amber eyes, usually so full of mischief and warmth, are shadowed, haunted. "Rapunzel." He drops to one knee before me. "I'm so sorry."

"Tell me why you did it," I demand, voice quavering. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

Ren lowers his head in shame. "Because I was afraid... terrified I would lose you."

The breath leaves my lungs in a slow, unsteady exhale and a memory resurfaces in my mind. "What if we found something about your past? What if we found evidence that you were betrothed to Prince Theron? What would you do?"

My stomach twists. "You should have told me."

"I know. I'm so sorry. I was selfish." Ren's anguished gaze holds mine. "I was a coward, Rapunzel. I worried that if you knew for sure that you were betrothed to Theron, I'd lose you. And I couldn't—" His voice breaks. "I couldn't bear it."

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“You hurt me, Ren.” I press a hand over my heart as if that will somehow dull the ache in my chest. “I gave you my heart, and you broke it, Ren.”

He flinches as if I’ve struck him. “I am so sorry that I hurt you, Rapunzel. I was wrong to keep the truth from you, and I will always regret it.” Silence stretches between us as his eyes search mine. “Can you ever forgive me?”

I let out a shuddering breath. I want to, but I’m not sure I can. The pain of his betrayal is still too raw. “I don’t know,” I answer honestly.

His entire body stiffens as devastation mars his face.

“I trusted you with all my heart.” My voice cracks beneath the weight of my sadness. “And you lied.”

“Please,” he pleads. “Tell me what I can do. I’ll do anything, Rapunzel. Anything.”

Sadness twists deep within but I force it back down as I meet his gaze evenly. “Take me to Prince Theron. I need to see him... to learn the truth about my past.”

His jaw tightens, and he bows his head, blinking back tears. “I will take you to Sylvalis,” he vows. “We’ll leave at first light.”

Unable to speak, I nod, even as my heart cracks a little more. I look away from him as emotions lodge in my throat. As much as I want to believe and trust him again, I’m not sure how I can. And that thought breaks me all over again.

CHAPTER 42

RAPUNZEL

I jolt awake, heart pounding in terror as echoes of cruel laughter claw at the edges of my mind. The witch's violet eyes gleam wickedly from the shadows of my nightmare, her fangs curled in a malicious grin as she whispers words that freeze my soul.

"He can't protect you, little bird. I'll take him from you first, and then you'll be mine again. Forever."

Cold sweat trails down my spine, and I reach out instinctively for Ren. But my fingers close on empty sheets beside me. A sob catches in my throat, loneliness slicing through me like a blade as I remember why he isn't here.

But even now, despite the pain he caused, my heart aches for him as images of my nightmare still linger.

I drag in a shaky breath as I sit up in bed. We're leaving for Sylvalis bright and early in the morning, and I know I should rest, but I cannot fall back asleep.

Finik is still asleep in a nest of blankets on the other side of the bed as I slip from the room and step out into the hallway. My feet seem to move of their own accord, guided by some sort of instinct—a strange pull deep within. When I turn a corner, I see light spilling out from under a heavy oak door.

Ren's voice drifts from within, murmuring words I can't quite make out. Drawing in a deep breath, I quietly open the door and step into what must be the castle library.

My heart clenches at the sight of him. He's standing next to Rowan and Rielle, bent

over a map spread across a grand wooden table in the middle of the room.

Rowan looks at Ren. “Do you really think fifty guards aren't enough to keep her safe?” he asks incredulously.

“I won't risk her, Rowan. We must do whatever it takes to ensure her safety.”

The pain of his betrayal is still bitter and sharp, but the fierce devotion in his words shakes my resolve. How can he hurt me so deeply yet care for me so thoroughly?

“What will you do if she chooses Theron?” Rielle asks.

Ren clenches his jaw. “All I want is for her to be happy. Even if it isn't with me.”

My heart aches with the knowledge that he's willing to sacrifice his own happiness for mine. But, I cannot simply forget how he hurt me. I need the truth of my past, of who I am, before I can even think of repairing what we've lost.

I take a small step toward them, and Rowan's fox ears shift toward me, his head snapping in my direction; Ren and Rielle turning too.

“Rapunzel.” His eyes flash with concern. “Are you all right?”

I'm not quite sure how to answer that, so instead I reply, “I'm fine. I just... I couldn't sleep.”

Rowan nods toward the table. “We're plotting the safest route to Sylvalis.”

Moving closer, I study the maps, my gaze drifting over unfamiliar landscapes until the image of a star-shaped flower catches my eye. It looks exactly like the ones embroidered across the bodice of the elegant blue gown I sketched in my book—the

dress from a dream I once had. Beside the flower, a name is written in delicate script.
“Valora,” I whisper softly.

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“Lumaria’s capital,” Rowan says. “It’s not far from here.”

My breath catches as a memory strikes—vivid and clear. I’m in a grandstand, the roar of the crowd filling the air as I gaze down at Theron. Wearing gleaming armor, he grins up at me, accepting my favor with a flourish. “Thank you, Princess.” He winks. “I’ll be sure to win now.”

“See that you do,” I tease back. “I think the people of Lumaria will enjoy seeing my brave Stag Prince, their future king, win the tournament.”

He takes my hand. “I won’t let you down.” He smiles as he presses a kiss to the top of knuckles.

I inhale sharply. “I remember now,” the words leave my lips in a hushed whisper. Lifting my gaze to Ren, I meet his eyes evenly. “I’m Princess Rapunzel of Lumaria. And I was engaged to Prince Theron of Sylvalis to unite our two kingdoms.”

“Are you certain?” Rielle asks.

“Yes.” My voice shakes as I trace my fingers over the map. “Valora—the capital. That’s where we have to go. That’s my home.”

“It’s about two day’s ride from here.” Rowan looks at me. “We’ll send a raven with a message to your family, announcing that we’re on our way.”

“Do you know them?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Despite sharing a border, we don't often deal with Lumaria.”

“Why not?”

“Lumarians...” Rowan hesitates. “They tend not to trust Fox Shifters. They think we're crafty. Cunning. Not to be relied upon or trusted.”

The irony is bitter, considering the betrayal I've suffered at Ren's hand. I glance at him, seeing the brief flash of pain in his expression. The room feels stifling suddenly, and I take a small step back, excusing myself. “I should return to my chambers.”

Even as I say this, I know it's technically Ren's room, but I'm sure he'll be sleeping somewhere else tonight after what happened between us.

When I reach my chambers again, I sit on the edge of the bed. Finik's head pops up from his nest, and he hops from his blankets to my side, his little nose and whiskers twitching as he gazes up at me.

Picking him up, I cuddle him to my chest, trying but failing to hold back my tears.

A gentle knock sounds, and Rielle slips inside. “Forgive my intrusion,” she says. “But I wanted to speak with you before you leave.”

Sniffling, I wipe away the moisture on my cheeks. “It's all right. What did you wish to talk about?”

“I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry.” She takes a seat beside me. “About what happened between you and Ren.”

“It's not your fault,” I murmur.

“I know.” She takes my hand. “I just wanted you to know that I’m here for you, Rapunzel. Even if things don’t work out between you and my brother, I still wish to be your friend.”

“Thank you, Rielle.” Although some of my memory has returned, it’s still incomplete. Ren was the one person I thought I could count on, but after what happened, I feel so lost and alone. For her to offer her friendship means everything right now. “You have no idea how much that means to me.”

“I wish I could go with you,” she says. “But my parents will not allow all three of us to go.” She sighs. “But don’t worry. You’ll be quite safe. Rowan and Ren will escort you to your home. And they’ll have plenty of guards that you won’t need to worry about the Goblin witch or any Troll raiders.”

“Troll raiders?”

She nods. “Their lands border ours. They often travel in bands four or five strong, preying on small convoys or lone travelers. It’s how Ren got his scar.”

I knew Fox females rejected him because of this mark, but he never told me how he got it in the first place. “What happened?”

“It was a Troll attack,” Rielle says, her voice quiet. “Ren was out running in his Fox form with his betrothed.” Unexpected jealousy rears its ugly head at the thought of Ren with someone else. “They were ambushed. Ren saved her, but he gained that scar in the battle. Afterward, she rejected him for it... even though he’d earned it by protecting her.”

Anger swells my chest. “Ren is a good person. How could she just leave him like that?” My heart aches for him all over again. “I can’t imagine how terrible that must have been.”

Rielle nods. “Their betrothal was arranged by our parents. They barely knew each other, but that was no excuse.” She lifts her gaze to mine. “And I know he hurt you, Rapunzel, but I also know how deeply he regrets it. Do you think you might be able to forgive him?”

A maelstrom of emotions swirls deep within. My feelings for him are still so strong, and yet I can’t forget his betrayal. “My heart is broken but, I cannot deny that I still—” I shake my head, unable to speak through my sadness. Drawing in a deep breath, I straighten. “I need to find my family, regain my past, and maybe then... I can forgive.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:33 am

Her eyes soften with understanding as she nods. “I hope you find what you're searching for.”

When she finally leaves, I lay down and turn onto my side. Finik curls up on the pillow above my head.

Even with the turmoil in my heart, hope sparks within. I finally know who I am. I have a family out there, waiting. I want to share this joy with Ren more than anyone, but for now, my broken heart needs time to heal.

Sighing, I think again of my Fox prince. Closing my eyes, I picture his teasing smile and his charming ways. I remember the whispered promises between us. Everything that was, and everything that could have been.

CHAPTER 43

RAPUNZEL

The carriage rocks beneath me, the rhythmic clatter of hooves threatening to lull me to sleep. I'm exhausted, but I'm too excited to rest. We're less than half a day's journey from Valora—the capital of Lumaria. Less than half a day until I see my parents and my brother.

Finally, I'll find the answers I've been searching for all along.

Ren's family sent a raven to my family and to Prince Theron. Perhaps after I meet with my parents we'll continue on to the kingdom of Sylvalis, to speak with the Stag

Prince. Maybe the more people I see from my past, the sooner I'll regain all my lost memories.

Ren rides at the head of the entourage with Rowan. We're traveling with seventy-five guards, but from what I've overheard, Ren is still worried about a possible ambush sent by the witch.

He and I have barely spoken since we left his castle, but Rowan always seems to find his way to my side when we stop for a break to eat and stretch our legs. He's a good person, and an even better brother. Every chance he gets, he subtly tries to encourage me to speak with Ren.

But each time my thoughts drift to my Fox prince, my heart tangles in a painful knot of anger, hurt, and betrayal. Whenever we stop, I can sense his gaze on me almost constantly, yet I refuse to meet it. I can't face him. Not yet.

The capital of Lumaria unfolds before us as we approach. White stone buildings with golden rooftops gleam beneath the sun, vibrant banners fluttering in the gentle breeze. It feels both familiar and foreign, as if I have stepped into a dream I half remember but cannot quite grasp.

At the gates, the guards halt our procession. One walks toward us, his golden armor nearly blinding as he steps out from the shadows of the city wall. "State your business," he commands.

"I am Prince Renard of Cambryn." Ren says from atop his horse. He gestures to Rowan. "This is my brother, Prince Rowan. We are escorting the Princess Rapunzel home."

The guard walks to my carriage. His breath catches as his gaze meets mine through the window, staring at me as if he's seen a ghost. Which, in a way, I suppose I am.

Everyone believed I was dead. Everyone except for Prince Theron, it seems.

“Princess,” the guard bows low. “We’d heard rumors that you’d been found but—” he blinks at me, still in shock. “Thank the gods you’ve returned.”

Another guard moves to his side, eyes wide. “Itisher,” he murmurs, voice full of awe. “Welcome home, Princess.” He jerks his head toward another guard. “Go! Inform the King and Queen at once! Tell them their daughter—the Princess Rapunzel—has been found alive and she has returned.”

The guard takes off at a sprint toward the palace. The rest of the guards fall into formation to escort us to the castle.

As we proceed through the city, whispers spread like wildfire, as crowds gather on either side of the main thoroughfare, watching us pass.

“It’s her.”

“The lost princess.”

“She has returned.”

As we draw closer to the castle, I’m excited but also nervous. I press my hands into my lap to keep them from trembling. This is the moment I’ve been waiting for, and I can hardly believe it’s here.

When we reach the palace courtyard, my breath catches as memories flood my mind. A grand marble fountain stands at the center, water cascading over intricate carvings of celestial beings.

I remember this place.

The carriage door swings open, and one of the guards help me down. My legs feel a bit unsteady, but I hold my chin high.

I notice Ren standing with his brother. I wish things were different between us. As much as I crave his steady presence, and wish he was at my side, the memory of his betrayal still stings, and I force myself to look away.

The guards lead me into the palace, through familiar hallways lined with towering columns and gilded chandeliers, until we reach the throne room. The doors open, and I see my parents sitting upon their thrones.

They stand as if in a trance, their expressions frozen in disbelief for a moment before they start toward me.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:33 am

Mother reaches me first. “Rapunzel?” her voice quavers as she cups my face with both hands. “It’s you.” A tear slips down her cheek.

“You’re really here,” my father says, his eyes glossy with tears.

Emotions flood through me like a giant wave, as they wrap their arms around me, hugging me so tightly I can barely breathe. “Mother.” A broken sob escapes me. “Father. I’ve missed you both so much.”

When we finally pull away, my father turns to Ren and his brother. “Thank you for bringing our daughter home. When your raven came, we—” his voice catches—“we were afraid to hope.” He struggles to keep his voice even. “We’ve had so many people claim to have information about our daughter over the past three years...” He shakes his head. “How can we every repay you?”

“No payment is necessary,” Ren replies. “We are simply glad she has found her home.”

“Ren is the one who found me.” I meet his gaze briefly before turning back to my parents. “He saved me from the witch who held me captive.”

Finik takes this opportunity to climb out of my pocket, startling my parents. “Rapunzel,” Mother gasps. “What in the world is that thing doing in your pocket?”

“Mother, this is Finik.” I gesture to him as he perches on my shoulder, tiny nose twitching with interest as he studies his new surroundings. “He was my only friend while I was in the tower.”

“Tower?” Father frowns. “What are you talking about? Who held you captive? Where have you been all this time?”

As I explain my story, I don’t tell them about everything that happened between me and Ren, or of my feelings for him. Instead, I explain how he saved me from the tower and the blood witch who stole my memories. How he kept me safe and brought me to his kingdom, offering me a home when I couldn’t remember anything of my past. And of how welcoming his family has been to me.

Ren stiffens and pain flickers across his expression as I use his formal name and title when I refer to him.

“We owe you a great debt,” my father says to Ren and Rowan. “To your family as well. We will have rooms prepared for you and your men. Stay a few days with us. We will hold a feast in your honor. And we’ve already received a raven from the kingdom of Sylvalis. Prince Theron—Rapunzel’s betrothed—is already on his way here. I’m sure he would like to thank you as well for all you’ve done.”

I don’t miss the way Ren flinches at the mention of Theron’s name. “Thank you.” Ren dips his chin in a polite nod. “But I’m afraid we will only be staying tonight.” His gaze sweeps to me, sorrow and regret darkening his fox eyes. “We must return to Cambryn at once. We’ll leave in the morning.”

Something inside me splinters. I want to tell him to stay, but the words will not come. Instead, I watch as he and Rowan are led away by one of the staff to the guest chambers.

When my parents announce that it’s time for dinner, I subtly scan the hallways, hoping to catch a glimpse of Ren. I hate the way we left things, and I want so much to see him. To hear him talk, to see his mischievous smile, and have him tease me as he used to—back and forth. But when we reach the dining room, he and his brother are

not there.

One of the servants walks up to my parents and bows low. “Prince Rowan and Prince Renard were served in their chambers.”

Before I can ask why, my mother leans close and pats my hand. “I hope you don’t mind, my dear. I thought it would be nice to have dinner with just the family this evening. Your brother should be arriving soon.” She smiles. “He’ll be so happy to see you.”

My brother. I think of the image I’ve drawn many times. A flash of memory returns and I see his face as he grins at me, his eyes sparkling with amusement before he laughs at something I’ve said.

I may not remember much, but I believe we must have been close, for my dreams are often of the two of us laughing together.

One of the servants places a separate plate and silverware beside me, for my brother. I’m anxious to see him, wondering much I’ll remember, and hoping his presence will trigger more memories of my past.

As if my very thoughts have summoned him, the doors swing open, and a young man with short, silver-white hair steps inside. His piercing blue eyes meet mine, and his mouth falls open. “Rapunzel?”

A flood of memories surges through me. “Tristan,” his name leaves my lips in a hushed whisper as myriad emotions swirl within.

He rushes forward and gathers me in his arms, embracing me in a bear hug as he spins me around in a circle. “Thank the gods, you’re here.” He pulls back just enough to look down at me. “My little sister. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.” He gives

me another fierce hug. “I’ve missed you so much.”

Tears of joy escape me as more memories begin to resurface of us as children, playing in the gardens, hiding from our tutors. Sneaking into the kitchens for sweets. Whispered secrets and shared laughter. “I missed you too, Tristan,” I barely manage to speak around the lump in my throat. “Where have you been?”

He looks the same and yet different—the slight scruff of beard along his jaw making him seem older.

“I’ve just returned from Sylvalis. I traveled with Theron as we followed what we thought was a lead on your disappearance.”

I’m touched beyond words to hear that they were still searching for me.

“Theron was right,” he adds, staring at me as if he’s afraid I’ll somehow disappear. “All this time, he believed you were still alive.” His voice catches. “He refused to stop looking for you, even though everyone told him you were—” His head snaps to my parents. “Has anyone sent word to Theron?”

“Yes. A raven was sent,” I tell him. “Letting him know I was coming here.”

“Well then”—Tristan smiles—“I’m sure he’s probably already on his way. All this time... I can only imagine how happy he’ll be to see you, Rapunzel.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:33 am

Guilt twists deep within. The Stag Prince has refused to give up on me all these years. I'm so worried he'll be disappointed when he arrives. With so much of my memory still missing, I fear he'll find I'm not the same person he remembers—the one he's been so desperate to find.

Even worse, I'm afraid that when I do see him, I'll discover emotions I wasn't aware of. And if so, what will that mean for my feelings toward Ren?

CHAPTER 44

RAPUNZEL

Fragments of the past trickle back into my mind when we walk into the study. As I sit across from my parents, on the large velvet sofa with plush sapphire cushions, memories spark in vivid bursts—the sound of Tristan's laughter, the comforting murmur of my parents' voices as we gathered here after dinner.

Across from me, Tristan leans forward, elbows propped on his knees, eyes wide and serious. Mother and Father are quiet as I share more details of my story, their expressions a mix of relief and guarded unease as I tell them more about Ren and how he helped me uncover Drusilla's lies.

When I'm finished, Tristan looks at my father. "We need to double the guards along the castle walls in case the witch sends someone else for Rapunzel."

"Agreed." Father clenches his jaw. "I'm going to kill that Goblin." He curls his hands into fists at his sides. "I'll put a price on her head from here all the way to the coast of

Eryadon. There will be nowhere for her to run.”

Father turns his attention back to me, his eyes full of regret. “I’m so sorry, my darling daughter. I would never have made a bargain with a bloodwitch, but I had no choice. Your mother was dying, and the healer feared that you would as well.”

“It’s all right,” I tell him. “I understand. In truth, I would have probably made the same decision myself, if I’d been in your place.”

“We made sure to pay her in gold, hoping to avoid an entangled bargain,” Mother says quietly. “And when you began to exhibit magic—” her voice catches. “We thought we were helping you when we hired Glinda as your nanny. She claimed to have knowledge of such things. We were only trying to help you.”

“Please.” I lean forward and take her hand. “You cannot blame yourself. You were only trying to do what you thought was best. Drusilla disguised herself. You had no idea of her treachery.”

Tristan shakes his head. “I don’t understand. Why did the witch capture you? Why not simply continue as she was? No one even suspected her of such deceit.”

Father shakes his head. “It was probably because of your upcoming marriage to Theron. She must have worried you would not take her with you when you went to live in his kingdom.”

My brother nods. “And if that had happened, Drusilla would have lost all access to you, and any chance of regaining her powers.”

“You are safe now, Rapunzel,” Father’s eyes burn with determination. “We will use every resource we have to hunt down the witch and end her,” he vows. “We will make sure she can never harm you again.”

I'm so happy to be home again. To know how much I'm loved and was missed these past three years. Less than a week ago, when I imagined this moment, I pictured Ren at my side. I miss his strong and comforting presence, and I wish so much that he was here to share this with me. Closing my eyes, I fight back the tears that would fall if I let them.

Tristan reaches across and takes my hand. "Are you all right?"

I nod, but it's a lie. I'm far from okay, but it's not so much to do with the witch and more to do with my charming Fox prince.

My heart is torn. Part of me wants to forgive him, but part of me is still so hurt I'm not sure if I can. He's leaving in the morning, and I'm desperate to talk to him. I want to ask him to stay... to see if we can work this out, but I'm not sure if I should.

Theron is probably on his way here even now. For all I know, his arrival could trigger memories of our relationship. If so, it would only hurt Ren. And that's the last thing I want to do.

It's late by the time I go to my bedroom. When I open the door, myriad memories rush forth. Moonlight filters in through the sheer curtains, painting my familiar surroundings in shades of silver and shadow.

Everything is exactly as I left it. My books are stacked neatly on the shelves, and several of my drawings are spread across my desk. I run my hand over the bedcover of pale blue silk embroidered with tiny white flowers.

A sharp ache pierces my chest as I trail my fingers over the smooth, polished wood of the bedpost. It's as if everything has remained frozen in time here while I've been gone. How much sorrow must my family have carried, to keep everything precisely as it was?

I pull Finik from my pocket and place him on the pillow, tucking a blanket over him as he curls up and goes to sleep.

I cross the room to the balcony doors. Pushing them open, I step into the cool embrace of night. The palace gardens below are bathed in moonlight and the wind carries the delicate fragrance of night-blooming jasmine.

My heart twists painfully as I think of Ren.

The hurt of his lies still lingers, a raw wound carved deep by Drusilla's deception, but beneath all the sadness, my love for him remains.

He isn't even gone, and I already miss his playful smile, his protective embrace, and the warmth in his amber eyes when he looks at me as if I am the only thing that matters in his world.

Because of him, I'm no longer trapped in the tower. He saved me, and helped me remember who I am. And despite what happened between us, I cannot fathom a future without him.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:33 am

Guilt threatens my resolve as I think of Prince Theron, searching for me for the past three years.

My fingers brush against the balcony railing, my heart twisting as I gaze out over the city.

“Rapunzel?” Tristan’s voice calls me back from my troubling thoughts. I turn as he walks toward me. “I knocked but you didn’t answer. I’m sorry to barge in, but I was worried. I’m sorry. You’ve only just returned, and I can’t stop this irrational fear I have that perhaps this is all just a dream.”

A faint smile crests my lips. “It’s all right.”

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” He leans against the balcony, his expression contemplative. “Do you remember how often we used to stand here, planning grand adventures?”

And just like that, the memories return. I whisper, “We weren’t allowed outside the palace grounds. So, we used to stand here, imagining what lay beyond.”

He nods. “When you disappeared, we were devastated. Theron and I searched everywhere for you.”

Tears sting my eyes. “You never gave up on me.”

“Never,” he says, voice thick.

I hug him, gratitude tightening in my throat. When I pull away, I ask hesitantly, “My

betrothed... is he a good man?"

Tristan nods. "The best." He studies me. "Tell me about Prince Renard. You spent a lot of time with him."

A warm flush creeps across my face. "He rescued me."

"Is that all?" He gives me a pointed look. My brother and I were kindred spirits; we could tell each other anything. I remember this now. He knows me too well.

"We... became close during our journey," I add a bit hesitantly.

"Do you love him?"

"I do, but it's complicated."

"How?"

I tell him all about Ren's betrayal. How much it hurt me, and how torn I am now.

After I'm finished Tristan studies me a moment before speaking. "He was worried he would hurt you, but also afraid he could lose you." He pauses. "It doesn't excuse what he did, but I think I understand why he did it." He looks at me. "The question is: how do you feel about all of this?"

I glance up at the stars. "My heart still loves him," I admit. "He's leaving in the morning with his brother, and I want so much to speak with him. But... I don't know what to say or where to even begin."

"How about you start with that?" Tristan gives me a faint smile. "Tell him everything you're feeling and then see what happens. It won't hurt anything to try."

He's right. As we bid each other goodnight, I linger on the balcony, staring at the endless sky, wondering if Ren is still awake and thinking of me too.

I cannot deny the truth in my soul. Despite all that happened between us, my heart still belongs to Ren. Tomorrow morning, I will find my charming fox prince and tell him the truth: that I choose him, scars and secrets and all.

And gods willing, he'll choose me too.

CHAPTER 45

REN

Dawn's pale light paints the room in shades of orange and gold. I stare at the ceiling, my mind churning as I think of Rapunzel. Sleeping without her these past few days has been agony.

Rowan shifts in the bed across the room, groaning as he awakens.

"You didn't sleep either," he mutters, rubbing his face.

I turn to face him. "I can't leave her. I'm staying. I need to earn her forgiveness, Rowan. I have to fight for her... for us."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:33 am

Rowan props himself up on one elbow, studying me carefully. “What if she chooses Prince Theron? I overheard some of the guards speaking. They claim he’s on his way here even now.”

“Then I’ll fight even harder. I’ll do whatever it takes to convince her to choose me.”

“And if she still decides she wants him?” Rowan asks.

I clench my jaw. “Then I’ll accept it. But I’m not going to just give up and leave without trying.”

Rowan crosses the room and claps a hand on my shoulder. “Then I’ll stand by you, brother, no matter what happens. Whatever you decide, I’m with you.”

“Thank you, Rowan.” Gratitude swells my chest. “Now, let’s go find her.”

Determination steels me as I step out into the hallway. Rowan walks beside me as we make our way to the stairs. One of the servants told us the princess was having breakfast, and I’m hoping we’ll find her in the dining hall.

When we round the corner, I stop dead in my tracks when I see Rapunzel standing in the hallway. Intense longing fills me. Sunlight spears through the windows, casting her in a lovely golden glow. Gods, she’s the most beautiful female I’ve ever seen.

She’s speaking with a man with short, silver-white hair and piercing blue eyes, the same as hers. I recognize him from her drawings. He must be her older brother.

“Ren,” she calls me over, and it doesn’t escape my notice that she greets me the way she used to—without my title and full name. This is a good sign, I believe. “This is my brother, Tristan,” she says. “Tristan, this is Prince Ren and his brother, Prince Rowan of Cambryn.”

Tristan’s gaze sharpens with interest as he studies me, inclining his head respectfully. “Thank you for bringing my sister home, Prince Ren.” He turns to Rowan. “Our family is in your debt.”

“Our father has a saying.” Rowan steps forward. “There is no debt among friends.”

Tristan nods at him—one crown prince regarding another. “Wise words,” he replies.

Rowan engages him in conversation about our journey from Cambryn and when he glances over his shoulder at me, I realize he’s doing this to allow me a moment alone with Rapunzel.

I turn my attention to her. “May I speak with you?” Before she can reply, I add, “Privately.”

She nods.

Finik peeks his head out of her pocket, climbs onto her shoulder and then leaps to mine.

I stroke his fur as he nuzzles my cheek, making a small sound almost like a purr. “I missed you too my friend.” I chuckle as he makes a chirruping sound, as if telling me what he thinks about this new place.

“I think he wants to go outside,” Rapunzel says. “We can talk in the gardens if you’d like.”

Soft buttery morning light greets us as we walk outside. A cool breeze weaves through the trees, carrying the delicate scent of jasmine and roses.

Finik hops off my shoulder to go explore, and I turn to Rapunzel. I want so much to gather her in my arms, but I cannot. Not yet. There are things I must say. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Her blue eyes search mine. “What is it?”

Words of apology and love balance on the tip of my tongue, but before I can speak, one of the guards approaches. “Princess.” He bows low. “Forgive the interruption, but Prince Theron has arrived.”

Over her shoulder, I notice a male striding swiftly toward us. Her mouth falls open and my heart plummets as I recognize him immediately. He is just as she drew him in her sketchbook.

Prince Theron is striking. We are of similar height, but he seems much taller with the proud regal stag horns that crown his head. He has the typical lean muscular build of his people, with broad shoulders and sharply cut facial features.

Shoulder-length black hair, tipped with silver ends, falls around his face. Two pointed ears stick up from the silkenstrands. His vivid blue eyes are intense as they travel over my amira.

“Rapunzel!” He gathers her up in his arms, spinning her around. “Thank the gods. I knew it.” He cups her face with reverent hands. “I knew you were alive.”

Rapunzel’s stunned expression softens into something warm, undeniably moved by his statement.

Theron suddenly steps back, noticing me. “Who is this?”

“Theron,” she says, obviously flustered. “This is Prince Renard of Cambryn. He saved me and brought me home.”

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Theron's face breaks out into a smile as he clasps my forearm as if I were greeting one of his brother warriors. "Prince Renard, I cannot express enough gratitude for what you've done. I am in your debt."

His sincerity catches me off guard, and despite the jealousy that burns in my veins, I cannot find it within myself to hate him. He clearly cares deeply for Rapunzel; it's written across his face.

Theron is a good man, and that realization makes the ache in my heart even worse.

How can I possibly hope to convince her to choose me, when here is the male who searched for her these past three years? The one who never gave up hope when everyone else believed she was dead.

Rowan and Tristan walks toward us, and Rapunzel introduces my brother to the Stag prince.

When Theron thanks Rowan for escorting Rapunzel from Cambryn, his gratitude is once again genuine and unguarded, as if he were speaking to a long-time friend instead of someone he just met.

Stags are known to be rather vain creatures, and I'd hoped this would be the case for Prince Theron. I wanted to find flaws in him that would prove I am the better male. But now that we've met, my first impression is that he is kind and possesses the type of charm that I'd thought could only be found in one of my kin.

Theron turns back to Rapunzel, taking her hands in his own. "What happened, Zel?"

Where have you been these past three years?"

Zel? My heart slams in my throat. He has a nickname for her? I don't stand a chance.

He starts to guide her away, but she turns back to me, her eyes meeting mine. "Ren, Rowan... could you please delay your departure? I'd like us to speak later."

"Of course." Rowan answers, dipping his chin in a subtle bow. "We'll wait for you."

Uncertainty tightens my chest as she darts another glance at me before walking away with Prince Theron. I long to go to her... to take her in my arms and never let go.

Ever since we met, I've tried so hard to prove myself worthy of her affection. And yet, as I watch her leave with the Stag Prince, it feels like I'm right back where I started: scarred, flawed, and not enough. Fate's cruel joke.

"She still wants to talk," Rowan says quietly beside me, probably sensing my unease. "That's a good sign, Ren."

I shake my head. "What if she regains her memories of him? What if she remembers"—my voice catches—"that she loves him?"

"That may happen." Rowan grips my shoulder firmly. "And if it does, she will have to make a choice. Which is why you must let her know what's in your heart. Hold nothing back. If you do, you will regret it."

Determination burns deep within. I won't surrender to ghosts of her past. If Prince Theron wants her, he'll have to fight harder than me.

Because I'm not letting her go. Not until she herself tells me I must.

CHAPTER 46

RAPUNZEL

Theron's striking blue eyes shine with something between concern and reverence, staring at me as though afraid I'll vanish. "You're really here." He touches my face. "After all this time, I was so afraid I'd never find you."

My heart aches at his tender words and expression.

"I was so worried—" His voice breaks, and he swallows hard. "What happened to you, Zel?"

Facing me, he takes my hands as we stand beneath an ivy-covered trellis. A fragment of the past flickers through my mind. I remember being here with him before. This is where we agreed we would marry.

The feelings attached to the memory are... complicated. Something more than friendship, but not quite as strong as romantic love.

And yet, the way he looks at me gives me pause. If we were not in love, I don't understand why he stares at me as though I'm so precious to him.

"I was taken by a Goblin witch, named Drusilla," I begin. "You probably remember her as Glinda—my former nanny and then handmaiden." Theron inhales sharply as I continue, explaining to him about how I inherited some of her powers when she saved my mother's life on the day I was born.

"She disguised herself to appear human. She lied to me, and I trusted her. She kept me in a tower and said it was for my safety."

Theron's jaw tightens as he listens to my story.

“She took my memories, but I started remembering things in flashes. Dreams, mostly. And you—” My voice quavers. “I remembered you. I dreamed of you reaching for me as I fell, a terrified look on your face.”

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His lips part, his eyes full of pain as he nods slowly. “It was during the midsummer festival. You were walking along the path, near the cliff’s edge, overlooking the river. You’d always liked the view from there.”

His gaze drifts to the back garden wall with a faraway look, as if reliving the painful memory.

Reaching out, I rest my hand over his, squeezing it gently.

“You slipped.” His voice breaks as he looks down at our joined hands. “It happened so fast. One second you were smiling at me, and the next you were gone.” He shakes his head. “I jumped in after you, but the current was so fast. I nearly drowned.”

He inhales a trembling breath, devastation marring his handsome features. “You were gone, and my devastation was beyond words.”

Tears gather in the corners of my eyes, and I cover my mouth.

“My younger brother—Falen—pulled me out.” He shakes his head. “They said the river must’ve swept you into the gorge...that there was no hope. But there was no body. I told them that meant you were still alive. I felt it. Iknewit.”

“Drusilla must have found me shortly after that.”

Theron nods.

“I wonder if she caused my accident, or if she simply took advantage of it to make me

her captive.”Perhaps, I’ll never know.

“You’ve been looking for me all this time?”

“Me and your brother.” Theron pulls me into a tight embrace, one hand cupping the back of my head, the other around my waist as he whispers, “We never stopped.”

“Theron?” Guilt is a heavy stone in my chest as he pulls back to look at me. “I have not yet recovered all pieces of my past. I know that we were betrothed when I was taken, but... the feelings I have for you—” I swallow hard, uncertain how to continue before I finally say—“the memory of our relationship... it’s—”

“It’s all right if you can’t remember everything, Zel.” He cups my chin. “I’ll be right by your side. We’ll get through this together. I promise.”

I don’t want to hurt him, but I must tell the truth before things go too far. My heart belongs to Ren, and I cannot pretend otherwise. “Theron.” I swallow hard. “I need to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“I’m in love with someone else.” The words leave my mouth in a panicked rush. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to happen, but it did. And I wanted you to know the truth before things spiral out of hand.”

“You?” he asks in disbelief. “You’re in love?”

I blink at his reaction. “Yes.”

“Well.” He arches a brow. “This definitely puts a damper on the wedding planning.”

I gape at him. “You’re... not upset?”

“I’m not thrilled,” he says a bit too casually for a man whose heart has presumably been broken. “I mean... I was looking forward to marrying my best friend.”

Now I’m confused. “We weren’t in love?”

Dropping to one knee before me, he takes both my hands in his. “Make no mistake: I have loved you fiercely since we were children because you’re my best friend. But romantically? No. But you and I agreed that we were a good match, and we figured we’d grow into it eventually.”

My lips part in surprise, but I press them together again as he continues. “I didn’t want what my parents had—an arranged marriage filled with bitterness and silence. I thought if I married you, someone I actually liked, maybe we’d be the exception.”

“You weren’t in love with me at all,” I murmur, more to myself than to him as myriad memories flood my mind. “I remember now,” I whisper. “You are my best friend.”

He nods.

Relief fills me. “And here I was, terrified I’d break your heart.”

He slaps his hand dramatically to his chest, directly over his heart. “Broken? No.” he chuckles, “But I cannot deny that my ego is a little bruised, perhaps.”

A snort of laughter escapes me, and he laughs as well. “So, who’s the lucky male that has won your affection, Rapunzel?”

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“Prince Ren.”

“The Fox Prince?” His brows shoot up toward his forehead. “Are you serious?”

I nod, cheeks warming. “Yes.”

“And to think, you could’ve had this.” He gestures grandly to himself, striking a dramatic pose.

Laughter bursts from me. “You’re ridiculous.”

“And you’ve always liked that about me,” he says, pulling me into another hug. This time he lifts me off the ground and spins me in a circle. “It’s so good to have you back, Zel.”

The use of my old nickname makes my throat tighten as images resurface from when we were younger—long summer days full of laughter and happiness.

A guard rounds the corner and walks toward us, bowing deeply. “Forgive the interruption, but a raven has come with a message from Sylvalis,” he says to Theron.

Theron turns to me. “It’s probably my family. I’m sure they’re worried. The moment I received the message from Cambryn about you, I left immediately.” He smiles warmly at me. “I wanted to get here as fast as I could to see you.”

“I’m glad you came,” I tell him, and I mean it. I’ve missed him.

He steps back, then takes my hand in his. “You’re happy? Truly?”

“I am.”

“Then that’s enough for me.”

Before I can respond, he pulls me into one last bear hug, practically squeezing the air out of my lungs.

“Theron!” I laugh.

“Just making sure you’re real, my darling Rapunzel,” he whispers into my hair. “My oldest and dearest friend.”

When he pulls back, he flashes a handsome smile. He raises his hand and a wisp of green magic swirls around his palm like smoke before he conjures a rose out of thin air. I smile as he tucks it behind my ear and then bows dramatically. “I shall return shortly.”

He starts to leave but turns back and takes my hand, pressing a kiss to the back of my knuckles with a mischievous wink. “Try not to miss me too much while I’m gone,” he teases.

Warmth fills my heart as I watch him leave with the guard. Thank the gods that went as well as it did. I was so worried about breaking his heart.

Happiness sparks deep within. I need to find Ren. I have to tell him I forgive him. That I love him, fully and truly. And even though he hurt me, I believe that love can mend our broken trust. There is nothing I want more than to have him by my side once again.

As I start back for the castle, a hand clamps over my mouth from behind. Panic seizes my chest as a strong arm wraps tight around my waist. “Shhh,” a man whispers in my ear. “It’s me.”

I stiffen, awareness prickling through me as I recognize the voice. Ren?

CHAPTER 47

REN

A few minutes earlier...

Crouching behind a very prickly shrub, I stifle a sneeze as a fern frond pokes me directly in the nose. “Can you see anything?” I whisper to my brother. “What are they doing?”

Rowan sighs beside me. “We have the same vantage point here, Ren. Why are you even asking?”

“Because I’m emotionally compromised and clearly suffering from an acute case of jealousy,” I say dramatically.

My ears twitch as I squint across the garden toward Rapunzel and Prince Theron, desperate to know what they are discussing.

Are they declaring their love for each other even now? Is he charming her with his magnificent horns and his chiseled stag looks? Is he reciting poetry, trying to sweep her off her feet with honeyed words?

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She smiles at him, and I bite back a growl, wanting to claw his eyes out.

Leaning forward, I strain to hear what they're saying, but I can hear nothing over the loud crunching in my ear. Finik sits on my shoulder, munching contentedly on a cracker Rowan gave him. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

I wince. "Finik, my friend," I whisper, angling my head toward him. "Can you please chew quieter? I'm trying to hear what they're saying. This is important."

Finik blinks at me and cocks his head before he takes another big bite. Crunch.

Rowan snorts.

"Here." I lift Finik from my shoulder and put him on Rowan's. "Hold him while I try to listen."

I turn my attention back to Rapunzel and the Stag Prince.

His eyes are soft and full of longing. He cups her face, and I stop breathing. My heart slams in my throat as he hugs her tight and she embraces him in return.

My stomach twists in a violent knot. "I'm going to be sick."

Rowan leans in. "You don't know what they're saying. For all you know, she just told him she's in love with you and she's hugging him to soften the blow."

His words soothe me a moment before they both laugh.

I purse my lips. “She’s laughing, Rowan. People don’t laugh when they’re breaking hearts. They sob. They throw things. They storm off dramatically.”

“How would you know?” he says.

“Because.” I grit my fangs as Prince Theron hugs her and spins her around. “I’ve read a lot of romance novels.”

Then it happens.

Theron lifts his hand. Green magic swirls like mist across his palm a moment before he produces a rose with his magic. He tucks it behind Rapunzel’s ear and then bows with a grand flourish as he smiles at her with his stupid, perfect face.

I gasp. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” Rowan asks. “The flower?”

“The magic, Rowan,” I hiss. “The sinister, glowing green magic.”

“There’s nothing evil about it,” he counters. “Most Stag Shifters have some sort of nature magic.”

“That wasn’t just a flower,” I tell him. “That was a seduction spell.”

Rowan squints. “It was a parlor trick. Fae do things like that all the time.”

“Exactly. Fae do it. When they lure unsuspecting maidens away from their villages.”

“That’s a myth,” he counters.

“Is it?” I challenge. “And yet, here he is, using the same magic as the Fae to woo an innocent maiden into his clutches by weaving dark spells and bewitching her even further with an enchanted rose.”

“You think he... what? Bewitched her with a flower?”

“That’s exactly what he’s doing,” I stress. “It’s all coming together now. I knew he was too good to be true.”

Rowan sighs. “Ren...”

“No, listen. I was resolved to hate him. And then I met him, and what happens? He charms me. Me, Rowan! A fox. And we’re famous for our charm. So how does a stag outcharm a fox?”

“Maybe you just like him because he seems like a decent person.”

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“Don’t be ridiculous,” I mutter. “I’m under the spillover effect of the enchantment.”

Rowan frowns. “That’s not a thing.”

“How would you know?” I gesture animatedly to Rapunzel. “I’m telling you: he bewitched her, and I was standing too close, and it somehow affected me as well.”

“If that’s true, then why am I not affected?” Crossing his arms, Rowan gives me an exasperated look. “Next, you’ll be accusing him of being a Dragon in disguise.” He sighs. “Besides, our kind are immune to the direct effects of magic, remember?”

Doubt begins to creep in. My brother does have a point. What if jealousy is clouding my judgement? What if I’m being ridiculous? Still... no one could out-charm a fox without some form of sorcery. Could they? “Maybe his magic is so strong, he found a way around this?”

Rowan pinches the bridge of his nose. “And what, pray tell, do you think we should do about this very real and not at all made-up magical situation?”

“There’s only one remedy.”

“Ren.” Rowan sighs as he gives me the look. “What is it? I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“I need to go rescue my fated one.”

“Rescue her?”

“She’s been enchanted,” I point out. “She probably doesn’t even know her own name at this point.”

My brother groans. “Ren—”

“A spell like that probably has some sort of range on it.” I frown, trying to figure out how far that might be. “If I can get her far enough away from Theron, the enchantment will break, and she’ll remember she’s in love with me.”

“Do you have any proof of that theory?”

“No, but doesn’t it make sense?”

He stares at me, and I take that as agreement.

Across the garden, Theron leans in and kisses the back of Rapunzel’s hand and then winks.

She smiles brightly at him, and I snap. I’ve definitely seen enough.

“Stay here,” I tell him.

“Oh no,” Rowan mutters. “Here we go.”

Ignoring him, I drop into a crouch and sneak along the garden wall like a predator.

“Take care of Finik while we’re gone.”

“Where are you going?” he whispers.

“I’m going to save Rapunzel... take her far enough away from here to break the spell Theron has her under,” I reply, voice low so as not to be overheard by anyone but

him.

“Are you seriously going to kidnap your mate?”

“It’s not kidnapping,” I whisper back. “It’s strategic relocation.”

“Ren, this is crazy,” he hisses. “Get back here!”

As soon as Theron is out of sight, I start toward Rapunzel, slinking in the shadows as I position myself behind her. If she’s under a spell, I can’t risk her alerting the Stag Prince of my intention to take her away from his influence.

Lightning fast, I hook my arm around her waist and pull her against me as I clamp a hand over her mouth, worried the effects of Theron’s spell will make her call out to him.

“Shhh,” I whisper in her ear. “It’s me.”

She stiffens and then relaxes. Satisfied that his enchantment won’t make her yell for him, I remove my hand from over her mouth. “Ren?” She turns to face me, confused. “What are you doing?”

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“I’m going to shift, and I need you to climb onto my back.”

“Why?”

“I can’t explain right now. But it’s imperative that you come with me.”

She searches my face. “All right.”

Taking a small step back, the transformation ripples down my spine, twisting bones and sinew in an instant, fur replacing skin as my paws dig into the soil.

I lower myself to the ground and Rapunzel climbs onto my back without hesitation.

“Hold tight to me,” I speak through the mind link, and then bolt into the trees. We race through the castle gardens, over the hedge, past the stone walls, and out into the wild forest beyond.

CHAPTER 48

RAPUNZEL

The wind whips through my hair as Ren races away from the gardens. My hands are fisted in the thick fur of his neck, my long braid trailing behind me like a banner.

“Ren!” I shout, breathless. “Where are we going?”

“Away from Prince Theron,” his voice hums in my mind.

“Why?”

Instead of answering, he sprints faster, weaving through the trees, leaving the castle far behind us.

Ren finally stops when we reach a clearing. A hidden glade with a gentle stream, lined with weeping willows. He moves beneath the closest one. The long branches hang like a silken curtain, shielding us from the outside world.

He lowers himself, and I slide off his back. In a whirl of wind and scattered leaves, he shifts back into his two-legged form. With his shifter ability, he conjures the appearance of pants, but his upper body is bare, revealing his broad shoulders, the thick bands of muscle that wrap around his arms and the sharply sculpted contours of his abdomen and chest.

He turns to me, amber eyes blazing. “Do you love Theron?”

I blink at him. “What?”

He takes a step closer, his jaw tight as he asks me again. “Do. You. Love. Theron?”

“No... I mean, yes, but only as a friend,” I reply, flustered. “Not romantically.”

“Thank the gods.” He breathes out a sigh of relief. “I knew I was right.”

“About what?”

“That you were bewitched,” he replies matter-of-factly.

My head jerks back. “What are you talking about?”

“I believe Theron cast a spell upon you. A dark enchantment to woo you into his arms.”

“Ren...”

“He conjured a flower for you,” he adds. “A classic sign of a bewitchment spell.”

“It was a rose.”

“Exactly. And no doubt made of sorcery... probably laced with illusion and moon-magic, or...” He waves a dismissive hand. “Whatever magic wielders use to create such spells.”

“I don’t understand.” I frown. “Why exactly do you think he bewitched me?”

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“Because I was resolved to hate him.” He shakes his head. “Determined to loathe his very existence. But then I met him, and I found myself thinking he’s a likeable male—a good person.” He pauses. “He charmed me, Rapunzel. And I’m a fox. We are literally known for being charming. So, tell me: how does a Stag outcharm a Fox?”

“Did you ever think that maybe you just liked him?” I offer.

“That’s how I know it’s a spell,” he counters. “Because why in the seven hells would I actually like my rival for your affections?”

I stop short of rolling my eyes. “He’s not your rival, Ren. You are the only one I want.”

His ears perk up, his expression a mixture of disbelief and hope. “I... am?”

I cup his face with both hands. “I told Theron about my feelings for you, and he has accepted it.”

“You did?” He frowns. “But... he seemed so happy. Why was he not upset?”

“Because we are good friends,” I explain. “We have been best friends since we were young. So, our marriage was arranged, and it would have been one of convenience and mutual respect, but not of love.”

“Truly?”

“Oh, Ren. You have nothing to worry about.”

“I... don’t?” he gives me a skeptical look.

“No, you ridiculously jealous Fox.”

A sly smirk curls his mouth. “I think you meant to say, ‘ridiculouslyhandsomeFox.’”

“Of course.” I laugh. “My handsome and charming Fox Prince.”

The smile slips from his face as his expression turns serious. “There’s something I must say.”

“What is it?”

“I’m so sorry I broke your trust.” Regret fills his foxfire eyes. “I hurt you and it kills me knowing that I’ve caused you so much pain.”

He clenches his jaw. “I know I’ve no right to ask for your forgiveness, but if you will let me, I’ll spend the rest of my life endeavoring to be worthy of you.” Sadness reflects in his gaze as he touches my face. “I am yours, Rapunzel, and I have been from the very start... even if you are not mine.”

Happiness blooms in my chest. Stretching up on my toes, I wrap my arms around his neck. “And I am yours as well, my charming Fox Prince.”

He stares at me in shock a moment before a handsome smile spreads across his face. Gathering me in his arms, he captures my mouth in a searing kiss.

“I love you, Rapunzel,” he breathes the words into my mouth.

His hands are everywhere, exploring the curves of my body as his lips mesh repeatedly with mine, kissing me like a man possessed.

Pleasure spirals through me with every stroke of his tongue against my own.

He growls low in arousal as I run my fingers through his hair, brushing the sensitive tips of his fox ears.

“Tell me again that you are mine,” he whispers between kisses. “My beautiful amira.”

My heart pounds as I melt against him. “I’m yours, Ren. Completely.”

His grip tightens as if he’s afraid to let go. And as he deepens our kiss, I realize that I don’t want him to. Not now. Not ever.

CHAPTER 49

REN

She chooses me. I am hers and she is mine. My mate, my fated one, my amira. Holding her close, sensations threaten to overwhelm me. I’m drowning in her taste, her scent, and the small desperate sounds she makes as I curl my tongue around hers, deepening our kiss.

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A soft moan escapes her as I cup her breast through the fabric of her dress. With trembling fingers, I unfasten her gown. The delicate fabric slips from her shoulders and pools around her feet.

My lips part as she stands bare before me. My love. My mate. My fated one. My Rapunzel.

I allow the illusion of my clothing to fall away, revealing myself to her in return. Her gaze travels slowly over my form, cheeks flushing crimson as her eyes settle on my staff. It's erect and painfully hard as it extends from my body.

Tenderly, I cup her chin, lifting her lovely eyes back to mine. "You are beautiful," I whisper. "Perfect."

Slowly, tentatively, Rapunzel reaches out and trails her fingers along my chest, down my abdomen, making my muscles clench with need.

She brushes her fingertips along my hardened length, before wrapping her hand around it. I bite back a growl of arousal as liquid beads on the tip of my staff. I want her so much it is maddening. When she brushes her thumb across the crown, fire roars through my veins.

My knot begins to expand beneath her gentle explorations. It's agony and bliss rolled into one, my body trembling with the force of my desire.

She takes a small step closer, and her gaze holds mine as she cups the back of my neck and pulls my lips back down to hers in a tender kiss, full of longing.

I lower us both to the ground, covering her. She's so soft beneath me, her body arching against mine as if she feels the same raw, aching need pulsing through my blood. The crown of my stav bumps against her entrance, but I hold myself back.

I want our first mating to be gentle. I don't want to cause her any pain. Although I've never been with anyone before, I've heard it's important to ensure she finds her pleasure first. It will make it easier for her to take my stav and my knot.

I trail a series of kisses along her jaw and down the graceful column of her throat, tasting the sweet salt of her skin. When I trace my tongue over the hollow at the base of her neck, I feel the fluttering pulse beneath.

"Ren," she breathes. "Feels so good."

I breathe deep of her delicate scent, kissing along her collarbone and then down to her breast. She gasps as I close my mouth over the stiff peak, clutching at my shoulders.

Her entire body is so soft and giving. And I love the small sounds she makes as I tease my tongue over the hardened bead.

"You're perfect," I murmur against her skin as I move to her other breast to give it the same attention as the first. "And all mine."

Worshipping her, I trail my lips and my tongue across her ribs, and the soft curve of her abdomen. When I move even lower, I lift my head. "Open for me, my Rapunzel," I whisper.

She parts her thighs, and I settle between them. She shivers as I press a tender kiss to the inside of her left thigh and then another, slowly working my way up.

"Ren," she whispers. "I don't know what to do. I've never—"

“May I kiss you here? I wish to taste you on my tongue.”

Softly biting her lower lip, she nods.

I dip my head between her thighs and drag my tongue through her already slick folds, groaning in ecstasy. Her taste is sweet, like honey, and I already want more.

When I reach the small bundle of nerves at the top, she moans and arches against me. Her fingers tighten in my hair, her thighs trembling around me as I brush my tongue over the sensitive pearl of flesh.

“Ren, please,” she breathes. “I need more.”

Her words unleash something inside me as I lose myself in her taste, her scent, and all the small sounds she makes as she unravels beneath me.

“Feels so good, Ren,” she breathes. “Don’t stop.”

Carefully, I slip a finger inside her, feeling her tighten around me.

My inner fox howls as the need to claim her roars through my veins. I am desperate to sink deep into her warm, wet heat. To knot her, to mark her... to make her mine.

When I slip a second finger into her channel, she moans. “Please, Ren. Please.”

Gently, I pump my fingers into her channel as I concentrate my tongue over the sensitive pearl of flesh at the cleft. She arches against me, crying out my name as she finds her release.

I keep my mouth on her, coaxing every bit of her pleasure until she finally collapses back on the soft moss beneath us.

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Slowly, I move up her body, savoring the taste of her still on my lips and the way she looks up at me in wonder. “I’ve never—” she breathes. “That was beautiful, Ren.”

Gripping my length, I drag the tip through her slick folds, groaning as I fight the instinct to thrust deep and knot her. I meet her gaze evenly. “Are you sure you want this?”

“Yes,” she breathes. “I want you, Ren. Make me yours.”

Intense need claws at my control as I notch myself at her entrance. Her gaze holds mine as I slowly push inside her.

She’s so tight, I grit my fangs, worried that I’ll spill before I’m fully sheathed. Breathing hard, I press my forehead against hers, fighting for restraint as I slowly sink deeper. This is the most exquisite torture I’ve ever known.

A deep growl vibrates in my chest as her warm, wet heat envelops my stav like a tightly fisted glove. Every nerve ending in my body is on fire, my inner fox demanding that I claim her, mark her, and bind her to me so that every male will know she is mine.

“I love you,” she whispers as she touches my face. “I choose you, Ren.”

She arches up into me as I push through her maidenhead, and the world shatters into light.

RAPUNZEL

My breath catches as a sharp flare of pain ripples through me when Ren breaks through my barrier, my body instinctively tightening.

He stills. “Are you all right?” His entire body trembles with restraint, his breathing ragged as he stares down at me in concern. “Rapunzel?”

When I don’t answer right away, he starts to pull back, but I tighten my legs around him. “Stay,” I barely manage. “I just... need a moment to adjust.”

The pain ebbs, melting into something new. Something delicious. My earlier discomfort replaced by an intense fullness as my body yields to his invasion.

Pleasure builds as he eases deeper with small, careful thrusts, giving me time to adjust as he fills me, claiming places inside me I never knew were hollow until now.

Enveloped in his masculine scent, I love the weight of him over me. I trace my hands down his back, feeling the powerful muscles beneath his skin. Closing my eyes, I revel in the sensation of each thrust of his hips as he claims me.

He’s so strong. So perfect. And all mine.

“Look at me, Rapunzel,” he murmurs, voice low and rough. “I want to watch you as you find your release.”

I open my eyes. Moonlight filters through the willow branches, carving his body in shadows and light, highlighting the muscles of his powerful form as each stroke becomes longer and deeper.

It’s too much. Almost too much.

His fox-fire eyes are molten gold, glowing with a fierce, possessive devotion as he stares down at me. Ren slips one hand beneath my thigh, hooking under my knee and lifting it higher, opening me even wider. “Mine,” he growls as he sinks impossibly deeper.

I sob his name as pleasure ripples through me with each claiming thrust.

His every movement is worship and reverence as he creates a delicious friction between us, his thick length, dragging against places inside me that I never knew could feel so good.

Burying my fingers in his hair, I pull his mouth back down to mine in a passionate kiss. He growls, his thrusts deepening as he quickens his pace.

“Need to mark you,” he rasps, baring his fangs. “Need to claim you as my mate.”

“I’m yours,” I whisper.

A strange pressure builds in my channel, tightening almost to the point of pain, but not quite. “What is that?”

Ren grips my hip, surging deep with rolling thrusts. “My knot,” he rasps.

He closes his mouth over my neck, and I feel a sharp sting of pain as his fangs pierce my skin, giving me his claiming mark. But the pain is quickly replaced by pleasure as his knot locks us together, and I cry out his name as a powerful climax ripples through me.

My release triggers his own. “Mine!” he roars. Heat erupts deep within, in thick pulsing bursts as he fills me with the delicious warmth of his seed.

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He shudders once more before he wraps his arms around me and pulls us both onto our sides. He's still knotted inside me as he seals his mouth over mine in a searing kiss.

When he finally pulls back, he cups my cheek and rests his forehead gently to mine. "You are my heart, Rapunzel."

Tears prick my eyes as I touch his face. "And you are mine, Ren."

He skims his nose along mine as a deep purring sound vibrates in his chest. "I need you again," he murmurs against my lips. "Will you take me?"

"Yes," I whisper, and he rolls me beneath him.

I cling to him as he kisses me passionately and begins to move deep inside me once more.

CHAPTER 51

REN

It is nearly dawn and although I know we should return to the castle, I cannot make myself move just yet. Rapunzel is sprawled across my chest, her silver hair like a river of moonlight, her bare skin glowing faintly under the dawning sun that filters through the willow's sweeping branches.

My heart clenches. She's breathtaking, perfect, and all mine. Just as I am hers.

Fierce possessiveness fills me as I gaze at the claiming mark on her neck. Even though I know Prince Theron has relinquished any claim to her, I love that she carries my mark and my scent. Every male will know she is my mate.

She shivers and when I pull her closer, I love how she nestles into my chest. Trailing my hand down her delicate form, a low rumble of contentment vibrates in my chest as I press a tender kiss to her temple.

“You are my heart,” I murmur into her hair. “My beautiful amira.”

“I’m yours, and you are mine.” She gives me a lovely smile. “My handsome and charming fox prince.”

Although we made love most of the night, I already want her again, but it will have to wait. Far in the distance, beyond the trees, the stone towers of the castle rise like sentinels against the morning sky.

“We should return to the castle before anyone realizes you’re missing. And before Finik eats your family out of house and home,” I tease.

She laughs, and my heart fills with warmth. As I gaze at my mate, I send a silent prayer of thanks to the gods for placing her in my path. She is everything to me and I never want to be without her.

Rapunzel rides on my back in my fox form, her hands curled into the thick ruff of fur along my neck as I pad silently through the misty castle gardens. When we reach her balcony, I shift back into my two-legged form and lift her into my arms.

“Hold onto me,” I whisper.

Clutching my shoulders tightly, she releases a startled squeak as I leap up onto her

balcony.

As soon as we land, I set her on her feet. She turns to me with wide eyes. “I didn’t know you could jump that far.”

I smile. “It’s one of the many perks of being mated to a Fox shifter.”

Rapunzel laughs. “You’re impossible.”

I give her a sly grin. “And all yours.”

She stretches up onto her toes and brushes her mouth to my own. “All mine,” she whispers against my lips. “Forever.”

My heart is full as I pull her against me, curling my tongue around hers and deepening our kiss.

When we finally pull back, she looks up at me. “We should go speak with my family.”

“Yes. We will let them know we’re now mated.”

“Maybe leave that detail out,” she says, her cheeks turning red. “And instead tell them we’re betrothed.”

I open my mouth to ask why, but she continues. “My parents expect us to wait until after our wedding to consummate our marriage.”

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I nod. “And I need to find my brother.” I think of Rowan and how he tried to stop me from kidnapping her yesterday when I was convinced she’d been bewitched. He’s probably been worried all night. “I’ll fetch Rowan.”

“And I’ll get my family,” she says. “We’ll meet in the study, where we can tell everyone at once.”

“I see you there shortly,” I vow.

Unable to help myself, I pull her into my arms for another kiss. I’m so happy; I can hardly believe she is mine. When we finally pull away, I leap over the balcony railing and cut across the gardens to the guest quarters to find my brother.

When I reach our chambers, I find Rowan sprawled haphazardly across his bed, hair tousled, a sheet tangled around his waist. He is normally a very sound sleeper, but it looks as though he tossed and turned all night.

Finik is perched comfortably on the pillow beside him, nibbling with great concentration on a massive spread of cheese and crackers. Crumbs are everywhere on the pillow, the sheets, and even a few in Rowan’s hair.

I smother a laugh. “You two have become fast friends it seems.”

Rowan groggily blinks at me, rubbing his face as he sits up in bed. “It’s about time you showed back up,” he chastises. “Wherehave you been? I was worried all—” He stops abruptly, nostrils flaring, his eyes widening. “You mated her?” he blurts out.

I tip up my chin. “She chose me.”

“Yes, but what about Prince Theron?” he asks, alarmed. “Gods above, Ren. They’re officially betrothed. He searched for her for three years. He’s going to murder you.”

“He already knows.”

“That you claimed her?” his voice rises in pitch.

“Not exactly,” I admit. “But he knows she loves me, and he accepted it.”

His brows shoot up to his forehead. “He did?”

“Yes. We’re going to tell her parents today, and then we’ll have the official wedding ceremony either here or in Cambryn.”

“And you’re certain Prince Theron will not be upset?” he asks a bit hesitantly. “That he won’t challenge you to a duel or start some sort of blood feud because you stole his intended?”

“It’s going to be fine, Rowan. I promise.”

He stares at me like he can’t decide whether to congratulate me or not. “I certainly hope you’re right,” he grumbles. “I’d rather not have to go to war with the Stag Shifter kingdom because you stole the crown prince’s betrothed.”

“You worry too much, Brother.” I chuckle. “No one is going to war with anyone.”

His lips tilt up in a smile. “Then I’m happy for you, Ren. Truly.”

“Thank you.” I embrace him warmly. “Now, what do you say we go speak with her

family to give them the good news?”

He nods.

I glance at Finik, rolling blissfully in the cracker crumbs on the pillow. I laugh as he sits up and looks at me, nose twitching with his little cheeks puffed out, stuffed full of food.

“Well.” I chuckle. “It looks like somebody already had a feast this morning.”

“I’ll say,” Rowan says in mock irritation. “He woke me up at the crack of dawn, demanding breakfast.”

“Well, you’d best get used to it, Brother,” I grin as Finik climbs onto my shoulder. “He’ll be coming home with us too.”

Rowan purses his lips, but it’s easy to see the fondness in his eyes as he looks at the squirrel. “Wonderful,” he drawls sarcastically. “Because we definitely need another demanding animal companion.” He shakes his head. “Between Finik and Sir Whiskers, I’ll never have a decent night’s sleep again.”

I chuckle, about to toss back another teasing remark when a sudden wave of dread crashes into me. The smile slips from my face as sharp-edge fear rips through me.

“Ren, what is it?” Rowan’s playful expression shifts instantly into alarm. “Are you all right?”

Panic spikes through me when I realize it isn’t mine.

“It's Rapunzel. She's in trouble.”

Without waiting for another word, I bolt from the room. Finik clings to my shoulder, and Rowan follows closely behind me as I race down the hall, desperate to reach my mate.

CHAPTER 52

RAPUNZEL

I step into the throne room, my footsteps echoing against the polished marble floors. Sunlight filters through stained glass windows, casting colorful patterns over the elegant tapestries and high vaulted ceilings.

My parents are seated on their gilded thrones, and Tristan and Theron are standing before them.

My mother's head snaps to mine and she smiles brightly. “Rapunzel, we're so glad you're here. Theron was just telling us the wonderful news.”

Confused, I glance at Theron. His expression is strangely distant, his eyes dull and unfocused as they meet mine.

“What news?” I ask.

Father practically beams at me. “That you two wish to wed immediately.”

“What?” Shocked, I look at Theron. “We’re not—”

I stop abruptly as a flash of purple sparks in his eyes. Fear freezes my veins like ice. He’s under a spell.

Without warning, the throne room doors burst open. Horror fills me as Drusilla strides in, using her magic to slam the heavy wooden doors closed behind her with a deafening boom.

Lightning fast, my parents and Tristan jolt to their feet, swords ringing out as Tristan and the guards draw their blades.

Raising my arms, I call upon my power as well, but Drusilla and Theron are faster.

Theron rushes my brother, knocking the sword from his grip and twisting his arm, immobilizing him in a headlock. Wisps of purple magic spiral around Drusilla’s fingers. With a flick of her wrists, thick vines burst from the marble floor, wrapping around our arms and legs, binding us in place.

She sends an arc of magic toward the guards, and they straighten rigidly, their eyes glowing purple as she directs them to march obediently out into the hallway. They step outside, and Drusilla seals the doors shut with a shimmering barrier of dark magic.

“How did you get in here, Drusilla?” I demand, voice shaking.

Her eyes glitter with malicious delight as she changes her appearance to look like a Deer Shifter—horns sprouting from her head. “The royal guards let me in,” she says mockingly. “How could they refuse a loyal servant of Prince Theron who had traveled all the way from Sylvalis with a message for him?”

She flashes a sinister grin as she morphs back into her Goblin form, with lavender skin and hair, sharp, black claws, and piercing silver eyes.

“Please,” my father pleads. “We'll give you whatever you want, just let—”

Drusilla flicks her wrists, and thick vines gag both my mother and father, silencing their pleas.

She turns her cold gaze to me. “No need to fret, my dear. Soon, you will have forgotten all about this place, and things will be as they were before.” A cruel smile forms on her lips. “Just you and me, and no one to interrupt us while I find a way to take back what is mine.”

“You won’t get away with this,” Tristan snarls, struggling against his bindings. “I’ll hunt you down, and—”

Drusilla silences him with another wave of her hand, his words choking off sharply. “How noble.” Her expression darkens. “But you can’t hunt me if you’re dead.”

“No!” Fear slices through my heart. “Please, Drusilla, spare them. I’ll go willingly, I swear it.”

“Oh, I’m sure you would,” she says mockingly. “But do you think they’d ever stop looking for you?”

She narrows her eyes. “It’s the reason I waited all those years before I finally took you. And as a servant, I had access to you as much as I needed, testing various spells as you slept, trying to regain my lost powers.”

Her eyes snap to Theron. “But then, you were going to marry him. And I couldn’t risk that he would take you to his kingdom and leave me behind. So, when I saw a

chance, I took it.”

She growls low in her throat. “It should have been simple. I thought everyone would assume you were dead. But they never gave up.” Her gaze travels over Theron and my brother. “Your Fox Prince will be a problem too if I don’t take care of him now. And I cannot allow loose ends,” she says darkly. “Not this time.”

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Panic claws at my throat, as I struggle against my bindings. With my hands bound, I cannot summon my magic.

Drusilla suddenly stiffens, nostrils flaring. Her dark eyes snap toward the sealed doors. “It seems your Fox is already here.”

CHAPTER 53

REN

Rowan and I race down the hallway as I allow the bond to guide me, following the source of my distress. Fear prickles down my spine, when we reach the throne room.

Two guards stand rigidly at attention on either side of the doors. Their eyes glow an eerie purple, unblinking and empty as they stare straight ahead, statues frozen mid-watch.

Rowan glances at the throne room and I nod. He reaches for the door handle. As soon as his hand touches the smooth metal, one of the guards snaps his head toward my brother.

Lightning fast, the guard charges forward. His eyes swirl with a purple glow as he attacks with inhuman speed and strength, sending Rowan flying back. He slams into the opposite wall with a sickening thud while the guard returns to his post, with the same blank stare, as if nothing happened.

“Rowan!” I rush to him, dropping to my knees at his side.

He's breathing, thank the gods, but he's out cold. Gritting my teeth, I look back at the doorway, now glowing with pulsing with dark magic.

Something or someone has enchanted the door and the guards. Dread fills me. Deep down, I already know the truth. This is the work of Drusilla. It must be.

Reaching up, I close my hand over the charm around my neck—the green gemstone pendant that allows me to cross nearly any ward.

The magical barrier hums angrily, crackling purple energy flaring as I step closer.

“I don't know what we'll find inside,” I whisper to Finik, still perched on my shoulder. “You should wait out here.”

Instead of climbing down, he digs his tiny claws into my skin and looks at the door, his dark eyes narrowing.

“All right, then,” I mutter. Taking a deep breath, I step forward and push the doors open.

The gemstone pendant glows bright, and heat washes over me as I slip through the magic barrier.

As soon as we step into the doorway, the sharp scent of licorice fills my nostrils, and I grit my fangs.

I was right. The Goblin witch is here.

The veil of dark magic falls away, and anger blisters through me as I enter the room.

Rapunzel's parents are bound tightly to their thrones, thick vines twisted around their

arms and legs, leaves covering their mouths to silence them.

Tristan is tied to a pillar, furious eyes blazing as he struggles against the bindings.

My stomach drops like a stone when I see Rapunzel. Her wrists are bound behind her back, eyes wide with fear. Beside her, gripping her arm firmly, is Theron, his eyes glowing with an unnatural purple light.

He's under the witch's control.

"Ren," Rapunzel breathes, desperation in her voice.

Fury roars through my veins. I'll end the witch for daring to harm my mate.

"If you come any closer, Fox," Drusilla says with a mocking smile, "I will paint the floor with her blood."

Without hesitation, Theron draws a blade and presses it against Rapunzel's slender throat.

Panic tightens my chest as I stand helplessly before my mate. "If you kill her, Drusilla, you will risk losing any chance of regaining your lost powers."

"Perhaps it's a chance I should take," she says darkly.

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Baring my fangs, I glare at Drusilla. I curl my hands into fists, my claws lengthening when suddenly, I realize that I'm free. She hasn't bound me as she has the others.

My gaze sweeps over Rapunzel and her family before settling on Theron. The Goblin must be weak. Using so much magic must be draining her powers.

"Let them go," I snarl. "This ends now."

Drusilla laughs, eyes glittering with disdain. "Or what, Fox prince? You'll charm me to death?"

My mind races, struggling to formulate a plan. I cannot allow her to take Rapunzel. Not again.

Sudden movement catches my eye. Behind the throne, I see Finik. I hadn't even realized he'd climbed down from my shoulder.

The brave little squirrel is carefully creeping toward Tristan. Quietly, he scurries up the column and begins gnawing at the vines around his wrists, unnoticed by the Goblin.

Hope flares in my chest. Tristan's gaze meets mine, and I flick my eyes toward Theron and Rapunzel.

Once Tristan is free, he can tackle the Stag Prince away from his sister while I handle the witch.

Understanding immediately, Tristan gives me the barest nod.

Now, I just need to distract Drusilla long enough for Finik to finish chewing through the vines.

“I hate to ruin your dramatic moment.” Sarcasm laces my tone. “Evil witch, dark plans... standard villain stuff. But honestly, have you ever considered that maybe you're going about this the wrong way? Have you ever thought to yourself that maybe there's something else you could try to regain your powers?”

Drusilla narrows her eyes, suspicion flaring in their dark depths. “Like what, exactly?”

“Rapunzel and I found someone who could remove your magic from her and transfer it back to you.”

“And just why would you do such a thing?” she asks, unconvinced.

“Because we knew you'd never leave us alone until you got your powers back. We didn't want to live the rest of our lives constantly having to look over our shoulders for you.”

She eyes me skeptically. “And how exactly would you restore my magic to me?”

“It's an ancient spell. Which is probably why you've never heard of it,” I add. “But it must be performed by a very skilled witch. We were going to leave tomorrow to travel to—”

“You expect me to believe this?” She scoffs. “Lies won't save your beloved princess.”

“I’m not lying.” I meet her gaze evenly. “Let me prove it to you, and we can both have what we want. You can reclaim your powers, and I can have my mate.”

Behind her, Finik works furiously, the vines beginning to loosen around Tristan as the squirrel gnaws at them with his tiny teeth.

The Goblin sneers, purple eyes flashing dangerously. “If you are lying, I will kill you.”

“Promises, promises,” I reply, keeping my voice steady even as my pulse pounds in my ears. “I’m a Fox, not an Ogre, Drusilla. I’m smart enough to know better than to cross a witch.”

The vines around Tristan sag, and he gives a fierce nod, signaling that he’s ready.

Rage blisters through me. The witch doesn’t realize it yet, but she is already dead. I will end her today. This is the last time that she will ever threaten my mate.

CHAPTER 54

RAPUNZEL

Without warning, Tristan slams into Theron with a fierce roar, knocking him away from me, and breaking the grip on my arm. Across the way, Ren swiftly shifts into his Fox form, his copper fur gleaming under the fractured sunlight as he lunges at Drusilla.

The witch snarls, face twisted with fury, hurling chairs, vases, and debris toward Ren with sharp flicks of her wrist. Power crackles across her fingers, but it’s weak and sputtering like dying embers.

Ren moves with fluid and lethal grace, dodging her attacks as shattered wood and porcelain scatter across the marble floor around him.

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My parents are still tied to their thrones, their eyes wide as they watch the violence unfolding around them.

Drusilla screams in frustration, commanding thick, thorny vines to erupt through the polished marble. My heart seizes as they lash out, twisting hungrily toward Ren.

Effortlessly, he snaps the vines between his sharp fangs, their severed ends falling lifelessly at his paws.

Desperation fills me as I strain against my bindings, the rough vines scraping my skin. Finik scampers toward me and begins frantically gnawing at the thick vegetation. "Please, hurry," I tell him as I watch Theron and Tristan, each of them fighting to gain the upper hand.

My brother swings out at Theron, but he twists away at the last moment. With a menacing growl, Theron charges Tristan, slamming him back against the stone column.

The impact echoes like a thunderclap, and I scream as my brother crumples to the ground, motionless. "Tristan!"

Theron's form ripples as he shifts into a massive Stag, his sharp antlers glinting dangerously as he swings his head toward Ren. Glowing purple magic swirls in his eyes, replacing their normal vibrant blue color.

Horror fills me as he lowers his head, and charges at Ren with a deadly intent, hooves thundering against marble, vibrating the floor beneath us.

Ren spins to face him, and then leaps out of the way, narrowly avoiding Theron's antlers. Instead of attacking, he calls out. "Theron, stop! I don't want to hurt you!"

"Please, Theron!" I cry out. "You must fight her control!"

Theron stills and looks back at me. The purple glow fades from his eyes as they return to blue. He blinks in confusion. "Rapunzel?"

Drusilla snarls, sending a fresh surge of dark magic into him. It hits his shoulder, and his eyes turn eerie violet a moment before he spins back to Ren.

"Theron, no!" I yell as he stomps his hooves, readying to attack. Lowering his head, he rushes toward Ren.

In a blur of red fur, Ren dodges his attack and slams into Theron's side. He knocks the Stag Prince off balance, but he quickly recovers.

Finik's frantic chewing finally severs the last strand of my bindings. The vines fall away from my wrist just as Theron charges again toward Ren.

Power surges through my veins as I raise my hands. My palms heat as magic crackles between my fingers like lightning. I thrust my hands forward, commanding vines to burst from beneath the marble floor.

They surge upward, thick and relentless, wrapping around Drusilla, cutting off her startled scream as she drops to the ground, writhing as they continue to tighten, covering her. After a moment, she finally goes still.

Fear stops my heart, and I watch in horror as Theron's antlers spear into Ren's side.

An agonized howl rips from Ren's throat as he collapses onto the marble floor.

“Ren!”

Ren and Theron both shift back into their human forms. Panting heavily, Theron stares down at him stunned, confusion etched in his features.

Pushing past him, I drop to my knees beside Ren. Dark blood seeps steadily from his torso, pooling beneath him. It’s warm and slick as I press my trembling hands to his wounds, desperately trying to stop the bleeding.

His eyes flutter weakly, as he struggles to remain conscious. The throne room doors burst open, royal guards surging inside, weapons drawn. “Find a healer!” I yell.

Several of them rush back out into the hallway, while a few of the others free my parents. Out of the corner of my eye, I see my brother sit up, groaning as the guards help him stand.

“Ren, please.” Panic claws at my chest as I gaze down at my beloved. “Help is coming. Please, my charming Fox Prince. You need to stay awake.”

“You think I’m charming?” he rasps, a faint teasing grin on his mouth.

“And handsome,” I add, sniffing as I fight back tears.

His amber eyes spark with amusement, and he smiles a moment before it falls away into a grimace of pain.

“Just hold on, Ren,” I barely manage. “A healer is coming.”

Slowly, he reaches a trembling hand up to touch my face. “Rapunzel,” he whispers, pain shadowing his features. “I wish we’d had more time. I don’t want to leave you.”

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“Don’t speak like that.” My breath hitches. “You can’t die, Ren. I love you. You cannot leave me like this.”

His gaze holds mine as he brushes his thumb over my cheek. “My beautiful amira. You are my heart.”

His eyes close and his head tips back, his hand falling away as he goes still in my arms.

CHAPTER 55

REN

My eyes slowly flutter open, and I blink, feeling disoriented. I’m lying in a bed in an unfamiliar room. Turning my head, I see Rowan, quietly sitting in a chair beside me.

“You’re awake.” He smiles. “Thank the gods. How do you feel?”

“I’m fine.”

Finik scrambles up onto the bed, whiskers twitching as his dark eyes meet mine. “I’m glad to see you, my little friend.” I stroke his fur. “You were very brave.”

He makes a small purring sound as he nuzzles my hand.

I glance around, but don’t see my beloved anywhere nearby. “Where’s Rapunzel?” I try to sit up, but sharp pain ripples through my side, and I fall back onto the bed with

an agonized groan. “Is she all right?”

“She’s fine,” Rowan reassures me. “She stepped out to change into a fresh set of clothes. You’ve been asleep for two days.”

“Can you help me sit up?”

Rowan nods, and a sharp hiss of pain escapes me as he helps me prop myself up on the pillows. I glance down at the thick bandage on the left side of my abdomen.

“It’s almost fully healed,” Rowan says. He gives me a hesitant look. “But the healer says it may leave a slight scar.”

Painful memories resurface of my betrothed recoiling from me in disgust when she saw the scar on my face. The familiar ache settles deep in my chest.

“Ren?” Rapunzel’s soft voice breaks through my dark thoughts. “Thank the gods you’re awake.” She throws her arms around my neck, as she rains soft, urgent kisses all over my face, including over my old scar. “I was so worried about you.”

My heart clenches as her touch banishes the dark shadows of my past. Her love is steady and unwavering. She sees every scar, every flaw... and still, she chooses me.

Someone clears their throat, interrupting us. I glance over her shoulder and see her brother, Tristan, standing in the doorway. He smiles warmly. “Glad to see you’re awake.”

Before I can answer, Theron strides confidently into the room, the regal Stag prince looking every bit the noble warrior. He pauses near the foot of the bed and flashes a warm smile at Rapunzel.

A spike of jealousy immediately shoots through me, and my inner Fox bristles at the knowledge that she was once betrothed to him. But when I glance at my mark on her neck, it appeases the primal possessiveness deep within. She chose me. Not him.

Sighing heavily, I resolve to accept him. He is her best friend, and he searched for Rapunzel all these years. That type of loyalty and devotion deserves respect. And I can now more readily give it since she is mine, just as much as I am hers.

His gaze flicks back to me, respectful but wary as he eyes my bandaged wounds—injuries he gave me when he was under Drusilla’s spell. “I wanted to apologize for—”

“There is no need,” I tell him. “You were not yourself.”

He dips his chin. “You look... better than the last time I saw you. I’m glad.”

“Thank you, Theron.” My lips twitch. I can’t resist teasing him. “It turns out almost dying is less enjoyable than it appears. I don’t recommend it.”

He chuckles quietly, clearly surprised by my humor. “Noted.” He extends his hand to me, and I grasp his forearm as he grips mine in return. “I’m indebted to you, Fox. Thank you for saving my best friend.” He offers a faint smile. “And congratulations on your mating.”

I dip my chin. “You are welcome to visit us in Cambryn whenever you wish,” I tell him.

He darts a glance at Rapunzel and nods. “I would like that.”

She gives me a smile as bright as the sun, and I have never seen anything so beautiful before.

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Theron looks at my brother. “Perhaps it’s time Sylvalis sought a treaty with your kingdom.”

“I believe our parents would be agreeable to that,” Rowan replies.

As he and Theron walk away, hope fills my chest. The future feels open and bright—full of love, peace, endless possibilities, and long years spent by Rapunzel’s side.

CHAPTER 56

REN

My heart thrums wildly, excitement and nervousness spiraling through me as we stand beneath the glowing foxfire arch in the middle of the woods, just outside Cambryn castle. Moonlight filters through the trees, bathing the clearing in a silver light.

The scent of moss and pine trees fills the air, blending with the delicate floral fragrance of burning candles that encircle us as we stand before a priestess to recite our vows.

I stare deep into Rapunzel’s lovely blue eyes as I take her hands. She is the most beautiful female I’ve ever seen.

I’m so focused on my mate that I barely register our families and friends seated nearby, their smiles and quiet tears of happiness a gentle backdrop to this perfect

moment.

“I swear myself to you,” I state solemnly. “You are my heart, Rapunzel, and I am yours forever.”

“You are my heart, Ren,” she vows in reply. “I swear myself to you, and I am yours forever.”

The cheering from our gathered families fades into the background as I capture her mouth in a claiming kiss.

When we finally pull back, I brush a stray tendril of hair behind her ears, and cup her cheek. “You are everything to me, my amira,” I whisper for her ears alone.

Softly, she bites her lower lip as a warm flush spreads over her cheeks. “I love you, my charming Fox Prince.”

After the ceremony, Rapunzel and I stand together beneath the sprawling branches of an ancient oak. We speak with our guests while we wait for the sun to set before the mating chase begins.

Laughter and music drift through the air from the nearby festivities, creating a comforting backdrop.

A familiar, deep voice draws my attention. “Prince Ren.”

Turning, I see the Wolf Shifter, Prince Malak, approaching, his human mate, Princess Luna, at his side. I met them when I was searching for the tower. “I’m so glad you could come, my friends.”

My nostrils flare and I glance at Luna’s belly. She is not showing yet, but my fox

senses already detect their unborn pup. “You are expecting.” I smile. “Congratulations.”

Malak loops a possessive arm around Luna’s waist and pressing a tender kiss to her temple as she smiles brightly. “Thank you.” He grins. His eyes dart to Rapunzel’s lower abdomen and he arches a questioning brow.

A slow smile spread across my face as I give him an affirmative nod.

Wolf Shifters have an even keener sense of smell than Foxes. It’s very early, and I only detected the change in her scent while we were exchanging our vows. I will tell her when we’re alone. I can hardly wait. I’m so excited for our future.

Off to the side, I notice King Caelen of the High Elves and his human mate, Queen Lyana. Finik is chittering animatedly at the Elf King as he sits on his shoulder.

Caelen’s lips twitch in amusement. High Elves are able to communicate with animals, and I wonder what Finik is telling him.

“Learning anything interesting?” I grin at Caelen as he walks over with Lyana, while Finik is still perched on his shoulder.

The High Elf King’s eyes sparkle with quiet amusement. “It seems your friend Finik has compiled a rather extensive list of grievances. Most of them revolve around your cat, Sir Whiskers.”

Just as Caelen finishes speaking, Sir Whiskers saunters over, his white fur gleaming in the fading sunlight. He looks up at the Elf King and gives an imperious meow and then fixes his gaze on Finik.

Immediately, Finik launches into a heated chittering retort, waving his tiny paws

animatedly.

Caelen chuckles. “Apparently, Sir Whiskers is accused of monopolizing the sunniest spots for his naps, deliberately grooming himself in areas Finik considers his personal space, and most egregiously—Finik claims the cat attempted a clandestine raid on his private stash of dried meat and cheese.”

Sir Whiskers meows indignantly, his tail flicking as Caelen listens carefully and nods before he looks at us to relay the cat’s message. “Whiskers insists he was merely safeguarding the food from potential thieves, and further states that as the self-appointed guardian of the palace, he deserves preferential napping rights.”

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Rapunzel bursts into laughter as she glances between our animal companions. “Who knew castle politics were so complex?” she jokes.

Queen Lyana looks up at her mate. “I love that Caelen can speak with animals. I wish you could have heard the outrage the palace horses had when the Elves decided to keep some of their Dire Wolves in the stables.”

Ren laughs. “I can only imagine.”

Caelen wraps his arm around Lyana, resting his palm lovingly over her rounded waist, heavy with their child, and presses a tender kiss to her cheek. “Even animals have their political intrigues,” he says, a hint of teasing in his voice. “It’s all rather interesting.”

Ren laughs as he glances at Whiskers and Finik. “It seems I may need to mediate a peace treaty before things escalate into full-scale warfare.”

Malak laughs heartily, giving my shoulder a friendly squeeze. “I’m happy it all worked out well for you, my friend,” he says.

Darting a glance at his own human mate, I smile at him. “And you as well.”

Now that we’ve greeted most of our guests, I’m looking forward to the chase. My mate is the most beautiful female in the world, and I cannot wait to claim her beneath the moon and the stars, in the ways of my people.

RAPUNZEL

As we greet the last of our guests, Ren leans in, a mischievous smile curving his mouth. “Are you ready for what comes next?”

I’m breathless with anticipation. When his sister first told me the details about the mating chase, I wasn’t entirely sure I believed her. But when Ren’s grandmother began to tell me the story of her wedding day to his grandfather, I realized they were telling the truth.

Apparently, most Shifters have some sort of chase involved with their bonding ceremonies. My family thinks we’re leaving for our wedding night in a cottage in the woods. If they knew what we were really going to do, I’m sure they’d find it scandalous.

I mouth a thank you to Ren’s sister as she leads them back to the castle for the wedding feast, before the chase begins. And I can’t help but notice the way Rielle smiles at my brother—Tristan—and the way he gazes at her like a lovestruck fool.

After they’re gone, I turn back to my new husband. A thrill rushes down my spine as Ren leans close, his breath hot against my ear. “Run, my beautiful mate. Run. I’m giving you a head start.”

Gathering my skirts, laughter bubbles in my throat as excitement courses through my veins. Turning swiftly, I dash into the darkness beneath the towering trees.

Moonlight illuminates my path as I weave through the forest, and my pulse quickens as the sound of Ren’s pursuit grows louder and closer.

Suddenly, strong arms wrap around my waist, sweeping me off my feet. I’m breathless and panting as Ren turns me to face him, his amber eyes blazing with

possessive hunger. “Caught you,” he growls low in arousal. “My beautiful amira.”

My heart pounds as he lowers me to the moss-covered ground. His gaze holds mine, full of desire as he extends his claws and slices away my gown, leaving me bare beneath him. A shiver runs through me as he touches my face and whispers in awe-filled reverence, “You are breathtaking.”

He captures my mouth in a searing kiss, stealing the breath from my lungs. He pulls back and trails a series of open mouth kisses down the column of my throat. His warm lips brush over my collarbone before moving lower to tease one breast, then the other, sending rippling waves of pleasure straight through me.

“Ren,” I breathe shakily, threading my fingers through his hair, urging him closer.

“I’ve waited far too long to taste you,” he whispers as he moves even lower and then parts my thighs.

He drags his tongue through my already slick folds, and I arch against him, crying out his name as sensations threaten to overwhelm me.

My body tightens as he devours me with his lips and his tongue, balanced on the edge of my desire. Without warning, waves of ecstasy crash over me, shattering me completely as my climax surges, sweeping me away into blissful oblivion.

Before I’m fully recovered, he flips me onto my stomach with effortless strength, parting my thighs once more. His powerful body covers mine, one strong arm banded tightly around my waist to hold me secure.

His other hand slips beneath me, sliding upward along my chest to gently cup my throat, tilting my head back and to the side so he can claim my mouth in a passionate, consuming kiss.

Desire coils tightly within as he pulls back and brushes his lips to my throat, directly over my mating mark. “You are mine,” he growls low in arousal. “Mine to touch. Mine to worship. Mine to love.”

A sharp sting pierces my skin as he sinks his fangs into the side of my neck, renewing the claiming mark. The pain turns into pleasure and the breath stutters from my lungs as he slowly enters me.

CHAPTER 58

REN

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My inner fox growls possessively as I renew her mating mark, the raw and primal need to claim her burning in my veins. My powerful body covers hers, as I hold her tightly to me. Gritting my fangs, I savor the delicious sensation as I sink deep into her warm, wet heat.

A low groan rumbles in my chest as her tight warmth envelops me, threatening to shatter my tenuous control. Gods, she's perfect—her inner walls gripping me like velvet, each stroke intensifying the fierce, burning need within.

My breathing is harsh and ragged, my jaw clenching painfully as I fight the desperate urge to thrust wildly, determined to prolong this pleasure and drive her to bliss first.

My gaze locks onto the fresh mating mark on her neck—the raw proof of my claim—and a surge of unbridled lust crashes through me. Leaning forward, I trace my tongue over the sensitive mark, reveling in her soft moan as she arches beneath me.

“Mine,” I growl, voice rough with barely restrained need as I thrust into her, each powerful stroke growing longer and deeper. I want to fill her so full of my seed that every male will be able to scent that she is undeniably mine, just as I am hers.

Her hips press urgently back against my thrusts as she gasps my name in a breathless plea that sends fiery pleasure roaring through my veins. My heart pounds as I balance on the edge of my control.

“Ren,” she breathes out as her inner muscles flex and quiver around my hardened length.

Panting heavily, I fight to hold back my release as she climaxes, her channel clamping down fiercely around me. Overwhelming, white hot pleasure spirals through my veins as my stav begins to pulse and I erupt deep inside her with a deep growl, flooding her open womb with my seed. Wave after wave of ecstasy tears through me as I cry out her name, reveling in the sheer intensity of my release.

My knot swells within her, locking us together, and I grit my fangs as her body tightens around mine and she climaxes again, triggering another explosive surge, this one even stronger than the last as my release boils out of me, flooding her with my essence.

Still breathing hard, I ease us onto our sides. We're still joined by my knot as I trail my hand reverently along her lush curves.

She sighs, melting into my embrace, completely sated and utterly mine.

Cupping her chin, I tilt her face back to me, sealing my mouth over hers in a slow, lingering kiss.

My need for her is insatiable and my hunger relentless. The primal instinct to claim her again is one I cannot ignore. Slowly, I withdraw from her and then turn her onto her back. She gazes up at me through long lashes, her lovely blue eyes searching mine. "I need you again," I murmur. "Will you take me?"

She reaches up and cups the back of my neck, pulling my lips back down to hers as she whispers against them, "yes."

Positioning myself at her entrance, a low groan leaves my mouth as I sink into the perfection of her welcoming heat. As I gaze down at her, I can still hardly believe this exquisite creature is mine.

She is my mate, my heart... my everything.

EPILOGUE

RAPUNZEL

Warm sunlight spreads across the gardens of Cambryn castle as the early morning sun begins its slow ascent into the sky.

As I lean against the balcony railing of our bedroom, I rest my hand lovingly over my rounded belly. My heart is full as I feel a tiny flutter within. I couldn't sleep, so I went to the Healer before dawn, and she gave me some rather surprising news.

Instead of having just one child, we're having two. A smile crests my lips. I wonder what Ren will think of this.

Footsteps approach, familiar and comforting, and Ren's strong arms wrap around me, pulling me back against him. He brushes a lock of my newly shortened hair behind my ear. "I must say, I quite like this length on you."

Now that Glinda's hold upon me is gone, I've been able to cut my hair. It falls just past my shoulders, and I love how light I feel without all that extra length. "It feels strange, but also... liberating."

He his gaze shifts back to the garden and he huffs out a laugh. "Just look at them." He points at Rowan and Finik walking along one of the paths.

Rowan stops and plucks a few berries from one of the bushes and hands them to the squirrel, stroking his fur fondly as he stuffs them into his tiny cheeks.

"Finik has captured everyone's heart," Ren adds. "And I believe Sir Whiskers is

getting rather jealous.”

As if our very thoughts have summoned him, Whiskers saunters out from behind a tree and walks over to Rowan, rubbing against his legs to get his attention.

Rowan leans down and picks up the furry puff ball, holding him in one arm while Finik perches on the opposite shoulder.

Ever since Rielle left for Lumaria last week, they’ve both been extra clingy toward Ren’s brother, fighting for position on his lap and on the pillow above his head when he’s asleep.

I turn in his embrace to face him. His amber eyes are full of warmth and affection as he drops his forehead to mine and gives me a tender kiss.

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When he pulls back, he gives me a mischievous smile. “How soon do you think we should expect a raven with news of Tristan and Rielle’s engagement?”

Rielle is supposedly in Lumaria on official business for Cambryn, but everyone knows it was Ren’s grandmother and my own mother playing matchmaker. Not that they need to try too hard, for I’m certain my brother is just as smitten with Rielle as she is with him. I’m so happy for them. “Within a few days, I’d wager.”

Softly, I bite my lower lip, wondering how best to break the news of our unexpected blessings.

“You’re up rather early, my beautiful mate,” he murmurs. “Did you have trouble sleeping?”

I take his hand and place his palm over my lower abdomen as the fluttering begins again. “I was woken up by this.”

“And just how are my two favorite people in the world today?” he asks, eyes sparkling as our fingers interlace over my stomach.

I gaze up at him, unsure how to begin. “Ren, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“I went to the healer.”

The smile falls from his face, replaced by concern. “What did she say?” He places his

other palm protectively over my belly. “Is everything all right with our kit?”

I rest my hand over his. “That’s the thing... we’re actually having two.”

“Two?” he frowns. “What do you—”

“Twins.”

A beaming smile lights his face. “Truly?”

I nod.

“This is amazing!” He gathers me in his arms, kissing me fiercely as he spins me around before setting my feet back on the ground. “I cannot wait to tell my family. They’re going to be so excited.”

Before I can stop him, he leans over the railing. “Rowan! Come over here! We have something important we need to tell you.”

Rowan rushes toward us, standing almost directly below the balcony, in the garden. “What is it?”

Indecision grips me. “Oh, Ren, Rielle will be upset if we tell everyone before she returns.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” Ren frowns. “She should be home in a few days.” He looks down at Rowan. “Never mind. We’ll tell you later.”

“Are you serious?” Rowan scoffs. “You cannot say you have something important to tell me and then suddenly decide to withhold it just because Rielle is not here.” He places his hands on his hips. “What’s going on?” His gaze drops to my abdomen and

his eyes widen. “Is the kit all right? Did the healer find something wrong with—”

“No,” I reassure him. “Everything is fine.”

“Doubly so,” Ren adds with a sly grin, and I laugh at his teasing.

“What’s so funny?” Rowan asks. “I demand that you both tell me right now. You cannot leave me in this suspense.”

“You’re going to be an uncle,” I tell him. “To twins.”

Shock flickers across his expression before his mouth curves up in a smile. “This is wonderful news. We must tell everyone else at once.”

“We should wait for Rielle,” I insist. “You know how she is. She’ll feel left out.”

Rowan dips his chin in a subtle nod. “Don’t worry. I can keep a secret.” Smiling, he picks Whiskers and Finik back up and heads toward the doors, calling over his shoulder. “I’ll see you both at breakfast.”

When he leaves, Ren cups my face with both hands, his amber eyes searching mine. “Two kits.” He smiles. “I can hardly believe it.”

Stretching up on my toes, I wrap my arms around his neck and brush my lips to his. “I’m glad you’re excited. I wasn’t sure what you would think.”

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“Of course, I’m excited,” he says. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well,”—I shrug—“I’ve heard some men get a bit worried at the idea of having more than one at the same time.”

He hugs me tightly to him. “In truth, I would be happy with even more.”

“You would?”

“Yes.” He smiles. “I love you, my amira. And the idea of having kits that are half you and half me... I cannot be any happier than I am right now.”

“I feel the same.”

He lifts me into his arms and starts for the bed. “What are you doing?”

“Breakfast can wait,” he murmurs, brushing his lips to mine. “I need you.”

A soft knock at the door stops him in his tracks. Still holding me in his arms, he turns toward it and calls out. “Who is it?”

“It’s your grandmother,” she says through the door. “Rowan just told us the news.”

The door opens and Ren’s entire family, except for Rielle, is waiting in the hallway, with Rowan standing in front of them.

Ren purses his lips. “You were supposed to keep it a secret.”

“I know.” Rowan grins sheepishly. “But it just sort of slipped out.”

I laugh. “Is that so?”

Rowan nods and Ren’s family walks into the room, gathering around us in excitement, offering their congratulations.

Ren sets me on my feet, but he keeps his arm looped possessively around my waist, tugging me close to his side as everyone takes turns embracing us warmly.

Once, I dreamed of freedom beyond a tower’s stone walls—of a name, a past, a place where I truly belonged. I never imagined that dream would lead me here—to love, to family, to the life I never dared hope for.

I still haven’t fully regained all my memories. Some remain lost. But I’ve found something even more powerful: the truth of who I am, not in what I once was, but in who I chose to become.

As his family chatters happily around us, Ren places his palm over the slight swell of my abdomen and nuzzles my temple. “You are my heart, Rapunzel.”

A smile crests my lips even as tears sting my eyes. “And you are mine, Ren.”

In this perfect moment, with my charming Fox Prince at my side, I know I am finally home.