



# Secrets and Starlight

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Her magic could destroy them all. Their passion could save the world.

Ayla needs help. She has more magic than ever before and no control over it. Not only is she dangerous to everyone around her, her magical bond with Zayne is growing stronger—and it's all she can do to resist it.

Zayne has an island to save and new powers he detests. The curse on his homeland remains, and only a set of black diamond shards hidden away at a trade assembly can fix it. Except it means sneaking into the assembly while yearning for a woman whose magic doesn't know the meaning of subtle.

As their irresistible passions bring the reluctant pair closer, the nightly ballroom parties hide something altogether more sinister. Someone is controlling the curse on Zayne's homeland. If Ayla and Zayne don't master their magic or have the courage to strengthen their bond, they'll not only doom their loved ones—they'll doom each other.

Secrets and Starlight is the second sizzling romantasy book in the Bound by Thrones trilogy. If you love morally gray men, court intrigues, and accidental mates, slide into Secrets and Starlight!

**Total Pages (Source):** 101

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## Prologue: An Overprotective Turtle

Nintithefirewolf

We sailed beyond the heavy influence of Gloom, liberated from the stagnant mist that had surrounded us for weeks.

Finally, I could visit my sister.

Wandering to my makeshift den at the rear deck of our boat, I curled up and fell asleep, allowing my consciousness to drift across the sea. I materialized upon the giant sea turtle's back, my astral self a pale comparison to my body. My sister lifted her gigantic fin from the water, acknowledging my return.

"It has been a while, fiery one." Leo's voice resonated through my being. "I was worried."

I wandered to the front of her shell, weaving through the trees that grew upon her back until I reached her shoulder. The critters that Leo cared for—rabbits, otters, and rats amongst them—scampered about my feet, excited by my return.

The waves crashed about us, filling the air with a thick salty mist, not a single isle in sight. Leo had positioned herself far from any island, as she always did.

Looking down, I caught the gaze of the turtle's large eye. She lifted her long neck and slowly turned toward me.

“It’s good to see you too,” I replied.

“Is all well?”

I pawed at her shell.

“Tell me of her, your companion Ayla, does she treat you well?”

“She does, it’s just... Sister, the fae have changed.”

Leo watched me carefully. “The seas have said as much. I tried to warn you.”

“It’s not all bad.” I met her large dour eye. “Our quest was successful. The necromancer Inarus has been defeated, and the Shadow Queen has claimed her throne.”

“If it is done, I will retrieve you. If the fae have no more need for your intervention—”

“Wait!” I couldn’t go back. Not when I’d barely had the chance to live. “They still need me.”

“Explain.”

“Inarus possessed a black diamond shard.”

Leo’s jaw tightened. “Are you sure?”

I swallowed. This news, while terrible, guaranteed the value of my presence. “It gets worse. The rest of Gloom’s shards have been found, and they’re being used to manipulate her mists. If they’re not reclaimed, Gloom will cover the Isles, forcing

everything into stagnation.”

The giant turtle exhaled slowly, steam rising from her nostrils. “The shards were scattered. The fae were never intended to find them.”

“I know that,” I snapped, fire licking my fur. “I was there.”

“Sister, I mean no ill will. What happened before was not easy for any of us.”

Through a long breath, I soothed my flames, quieting memories from millennia past.

“What is your plan?”

“The Shadow Queen is using her throne to fortify Gloom, but she cannot sustain the effort. So we will find those wielding the six remaining shards, and when we do, we’ll reclaim them.”

Leo nodded her large head. “I am assuming that you have chosen to remain with your companion, your Ayla?”

“Yes, even now, I’m with her and the Shadow Prince. We have a lead on the first shard bearer. She should be at Mer.”

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Leo lowered her head back into the water, and when she next spoke, her tone was softer. “Sister, I will speak frankly. Perhaps you should return to me, where it is safe. Leave Gloom and the fae to their fates.”

I looked at my feet, glancing at the critters. I’d expected this, certain Leo would never understand. “I have to stay.”

“Your companion could destroy you as easily as these shard bearers control Gloom. You trust her too much.”

“Ayla would never—”

“Ayla is young.”

“But—”

“Stop meddling in the ways of fae. They are too dangerous, and I do not want to see you hurt.”

My chest ached. “Last time, my presence mattered, and I suspect it’ll matter again. I didn’t choose Ayla lightly, and I suspect she’s the lynchpin in the times to come. Even if she is... uncertain.”

“Explain.”

“Ayla has awoken her magic, and with its explosive start, she tethered herself to the Shadow Prince.”

“A tether? Are you certain?”

“My own power contributed to its formation. Ayla is hesitant to accept it, but Zayne speaks of it. It’s only a matter of time until it grows stronger, and when it does...”

Without saying more, Leo started paddling her fins, swimming forward.

“Where are you headed?” I asked, examining our surroundings anew and realizing these waters were farther north than the ones Leo usually frequented.

“Toward Mer.”

“Don’t! I told you, I want to stay! I’ll—”

“I will not interfere, but if you insist on chasing danger, I will not be far away. I hated how long you vanished into Gloom. It was... boring without you.”

“That’s the closest you’ve ever come to saying I’m your favorite sister.”

“Do not let it go to your head.”

For a wonderful moment, I laughed before lowering my tone. “Thank you. It’s reassuring to know you won’t be far away.”

“What you have shared is worrisome.”

“On that, we agree wholeheartedly.”

Chapter one

The Uninvited Guests

Ayla

I lifted a hand to my brow, squinting at the purple horizon of the approaching sunset. My heart raced at the sight of land.

Mer.

We had arrived.

Coral reefs rose from the sea, surrounding the isle, protecting it with a wall of brilliant teals and vibrant oranges. Such a splendid destination for a dangerous mission.

Behind me, the boat's floorboards creaked as my heart fluttered. I turned in time to see Zayne joining me at the bow, shadows rippling behind him. "Are you excited, Princess?"

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The way he called me princess drew a smirk from me. It would have gotten anyone else punched.

“Back on Valterra, I heard accounts of Mer,” I answered. “And in every single one, they spoke of its beauty. I always thought when I visited, it would be under better circumstances.”

His dark eyes twinkled. “Now that’s where you’re mistaken. What circumstances could you have possibly imagined that were better than my valiant company?”

“We’re on a quest, remember?”

“Let’s pretend otherwise, if only for a moment.” He wrapped his arm around me, pulling me flush against him.

In response, my heart raced, the tether throbbing alongside it, ignoring my desperate attempts to refuse it. Ever since we had left Gloom’s stagnant mists, my attempts to deny that anything permanent had formed between us had grown weaker by the hour.

And Zayne seemed to know it.

“Imagine it was just you and me,” he continued. “Two fae who have escaped the responsibilities of their families and have finally left Gloom behind. We are eager to explore the world... and one another.”

Despite my hesitation, my breath caught. “Yes?”

“We spent the first week of this relationship fighting for our lives. And then we spent the last month rebuilding Eleanor’s stronghold. We haven’t had time to...courtone another.”

I laughed him off. “After all that, I’m hardly convinced we need tocourteach other.”

He cupped my chin, lifting it so I would meet his gaze. “Ayla, we’ve barely had time to get to know one another, but I’m certain I wouldn’t have survived the descent to the Underworld without you.”

I glanced away. “We don’t know that for sure.” Our bond had been the result of my desperation. I didn’t want him to die, and now it seemed he was trapped with me.

Nobody deserved to be stuck with the likes of me.

All the same, he squeezed me tighter. “We could visit the Meridian Moon? It’s a fiddle bar that specializes in the strangest, most experimental of instruments.”

I softened at the idea. “Oh, that does sound fun.”

“Or we could find a hidden lagoon, somewhere tucked away on one of the many outer reefs. We would swim... amongst other things. If you’re interested.”

My throat tightened at the promise in his voice. My chest swelled, begging me to acknowledge the bond.

I can’t.

But I also couldn’t resist him for another second.

Rising on my toes, I inched my face to his. He closed the distance, pressing his lips to

mine. My entire body shuddered and then rushed into action. My hands were upon him, fingers tracing up his neck as he pinned me tightly against him. When I reached his horns, I pressed the sensitive spot at their base, and Zayne moaned deliciously.

The sound of his need resounded in my being, amplified by the lightness that filled everything since we left Gloom behind.

My core warmed, the heat still so new after our time in the stagnant mists that I broke the kiss, desperate to catch my breath. I needed to claim him before I came to my senses.

“We don’t have long,” I whispered, grabbing his hand as I led the way toward the ship’s small cabin.

“Ayla?” Rhett’s voice rose from the speaking stone tucked in my pocket.

I froze.

By Teyr, he has the worst timing.

“Ayla? Are you there?” my oldest friend asked. The stone would only work for a limited time, only while the isles were cast in liminal dusk and dawn.

Zayne’s grin faded into seriousness.

Rhett continued, “I know we planned to meet at the docks, but it’s important.”

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Still flushed, I lifted the stone to my lips. “Yes. I’m here. Zayne too.”

“Good. Because I think you may want to consider turning that boat around.”

My other hand loosened from Zayne’s grip. “What do you mean?”

“I just got here, and guess what? There’s a damnably delightful party going on at Mer.”

Zayne’s brows furrowed. “And you want us to turn around because of a party?”

“Not just any party. Technically, it’s a trade assembly, but there will be balls every night. Thanks to your convenient destruction of the shades, the Isles need to negotiate human trade, and Mer is hosting. It’s invitation only, and judging from the other ships here, I’m downright offended that my guild wasn’t on the guest list.”

I pursed my lips. Fae trade with Valterra would bring magical aid to the kingdom. Countless humans would benefit from the surge of fae goods, which improved everything from basic lighting to medicine and agriculture. “Why is this a problem?” I asked.

“Not only are the gates of Mer closed to anybody except sanctioned guests, but consider who you two are. You and Zayne can’t just go prancing about Mer unrecognized when the guest list is this impressive.”

In all of our planning, we never imagined that sneaking around Mer would be part of the problem.

Rhett's voice crackled. "The Lord of the Dusk Court arrived at the same time as me, and there's another ship that is definitely from the Court of the Burning Bogs. Even Wisp is accounted for."

"Sounds important," I considered.

"And all the more reason for us to be there," Zayne added. "Everyone is going to be distracted making secret bargains. It'll be the perfect time to search for the shards and gather information."

"Or maybe it's just a sign we're in over our heads and should turn around," Rhett countered. "Besides, my friendly Shadow Prince, while Ayla might be relatively unknown amongst fae, you were raised at the Starlit Court. You can't possibly remain hidden amongst so many nobles."

"Do not presume to know what I'm capable of."

Rhett groaned. "You can't be serious."

I took in the stern lines of Zayne's face. "He's serious. And with his shadows, I think he can handle himself."

Rhett sighed. "You're trouble, Ayla, and you'll owe me for this one, because I already have a plan. You won't love it, but just... wait there and give me some time."

"Why didn't you say that earlier? What are you—"

"Now if you'll excuse me, I've got work to do."

The speaking stone went quiet.

For a long moment neither of us spoke until finally Zayne raised an eyebrow. “Do you trust Rhett with your life?”

I palmed the stone. “I do.”

His gaze bored into me, and the tether jostled in my chest.

I scoffed. “Oh, don’t be jealous. Rhett and I have been friends for years. He’s the only one I could trust when I fled Valterra.”

“I’m not jealous, I’m just...” Sighing, he turned to the crow’s nest. “Hey, Vanessa?”

The water sprite looked down from her vantage point, her watery blue skin glistening in the dusky sun. “Yes?”

“Can we anchor nearby? There’s an issue at the ports that Rhett needs to address. Teyr willing, we will be on our way soon.”

“Can do!” Her glowing blue magic dulled, and as the boat’s momentum shifted, I braced against the ship’s railing.

The shift must have stirred Ninti, who padded from the rear of the boat where she’d made her den. “Why are we slowing down?”

“Rhett’s run into trouble,” I began, relaying what little we knew.

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As I explained, she walked to the bow, shifting her form until she was large enough to look over its edge. Her fiery gaze flashed as she took in the distant walls of Mer. “Rhett’s plan better work, because I suspect we’re exactly where we need to be.”

Zayne’s lips drew into a line. My heart pounded.

“Incoming!” Vanessa shouted from her crow’s nest.

The ship swayed, and I stumbled. Zayne reached out, grabbing my arm and catching me as water lapped over the edge of the boat. Droplets landed on Ninti’s fur and sizzled.

Above us, Vanessa’s magic brightened as she protected the Umbral Star from the surging wake of a passing boat. It rushed by, racing for the port.

The approaching ship, a vast yacht, had clearly been built for luxury. It towered over us, each deck lined with brilliantly lit balconies. Even from this distance, I could see the ship was filled with fae dressed in soft fabrics and rich colors, their court far grander, far brighter, than any I had known in Valterra.

Zayne growled, baring his teeth at the larger ship before vanishing into shadows.

I followed his lead, pulling my scarf over my red hair the best I could with my larger antlers. Ninti made herself smaller, diminishing her flames until she appeared to be more dog than wolf.

All the while, unable to help myself, I gawked at the illuminated finery. Some of the

guests drank from flutes and others danced as musicians thrummed upon their instruments. There was no doubt these were guests of this so-called trade assembly.

My attention snagged on a fae male perched on the highest balcony. Tall and imposing, with giant antlers, he glared down at our little boat like we had gotten in his way. His aging features, creased brows and streaks of gray, did little to downplay his handsome face. Our gazes caught, and my stomach sickened with the onslaught of his raw power.

My hands heated, light flicking between my fingertips as uncontrolled magic burst forth. I drew my hands into fists and shoved them behind my back, begging my magic to stop.

For a terrible moment, he continued to stare down at me, his expression unreadable. And it was to my great relief when the yacht passed by, forcing his attention toward Mer.

More waves crashed against us as my heart raced, continuing long after the ship was gone.

When Zayne emerged from the shadows, the water sprite turned on him. “Was that who I thought it was?” Vanessa pressed. “I would have charged more for this mission if I had known he’d be involved.”

Zayne’s eyes narrowed on the distant ship, and darkness wavered around his clenched fists. His breath steadied, deepening as it always did when he neared the Underworld.

He’s preparing to fight.

“What is it?” I demanded.

Zayne straightened. “This must be one hell of a party because the Starlit King himself is here.”

## Chapter two

### The Sparkling Palace of Mer

Ayla

“It’s most irregular.” The guard sighed, his gaze flicking between the thick parchment and his partner. “These were supposed to be invitations, not hastily written notes.”

Rhett waited, arms crossed as he stared at the keepers of the rocky gatehouse. Mer’s coral walls imposed above us, framing the closed gate. Beyond, the city sprawled up a hill, a palace twinkling at its peak, twilight reflected in countless windows. Along its side, the palace’s countless balconies overlooked a tall cliff, the structure imposing over the sea.

And between us and the city was a locked gate, its guardians housed upon the small island on which Rhett now stood.

“I know we were overlooked on the invitation list,” Rhett explained smoothly, “but you’ll find this document has been signed by the kings themselves, and that the Golden Apple Trading Guild has been given entry for the duration of the event.”

I still didn’t know what Rhett had done to get this document, but I played along with the ruse, sighing impatiently as I waited on the deck of the Umbral Star. Rhett had said the gates weren’t normally closed when we planned this whole thing. This last-minute change was unnerving.

“There’s only space for one boat per guild,” the guard finally grunted, nodding

toward both Rhett's vessel and the Umbral Star.

"My crew will continue on their way, and I'll join my cousin Aida's ship," Rhett explained.

Aida. Once, I thought the name was conveniently clever, but now it seemed far too close to Ayla. I wished I'd chosen a different name for my travel papers—forged papers that named me as Rhett's distant cousin.

Forging those papers seems like a lifetime ago.

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At least my antlers had grown in, shifting my most distinguishable feature. Now nobody could link me to Valterra's bastard princess. Or so I hoped.

Just as I hoped nobody would notice the shadow magic shielding Zayne. Or the firewolf sitting at my feet, her flames a demure gray and features doglike. We gave the illusion that Vanessa and I were the only crew on our ship, our companion an unassuming dog.

"Those are the King's signatures," the guard finally agreed, shoving the parchment toward Rhett. He signaled to his companion, and with a creak, the gates barring our entry began to open. "Apologies for the delay."

"Not a worry, my friend. Happy to sort out any confusion." Rhett accepted the paper with a sweep of his arms, tucked it in his coat pocket, and whistled toward his own boat.

Rimu, his jet-black dog, rambled down the gangway, practically running to join him. The dog slobbered on Rhett's thigh.

Ninti raised her head and wagged her tail, and I stared, shocked by the sight of her acting so...doglike.

After a few final commands to his crew, Rhett jumped onto the Umbral Star, Rimu leaping after him. The dogs circled one another, leaving me unprepared for Rhett's bear hug. He lifted me off my feet, squeezing me tightly. "Welcome, cousin. Long time no see."

I gasped for breath as a wave of jealousy that wasn't mine knotted my stomach. Zayne. He watched from the shadows, and I pushed his emotions, the bond, out of my mind.

"I missed you too," I admitted to Rhett, lowering my voice. "But the circumstances..."

"I told you I could do it," he whispered in my ear, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and turning me to face the open gate.

"I never doubted, but how? Where did you get that parchment? Did the kings really sign it?"

"A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell." He grinned cheekily.

"You didn't really kiss anyone... did you?"

"It's a genuine signature. Don't worry."

Still, I wasn't reassured as we slipped into the port, the gates grinding closed behind us. We passed empty boats as music tinkled from the city itself, laughter and excitement audible from here. My heart began to race, anticipating what sort of ball awaited us. The sight of the Starlit King's yacht was only the beginning.

This was a huge step up from the Valterran fae fiddle bars I once knew. I had heard the gossip of fae courts, but after seeing the shadow court in such disrepair, I had forgotten my old fantasies, ones that belonged to someone eager to explore the Isles of Fae as Rhett's cousin.

We would have danced. We would have traded. Rhett and I had planned a simple life, but that was before Zayne found me, disrupting everything with a lethal brand.

A breeze cooled my skin, and when I turned toward the cabin, the shadows shifted. Zayne didn't make himself visible, but I guessed where to look. He hid in the spot that made my chest ache.

Rhett followed my gaze, speaking to the nothingness. "Well hidden, Shadow Prince."

"I'll be perfectly discreet," Zayne said, moving between us.

Rhett stepped back with a frown, his gaze flicking between the two of us. "Very well. For now, follow my lead, and we'll be in our private suite soon enough. We can talk freely then."

"Private suite—" I started to ask, but the port's air sprite arrived, giving Vanessa instructions on where to dock.

Rhett started chattering, telling the story of his travels. All of it was empty, spoken with the practiced air of someone certain they might be overheard, but I gave the appropriate responses, forcing my attention away from the place where I thought Zayne stood, hidden in plain sight.

Once we were docked, I followed Rhett's lead, I shouldered my satchel and stepped onto the dock. Ninti and Rimu followed us, and I sensed Zayne beyond them.

I turned back to Vanessa. "Take care of the Star while we're gone." Meaning, Stay prepared for a quick escape.

"Aye," she agreed, her lack of sass evidence of her sincerity.

I couldn't wait to retreat to the open sea. Already, my skin felt too tight.

We left the docks and reached a wide beach that, even in twilight, was crowded with

locals. The mer fae splashed in the water, their legs shifted into their iconic fins. The children swam about in play as adults luxuriated in the water.

Rhett slowed, scanning the crowd.

“Who are you...” And then it dawned on me.

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A woman rose from the water, her fin parting into legs covered by a brightly colored skirt. Blue and pink scales covered patches of her skin, and her blonde hair was streaked with color too.

Iona. It had to be.

I had never met Rhett's mer fae teenage flame, but that puppy-dog look in his eyes could only mean one thing.

She took to a run, sprinting into Rhett's waiting arms. I watched, dumbfounded, desperately recalling everything he had told me about her. He'd written a song about her, and supportive friend that I was, I had listened to it a painful number of times. Most of it was insignificant—her beauty, her intelligence, the way her mother tore them apart...

Wait, her mother is someone important, right?

"I still can't believe you're really here." She stepped back, holding him at arm's length, her gaze trailed up and down his full height so intently that a blush started creeping up my face. "Has it really been years? You still look like a rogue."

"And you are even more dazzling," Rhett said, rushing his words. "Thank you, by the way, for helping us join the festivities."

Ah. So she was the one who got us in.

She waved it off. "Anything for an old friend. I can't wait to catch up." Iona turned to

me, piercing me with her bright eyes. “And this must be your mysterious cousin!”

“Meet Aida,” Rhett answered.

I offered her my smile in return. “Rhett’s told me wonderful things about you.”

“Funny,” Iona said. “He never told me about you.”

“I didn’t meet Aida until I was older,” Rhett intervened. “Since she was born in Valterra.”

“Sure,” Iona said, fanning out her already-dry hair. “At any rate, I’ll show you to your rooms.”

She led the way, taking us to one of the many watery channels that were the arteries of the city. Bewitched with mer magic, their currents could flow uphill, and the channels allowed the mer fae to swim quickly throughout the city. Fortunately for us, we could hire a gondola.

I sat on one side as Rhett and Iona cuddled opposite me, Rimu and Ninti settled at our feet, the two dogs entirely distracted by one another. Between Ninti’s silence and Zayne’s constant shadows, I quickly became a third wheel as Rhett and Iona retreated into whispers.

Zayne settled beside me. Or at least, I thought he did.

We rode through the city, up the hill, and toward the palace, and my heart raced with uncertainty. Everything had unfolded so fast. And while I trusted Rhett, I had to admit it was possible he was distracted.

If only I could speak to Zayne. I trusted his instincts nearly as much as my own. Was

he nervous too? What did he see that I might have missed? With each step we moved farther from the Umbral Star, the vessel now trapped behind a coral wall, my fear grew.

Through it all, I maintained my small smile, allowing my eyes to dart with awe. It wasn't hard to pretend, especially as we approached the sprawling palace estate.

"The palace has multiple wings, all of them connected by courtyards and channels," Iona explained. "You'll be staying in the guest wing, but the festivities will be in the throne room."

"And where will you be staying?" Rhett asked her.

"I still live with my mother," Iona sighed. "She has a suite in the royal wing."

Rhett frowned.

"Your mother must be very important," I probed carefully.

"Of course, though I wish she didn't find Rhett so...common." Iona's smile faltered. "You see, she's one of the Kings' nieces, their favorite advisor, and honestly, she's let the position go to her head. You may have heard of her—Lady Calindra."

"Oh, I see."

Nervously, I wrung my hands.

Lady Calindra.

Iona's mother was the very same mer who had been working with Inarus, and we were here to take the shard from her.

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“Oh no.” Iona reached out for my hand. “I didn’t mean to scare you, though I understand. I know my mother’s policies can be a little intense.”

Calindra was the one who had given Inarus the collar that could control Eleanor. She was known for her willingness to produce any fae goods if it would yield a profit, and she allegedly had no qualms using her people to produce as many goods as possible. And now her daughter seized my hand as if she wanted to be my friend.

Is this a trap?

Her grip on my hand felt far too familiar. My heart raced.

Light flashed between us. Heat seared.

“Ouch,” Iona gasped, yanking her hand away.

“Sorry, I must have squeezed too tight,” I whispered, knowing that hadn’t been the case. That light... it was magic, spilling unrequested from me. Ninti looked up, concern etched in her narrowed brows, and I met her look with my own surprise.

“Aida is passionate about the types of fae goods that will be traded with Valterra,” Rhett quickly explained. “Medicine, not weapons, that sort of thing.”

“Oh, of course, I understand completely,” Iona answered, still shaking out her hand.

“Oh good, we’re here!”

The remainder of her tour was brief, almost rushed, as she led us through the estate.

Several buildings were spread across the hilltop, each separated by countless flower beds, luscious pools, and towering fountains. Iona pointed to a large, domed pavilion to the center. “That’s the throne room,” she explained. “The servants are preparing it for the welcome banquet as we speak.”

Soon, we reached the guest wing where several apartments faced a central courtyard with a pool, garden, and several benches.

“This will be your suite,” she concluded, leading us to one of several identical doors. “If you press your hand against it now, it’ll be warded to anyone but you for the remainder of the stay.”

We did as she instructed, the door warming to my touch.

Satisfied, Iona nodded. “Now I’m sure you’re quite tired. Take some time to rest, and I’ll see you at the banquet shortly,” she concluded, her gaze scanning my leather armor with a frown. “I’ll have my ladies send over a few dresses suitable for tonight.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” I managed as Ninti and Rimu scampered into the living space. Following behind, I entered the suite slowly, ensuring Zayne had ample time to enter.

Rhett lingered, giving Iona a farewell embrace before entering the suite, and while she blushed, she didn’t refuse.

I snapped at Rhett the moment he closed the door behind himself. “You didn’t say your contact was Calindra’s daughter.”

Rhett folded his arms. “I said you wouldn’t like my plan, but you insisted.”

“You didn’t take the time to properly explain!”

“I trust her, Ayla. She understands the nature of her mother better than anyone—if you need inside help, I have it. For Teyr’s sake, I got us a headquarters in the center of the palace.” He scanned the room, looking for Zayne. “You’re welcome.”

Zayne stepped from the shadows, his lips in a tight grimace. “Well done, but a warning still would have been nice.”

Rhett waved him off. “I’m relieved your shadows are as good as you claim. The rumors said your powers were... inconsistent.”

Zayne glared. “My shadows were limited in Karenia, yes. Growing up, it was easy to downplay their strength.” He turned toward me. “But my powers are not the ones we should be worried about.”

I looked to my hand, finding my fingertips were still tingling, my skin unusually warm. Frustrated, I shook it out, willing the sensations to go away.

“We’ve left Gloom,” Ninti padded forward to explain. “You’ve never felt your full powers before, so they might behave differently.”

I nodded. “We don’t even know what type of magic it is, but I’ll just have to learn to control it.”

“We’ll train together,” the firewolf offered. “But first, let’s prepare for tonight. The banquet is soon.”

Quickly, we took inventory of the suite. The small kitchen and living space were adjoined by two bedrooms, one to each side, with trinkets of brightly colored shells and sea glass spread throughout. The far wall was built entirely from windows, framing a balcony that overlooked the cliff. Even at dusk, the sea glinted below, reflecting the stars and the city’s lights. Any silence was filled by the roar of the sea.

Rhett returned from one of the bedrooms. “The rooms are clear from spy-craft, as far as I can tell.”

“Agreed,” Zayne added, stepping once again from the shadows as if he had been searching there. “While I’m fairly certain I can bypass the locked doors, I doubt any others can.”

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Rhett picked up his bag. “I suggest we rest and clean up. Iona’s ladies should have those clothes ready soon.”

“Iona...” I mused, meeting Rhett’s glare. “Can you at least tell me what she knows?”

He shrugged. “Not much. I said that I wanted to show Mer to my favorite cousin, but I didn’t realize there would be an event. She thinks I’m an ass for not telling her I’d be visiting, and I told her I was disappointed Calindra used our history to avoid inviting my guild. She understands, in her way. Our relationship is... problematic. It always has been.”

“Rhett, I’m sure we could have found another way. You didn’t have to involve her.”

He waved me off, pointing to a bedroom door. “I’ll take this room. It’s smaller.”

“After all these years, you still like her, don’t you?” I asked as he vanished behind the bedroom door without an answer.

### Chapter three

#### A Room Beyond Gloom

##### Ayla

Turning, I faced Zayne, my heart dropping to my stomach. With all this chaos, it was a relief to finally look at him, and I soaked in the sight. His dark looks—the glowering eyes, the long black hair—had never seemed so handsome. Even

disheveled, he was a prince in every way, his horns defiant and the shadows at his fingertips.

He nodded toward our new bedroom.

I glanced at Ninti, but the firewolf had already jumped onto the nearby couch, Rimu settling at her side. The two of them had quickly become inseparable.

Satisfied, I reached for Zayne, placing my hand in his larger one and allowing him to lead me toward the bedroom. I closed the door and leaned against it with a sigh.

Finally, we had a few moments to ourselves.

Because I felt... I felt everything.

My every muscle was tense, my nerves on fire. Our plans hadn't involved settling so close to our enemy. What if someone was searching for me, the bastard princess who had vanished thenight her sister was declared heir? News would have spread—especially amongst the merchants who traveled to Valterra.

My breaths grew shallow.

Zayne pressed his hand against the door, towering over me and pinning me in place. "Are you all right?"

I peered up at him, certain I couldn't breathe. When had he become so hot? I mean, he'd always been attractive, and we'd barely been able to keep our hands off each other during our travels. But during the last month in Gloom, I hadn't felt desire. Not like this.

I glanced away, taking in the room, and my gaze landed on the single gigantic bed,

plush with countless pillows. We'd been sleeping in the same bed for weeks, but the pressure of it struck me in a new way. Before, there had been nothing sensual between us—the mists were too imposing—but now we were here and...

Mer was far hotter than Gloom.

Sweat glistened on my brow and my leathers stuck to my thighs. I glanced down at Zayne's chest, noting the way sweat made his shirt cling.

Sharing this bed would be nothing like before.

My heart began to pound. The tether ached in my chest, and I arched my back, looking up at him. His lips were moments from mine. Teyr, I wanted him. Heat grew in my hands—

Wait, my hands?

Cursing, I dodged out of his grasp and examined my illuminated fingertips, magic flaring from my complete lack of control.

He followed me. "What's wrong?"

I turned on him. "I can't control my magic. I'm surrounded by people who could recognize me." I squeezed my eyes shut. "Nothing about this feels safe."

"I'll protect you. I promise." He stepped closer and cupped my cheek, and despite my frustration, I leaned into his touch. "If I didn't think we could handle this, I would have turned us around and left Rhett to his own devices."

"And what if my magic flares up? What if everyone sees?"

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“Our cover story says you’re a half-fae raised in Valterra. Uncontrolled magic fits the narrative.”

“But it’ll draw attention to us. Tome.”

He nodded slowly, holding my gaze as he spoke. “You might not be able to see me, but I will be watching from the shadows, always at your side. If it becomes dangerous, if you need to flee, I will run at your side. We can always escape together.”

My heart fluttered. “I like that.”

Zayne smiled. Teyr, I loved seeing him happy. For a moment, the reality of our situation faded away, and I could pretend we were just a normal couple.

I liked Zayne, I really, really did.

My cheeks flushed as my face neared his. He tugged at my waist, pulling me the rest of the way, and I surged to my toes, claiming his lips so fast the kiss could bruise.

Time stilled, pinning us in place. If only we could linger here forever, caught in this moment where nothing mattered but our affection. I wanted to forget everything but Zayne.

He tasted as good as he smelled, cedar and amber and rain. And still, I needed more. I wrapped my hands around his neck, pressing my body against his. Shivers ran down my spine, and I teased his lip with my teeth as I drove our kiss deeper. He responded

with equal hunger, thrusting his tongue past my lips.

We grew desperate, his hands drifting up my shirt and my fingers finding his waistband. Need ignited between my thighs, erupting quick as a flame. I reveled in the way his bulge pressed against my stomach.

I understood where this was headed.

The world spun around me, and I searched for leverage. Arousal was its own flavor of overwhelming, and this tether that burned in my chest... It made me want to claim him, to make Zayne mine, mind, body, and soul.

Except...

I couldn't do that. Not to him.

I broke the kiss, panting for breath. "I'm not ready."

Zayne took half a step back, still holding me at arm's length like I could collapse. "If you need to take it slow, that's fine. I didn't mean to pressure... We're both virgins."

"It's not that," I whispered, turning around and finding the bed so I could sit on it.

He sat beside me, giving a hand width of space between us. His clenching fist and the hard bulge of his pants reminded me of his self-control. It made me want him more.

"It's the tether, isn't it?" he asked.

I looked away, my shoulders hunching.

"Ayla." He said my name like it left a sweet taste upon his lips. "What I feel for you,

it's more than this bond.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because I knew you were precious from the moment we met. When you sat beside me, pretending to be someone you weren't, I knew you had the power to ruin me. And seeing you again the next day? I was terrified when the shades pursued you, afraid you'd be hurt in my schemes. I always wanted the best for you, long before we were bound.”

He made it sound so simple. Only, I was broken in love, betrayed by my own sister. I didn't trust myself to judge who truly cared for me.

But I did know I cared for him.

I reached for his hand. “I thought you were a pompous princeling when we met. You still are. But I don't mind. Not really.”

He laughed, the sound a gem to my ears.

Still, I couldn't admit the tether was there. Not to him. It meant accepting we were... inevitable.

We'd known each other for a month. After everything, I wasn't even sure who I was anymore. But he'd seen me at my lowest and still cared for me. Nobody else had ever done that.

Even now, he seemed to understand. He kissed me on my brow. “I'll go shower and give you some space.”

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“Thank you.”

I wrapped my arms around myself, watching as he vanished behind the bathroom door, frightened that I trusted him more than anyone. He knew my every weakness because I had shown them where they were. I had taught him how to hurt me the most, and still, he made me feel safe.

If only I was capable of the love he deserved.

Chapter four

His Shadow

Zayne

I set the water to cold and stepped into the shower before I could change my mind. It consumed all my self-control to step away from Ayla, and I didn't think I could do it a second time.

The water streamed down my chest as I swallowed my longing to return to the bedroom, press her against the mattress, and show her everything that she meant to me.

She'd saved my life.

I owed her everything.

Except no matter how cold the water ran, I couldn't escape my desire—a desire for more than her body. The ache in my chest grew heavier with each moment she refused to acknowledge what was between us. And still, beyond the tether, I craved her heart.

A heart she would be slow to give.

The last time she'd trusted a man, he'd tried to kill her. I couldn't blame her for needing time—especially when I was the idiot who branded her soon after.

I had to be patient.

Sighing, I turned off the water, grabbed a towel, and dried off. When I stepped onto the tile floor, I found myself staring at an oversized mirror, too foggy to use. Not that it mattered. I barely recognized who I'd become.

Once, I had been a shadow to my sister. Her spare and protector, I served her because I had nothing to claim of my own. Raised in Karenia, I'd been a shadow prince living in a kingdom of light.

Now I was a necromancer, wielder of death and champion of the realm beyond. Most importantly, I was tethered to Ayla.

Maybe I didn't understand the tether any better than her, but I didn't fear it. No, I treasured it.

Ayla had saved me long before she'd lifted me from the depths of death. She'd given me a reason to live beyond my family, showing me life could have new meaning.

I'd been attracted to her since we met. I'd been attached to her since we dared to take the throne, and I'd bonded with her as we repaired the stronghold. And now that our

tether was beyond Gloom, I'd grown attached, obsessive even.

She was always in my head, and still, I craved more.

The way her laughter filled a room or the way a smile flittered upon her lips when she teased me. I needed her nearby. Always. And even when she needed space, the evidence that she was so comfortable with me that she could admit her fears only stoked the flame of my devotion.

I coveted her beyond all else.

And as the foggy mirror cleared, I met my reflection and wondered who, exactly, that made me.

Ayla stilled as I entered the bedroom, her body sprawled across the bed, hair falling off its edge. Her hands were raised above her, fingers fluttering as she traced the beat of the music playing from her phonograph, already placed upon the dresser.

The song continued, lilting over the room.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

She rolled over onto her stomach and cupped her chin between her hands. Her gaze trailed over me, wandering from my still bare chest to the towel around my waist.

Smirking, she spun about, swinging her feet off the bed and facing the main door. There, hanging upon its back, was a gown, the fabric dark and rich, a perfect coal to her fire. "Iona sent this over. She seems to think it'll be appropriate for tonight."

I choked, realizing the high slit would nearly reach her hip. "You'll look great."

“I know.”

“Truthfully, I’ve never seen you dressed as a princess.”

She took a step closer. “And I’ve never seen you dressed like a prince.”

“Too bad I’ll be hiding in shadows, my knives at the ready.”

“I don’t think I mind that either.” She swung the dress over her back and vanished into the bathroom.

I wasn’t sure what game she was playing, but it was nice to see her smirking like that.

Her music played as I dressed in my worn leather armor. I strapped a few knives into place but decided against bulky weapons. My strength lay in the shadows. Satisfied, I swung my cloak around my shoulders, the black fabric attuned to darkness by my sister’s shadow-stitches.

I stepped into the living room of the suite where Rhett lounged upon a couch. The self-proclaimed merchant prince wore a jacket that glistened in jewel tones, contrasting Ayla’s darker dress.

He glanced at me and then looked to the ceiling. His disregard left me acutely aware that the last time we’d met it had been right after Ayla was branded.

“Thanks for your help,” I offered.

Still, he didn't look at me. "You and Ayla, eh? She told me, but it's still strange seeing you two together."

My every instinct railed against me. He was a rival for Ayla's attention—someone she had trusted for longer than me—and yet, he was not my competition. "Our time in Gloom changed us."

Finally, he met my glare with one of his own. "I see that."

"Ayla is lucky to have you as a friend."

"She is. Nobody in Valterra looked out for her, nobody understood her fae instincts. Until I came along, all she had for company was those soldiers who trained her. Of course I'm protective. Especially with necromantic princes she just met."

My lips curled.

He continued, "I suppose it's not your fault you're a necromancer, but I lost good friends to the shades. I'm sure you understand."

Despite the barb, I nodded stiffly. "She trusts me."

"Does she? If I'm honest, she seems skittish as a deer."

"She's recovering." Though I couldn't deny Rhett was right. Ayla's confidence had been wrecked by everything.

He stood up, stepping closer to me, and I braced for whatever taunt he had prepared. Instead, he softened. "Her sister's assassination attempt messed with her head, didn't it?"

“Yeah, and I—”

“And you came into her life at the worst possible moment.”

I couldn't deny it.

Rhett didn't stop. “I'm glad the shades are gone, that your sister can revitalize the Isle of Shadow. It's what the Isles need. But by Teyr, you're followed by a force determined to change our world, and you've wrapped Ayla up in it.”

“What's your point?” I growled.

“I don't trust you.”

“I could say the same, but she trusts both of us. We need to work together.”

He opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted by a bark at the front door. He shook his head, muttering as he went to the door, opening it.

Rimu stormed into the suite, Ninti at his heels. The firewolf wagged her tail, seemingly out of breath. I raised an eyebrow at her.

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She quirked her head. “Don’t look so concerned, I’m just playing along with Rimu. As far as anyone can tell, I’m a normal dog and not a minor deity.”

The large black dog snuggled up to Rhett, streaking slobber over his jacket. Meanwhile, Ninti pawed the bedroom door open and went in search of Ayla.

I leveled with the merchant prince. “I don’t see you interrogating Ninti.”

Rhett scratched Rimu behind the ears. “That’s because you’re much more fun to infuriate.”

Somehow, that got a laugh out of me.

Rhett examined the slobber on his jacket and frowned. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to clean this up.” He vanished into his bedroom.

Alone, I glanced out the large balcony windows, finding that full darkness of night had finally come upon us. Securing myself in my shadows, I opened the doors and stepped outside.

The ocean roared, waves crashing against the cliff. Several stars now glistened over the cloudless expanse of sky. We faced west, but I could no longer see the distant mountains of Dusk Isle.

Sunset had long since passed, and there had been no word from Eleanor through the speaking stone. Not that I expected anything—our plan was to communicate only when necessary—but it was hard to shake off the last month of caring for my sister in

spite of her demanding relationship with the Shadow Throne.

Gloom would expand if not kept in check. Her mists were commanded to overtake the isles because some of the mysterious shard bearers commanded her to do so. They abused the shards, the remnants of the deity's artifact.

Fortunately, Eleanor could slow the effect, helping Gloom to stay in one place, but it only worked with Eleanor on the throne, meditating upon it for endless hours each day. The process drained her, robbing her of what little strength she had regained after becoming the Shadow Queen.

Yes, I'd carved out a new path, and it was no longer my role to ensure her welfare. Ysandra had taken that responsibility. And perhaps, if I was honest, the guard was better at it than me since Eleanor actually listened to her.

But still, the old habits remained. Eleanor had needed me our entire life, and it was all I knew.

Now I was the one responsible for finding the remaining black diamond shards and ending this. We only had one lead: Calindra had a shard. There had to be a clever way to find it quickly.

Settling into a seated position, I allowed my breathing to slow and my consciousness to drift. I touched the surface of the Underworld, and my heart rate slowed.

I settled in the highest level of death, my vision of the undead superimposed upon the Living Realm. With my next steady inhale, I identified the familiar scent of funeral flowers, noting how it mixed with the essence of Mer, salty and citric.

The royal graveyard was quiet, the souls there having moved on. It was peaceful, the dead at rest.

Except. Not quite.

There was something I could almost detect, a faint purple light so dark it was almost black. I descended a little further, the current of death strengthening as I homed in on the sensation.

The purple light was coming from my cloak, brightening one of its many pockets. Uncertain, I raised myself back to the living and searched. The pocket itself was carefully stitched and sealed by several buttons. Within the pocket, I found a small pouch with a note.

You'll need this more than me, but you're too noble to take it for yourself.

I'm fine. Stop worrying.

Eleanor

I shook my head rereading her final line, torn between annoyance at how well my twin knew me and relief.

Eleanor would be safe. I had to trust her.

As for the pouch...

I poured the contents into my hand, already suspecting what it contained.

The shattered remains of a dark diamond shard pooled in my palm, the sharp edges threatening to cut my flesh. Eleanor was supposed to keep the fragments to ease her communication with Gloom, and she'd been smart to sneak them into my procession because I never would have agreed.

Inarus had used this shard to amplify his powers, and I hated any reminder that his necromancy wasn't all that different than mine.

But perhaps Eleanor was right—I could use this. If I'd been able to sense these fragments in death, maybe I could sense the other shards the same way.

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I returned the fragments to the pouch, smiling as a plan began to form. With this knowledge, our mission could be completed far faster than expected.

And the sooner we left this place, the better.

### Chapter five

#### The Forgotten Past

Zayne

I felt Ayla's approach before I saw her.

She fluttered in my mind, a prickle along my spine, the tether catching me by surprise. Cherry and spice. I tasted her essence, and hungry for more, I turned around as she opened the patio door.

"Ayla," I rasped at the sight. The dress hugged her chest and hips, the long slit giving me a glimpse of ample thigh.

She looked past me, searching to the left and right. "I can't see you, but I... sensed you." Even now, she avoided naming the tether for what it was.

I stepped closer, allowing my shadows to expand, drawing her within my darkness. Curious, she looked around, inspecting the aura of my shadows before meeting my gaze. Her green eyes burned into me, and I took another step, leaving only the barest breath between us.

She looked away, her proud shoulders dropping as she reached down for the skirt, tightening the slit closed. “Is it too much?”

“Absolutely. You look like a royal fae, sensual in every way, and I’ll kill anyone who looks at you wrong.” I reached for her waist, pulling her closer until she arched her back and stood tall again. “And that’s appropriate for tonight. Don’t let the studious sound of ‘trade assembly’ deceive you. Riches are on the line, and the fae will be out for blood. Everyone will be dressing the part.”

She swallowed, and I studied the way her throat bobbed.

“I’ll be watching over you,” I reminded her. “And my shadows are waiting for you.”

“Hopefully that won’t be necessary.”

“Agreed, as much as I’d like to keep you in my shadows forever.”

“So what’s our plan?”

Movement caught my eye through the window behind her as Ninti and Rhett settled in the living room. I took Ayla’s hand and led her back to the balcony door, dropping the shadows. “I have some ideas. We’ll begin by asking Ninti some questions.”

Rhett was laughing at something Ninti had said, but the laughter died as he caught sight of Ayla. “You’re stunning, Ayla darling. The Valterran gowns could never suit you the way fae dresses do.”

Ayla smirked. “Finally, I understand how fae dance the way they do. It was impossible to move in those gigantic skirts, but this” —she reached down, showing off a dagger hidden in her boot— “This was designed for something far more intense.”

Rhett chuckled. It was good to see her confidence, even if it was an act.

But there was work to do.

I reached into my cloak, retrieved the satchel, and dropped it onto the table. “Ninti, did you know Eleanor snuck these into my cloak?”

The firewolf sniffed at the satchel before sitting back on her haunches. “I was the one who told her to do it.”

Typical.

“I thought we’d need it,” she added.

“Did you know I would be able to detect it from the Underworld?”

“I suspected as much. Gloom and the Underworld are never that far apart. At least, it was always that way in the times before.”

I lowered to my knees, sitting so I was eye-to-eye with the firewolf, reminded how eerily similar her green eyes were to Ayla’s. While I trusted the firewolf with Ayla’s safety, Ninti always avoided sharing more than was necessary. “We need to know more about how the black diamond shattered.”

“That’s not something I’m supposed to talk about.”

“Says who?”

“We made a pact of secrecy, the other deities and me.”

I sighed. “We’re taking a huge risk by being here, and we need to understand what we’re facing. You said the black diamond was shattered into seven shards. We need to know how.”

She glanced away.

“Zayne, stop,” Ayla tugged at my shoulder. “She said they made a pact—”

“It’s fine.” Ninti shook out her fur, fire flickering. “For all of our safety, you should know.” After a long moment, she continued. “The black diamond was shattered at the same time the Rift was formed, separating the magic of the Isles from the mundane world of the humans.” She paused. “Long story short, the formation of the Rift caused the splintering of the black diamond.”

I settled on the floor at her eye level. “I thought the Rift was always there. There aren’t any stories of its formation.”

Her ears flattened. “That’s because the divine artifacts were never meant to exist. These objects—like the black diamond and my ruby—are our weak spot, a way to tap into the powers of divinities, even controlling them. They make us vulnerable. When Mother Sea and Father Sky created us, they never intended for us to be so exposed, but magic has a way of balancing, even for the divine.”

She took a deep breath. “It was the thrones that provided a pathway for the creation of the artifacts, each one forming at the base of a throne. My siblings and I didn’t know what had happened until Pyrian, the Shadow King of the time, unearthed the first stones, including Gloom’s black diamond.”

“Pyrian,” I echoed the name, searching my memory. “He was a necromancer, wasn’t he? He was the first to put the practice to paper. His journals are now missing, but others reference his work.”

Ninti nodded slowly, holding my gaze. “Pyrian was very powerful. And dangerous.”

My skin crawled. To think, Inarus had done so much damage with a single shard of Gloom. “What did Pyrian do with the black diamond?”

“He started a war,” the firewolf sighed. “Wielding Gloom like a weapon, he choked the other isles into submission. Upon discovering the existence of our divine artifacts, we retrieved those we could find. Soon we discovered we were more powerful when linked to a fae companion, like I am to Ayla. And as Pyrian’s power grew, we called upon the fae to protect us. Teyr’s white diamond was captured by the King of Dawn, and as for myself, I was bound to one of his generals.”

Ayla looked at the ruby ring and spun it nervously on her finger.

Ninti stared at it too. “The battles that followed were harrowing—Pyrian’s skeletons make the shades seem harmless by comparison. It was a war on the scale I hope we never see again.”

“So how did it end?” Ayla whispered.

“Teyr begged us to transform his diamond. He believed that doing so would free his sister from Pyrian’s control. The process turned his diamond into the Rift, ensuring

that magic would remain isolated to the Isles. It worked. The impact shattered the black diamond, and its shards pierced Pyrian's heart. After, we scattered the seven pieces, believing that would keep her safe. But clearly, we were wrong."

Ninti paused, clearing her throat. "After that, we erased what we could so the fae might forget the artifacts existed. Since so many had perished, it was all too easy. Most buried their artifacts. But as for me, I couldn't completely leave the world behind. While I stayed with Leo, my companion kept the ruby, offering me a limited view of the world.

"Soon after, he traveled south of the Rift and married the widowed Valterran queen. Beyond the Rift, the artifact's effects were dampened, and with my permission, he set the ruby in a ring and gifted it to his stepchildren. He never explained what it was, only insisting that it was a fae heirloom to be handed down through the generations.

"For centuries, I watched the world through the ruby, waiting for another threat. Ever since the Collapse, I had been wary, certain something had gone wrong. Discovering Inarus carried a black diamond shard confirmed my worst fears."

Ayla looked up. "You looked out for me, even as a child."

"I suspected you could be my companion, but you were hellbent on trouble since the day you were born. Some of it of your own making and the rest inevitable."

She nodded slowly and returned to spinning the ring on her finger.

Ninti looked at the satchel containing the shattered shard and nosed it in my direction. "Take it, Zayne. As I trust Ayla with my ruby, Gloom trusts you to retrieve the shards. She needs your help, and hopefully this can show the way."

Pyrian's legacy shadowed over me, his abuse of the black diamond and necromancy

forever changing the isles. Despite Ninti's assurances, I felt unsuited to the task.

And still, it had been asked of me.

I wished I could vanish, taking Ayla into the shadows as we left all of this behind. Except there would be no future for us if we didn't act.

The satchel feeling heavier than before, I buttoned it within the pocket of my cloak. "Very well—" I began, interrupted by a thumping at the door.

Chapter six

Pretense and Reception

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:48 am*

Ayla

Someone knocked on the door, and I jumped to my feet, debating which of my hidden daggers was closest. Zayne vanished into the shadows.

Rhett chuckled, shaking his head as he glanced between myself and the place where Zayne had been. Muttering something involving the word “paranoid,” he straightened his shirt and approached the door.

Iona stood at the door, even more beautiful than before. Her hair was teased into an elegant updo, and the sparkles in her pale pink dress blinded me as she stepped into the lit entryway.

Behind her, there was chatter in the courtyard as Mer’s guests began their journey to the throne room. The Starlit Court was streaming out of the suite in the corner of the structure—a vast apartment, judging from the lack of doors anywhere around it. Everyone was chatting with the atmosphere of revelers.

“Shall we?” Rhett asked her, offering her his arm, and she accepted with a smile. He turned to me and the two dogs. “Following?”

Taking a deep breath, I found a courtly smile and addressed Iona. “Thank you for the dress. It’s beautiful.”

“I’m glad you’re here, even if it’s all a bit of a surprise.”

“Yes?” I asked, genuinely curious. Her excitement at seeing Rhett was easy to justify.

But why me?

She nodded. “Maybe you can offer some perspective on what Valterra truly needs from the Isles. There aren’t many here who can voice this concern—my mother didn’t seem fit to invite them—but perhaps you can fill that role.”

I tensed. What she asked would mean addressing the royalty and merchants. It was attention I didn’t want, and yet... “That’s important to me,” I admitted. “Maybe it’s lucky we’re here.”

“But I’m the luckiest of all.” Rhett beamed, patting Iona’s hand wrapped snugly around his arm. “So what did you tell your mother about this? Prepare me for the worst, my dear.”

“The truth.” Iona rolled her eyes. “I told her you had more right to be here than half the merchants she invited, so she should consider it a blessing you happened to be passing by.”

“And as for us...” Rhett probed.

“Oh, she warned me yet again you were a terrible fit for a lady such as me. Blah blah blah, you’ve heard it before.” Iona squeezed his arm. “But we’re not teens anymore, Rhett. I need to know if we...”

She drifted off, glancing at me as if remembering they weren’t alone.

I awkwardly cleared my throat and motioned toward the others leaving the guest wing. “I’ll follow you with the dogs. You two should catch up.”

I turned back to the suite, signaled that Rimu and Ninti should follow, and tried not to stare too long at the shadow that kept Zayne hidden from sight.

We trailed behind the others in the dark evening, weaving through the palace grounds. Fae lights illuminated our way toward the marble dome, pillars supporting the vast structure as music drifted from within. Even from here, I could see the immense cerulean pool that filled its center.

It seemed that dozens of fae had been invited to the festivities, and they appeared to be from all over the Isles, each distinct from the others. One fae had gossamer wings, another had feathered ones, and most had none. Skin tones ranged from rich bronze to fair ivory. Yet all of their ears were pointed, their clothing far more splendid than even Mariana's coronation gown.

The pinnacle of Valterran splendor held a dim candle to the brilliance of a minor fae gathering.

Still, my foot caught as I recalled the night of Mariana's coronation. The night my sister had sent someone to assassinate me. It still haunted my dreams.

I didn't even know if anyone was searching for me.

But no one here would recognize me, right? Aidan might be a newcomer to this palace, but she was also Rhett's distant cousin who had been raised in Valterra. Her backstory was uncommon, but not unheard of.

I raised my chin higher, showing off the height of my antlers, antlers that were distinctly longer than Ayla's had been. Surely none of these fae were so concerned with Valterran affairs they'd be looking out for the missing bastard princess.

I shook it off, glancing to where Zayne hid at my side and taking a deep breath. I wasn't alone, not really.

With a hand minding my skirt, I carefully climbed the tall steps into the pavilion,

Ninti and Rimu at my feet.

We entered the throne room, and it overwhelmed me, the space far more splendid than anywhere I had been. Countless statues filled the space, each of them carved from the same marble stone as the floors, the white a stark contrast to the coral that filled the ceiling with vibrant pinks, blues, and yellows.

And there, in the heart of the space, a dais rose above a central cyan pool, with a large coral throne at its center.

The Mer Kings sat upon the unusually wide throne, surrounded by their inner court and their attendants. Their rise to power was a story that had trickled down even into Valterra—how the young prince had insisted he would only take the throne's rite if his lover joined him. And thus, the two had become kings together.

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That was centuries ago, and now the kings reclined upon their seat with the fatigue of age.

I watched as Ninti and Rimu prowled around the pavilion together. Attendants carried trays of food, and both looked hopefully at the snacks. It was impressive how easily Ninti had taken on the role of Rimu's companion, and how her company seemed to calm the massive black dog.

I quickly spotted a leopard and a fawn—we weren't the only fae with animal familiars. Soon an attendant led the dogs to an array of foods set aside just for the animals.

In a floating leap, a mer jumped into the pool as another rose from it, their forms shifting with ease, their clothes as grand as their fins and their skin instantly dry.

Iona watched my awe with curiosity. "You really are from Valterra, aren't you? From the look on your face, you've never seen a fae shifter before. Well then, I'm sure the dragon fae will be quite a surprise."

"I have a lot to learn," I admitted.

"Looks like your mother found us," Rhett murmured, eyeing the central pavilion. A member of the court looked at us, her blond hair identical to Iona's and her face screwed tight in a scowl.

Iona tightened her grip on Rhett. "Oh, Teyr. See how she's muttering to Lord Tallus?"

Following her gaze, I studied the fae beside Calindra. He had a pointed chin, and chunky bracelets covered both of his wrists.

“They’re thick as thieves, those two.” Iona explained for my benefit. “They’ve been working together my whole life, and even now, I’m sure they’re plotting to tear Rhett and I apart.”

Rhett chuckled, but his answer died in his throat as the music stopped. By now, dozens of fae had gathered throughout the pavilion, and the room grew quiet as everyone turned to the central dais.

The kings stood carefully, each grabbing an armrest to assist them. The one on the left cleared his throat, and when he spoke, his voice boomed through the room.

“Welcome, guests, to our assembly! When we ascended to the throne, countless fae goods did not exist yet and trade with Valterra was reserved for the dragon fae. How life has improved since then.”

Someone cheered, and another clapped.

The king continued, “Except the Collapse nearly ruined everything, the shades preventing trade with Valterra. However, with the end of Inarus and his shades, a new era is upon us. And as the leaders of this world, we are all in the position to reap the rewards.”

Applause resounded throughout the hall, followed by echoing cheers. I mimicked the others, swallowing down the uncertainty in my stomach.

If these fae were so grateful to see Inarus gone, why had no one offered to help Eleanor establish her court? These leaders had turned a blind eye to those who had sacrificed to make this possible.

Iona glanced at me, an almost-frown on her lips.

The other king spoke next. “Our deepest gratitude for your attendance—merchants and rulers alike—we hope that by giving each of you a voice, we will all benefit. It is our pleasure to host this brilliant concord so you might shape the world to come.”

There were more cheers, and this time, as they died down, a third voice shouted into the room.

“If I may,” they began from somewhere across the pavilion. The crowd shifted, turning toward the speaker.

I found myself staring at the same male I had seen upon the yacht. The Starlit King. He was dressed in splendor, his rich golden suit tailored to his tall, strong build. Magic swelled within me as his gravitas both drew me closer and made me want to run. He seized the attention of the entire room.

The King of Mer lifted a hand in acknowledgement. “Please, enlighten us.”

The Starlit King answered, “With the Starlit Isle the closest to Valterran shores, I’ve staked my legacy on the trade of fae goods. So it is with great relief that I welcome this new era. And so, my good hosts, thank you for taking us under your care.” He lifted a glass, everyone’s attention rapt upon him. “A toast,” he proposed. “To our hosts.”

Attendants sped to action, putting glasses into every free hand. Through the chaos, the Starlit King kept his arm aloft, his lips turned in a patient smile.

I found myself lifting a drink along with the rest, the entire throne room eager to follow his lead.

“To the bright future of the Isles of Fae,” the Starlit King toasted.

“To the Isles of Fae,” the crowd echoed.

As the cheer faded, one of the kings waved his hands toward the musicians, and a bright melody began to fill the pavilion.

“And so it starts,” Iona whispered, taking another sip from her glass. She eyed Rhett warily, keeping her voice low. “Mother’s been putting pressure on the artisans, insisting they produce more fae goods faster. They’ve asked her for a larger payout for the extra work, and so far, she’s resisted.”

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“It’s the same everywhere,” Rhett sighed. “We’ll line our pockets with gold before allowing anyone else to profit from it.”

Iona smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m glad you haven’t changed, Rhett. At least, not in this.”

Rhett met her gaze with a softness I had never seen there before. “And, Iona, it’s... I don’t know if I said this earlier...” he stumbled over his words. “You’ve only grown more wonderful.”

She lifted her chin. “You always were a flatterer.”

They were so adorable, but Rhett was at such a loss of words, so completely besotted, I couldn’t help my snicker. “Iona, you’ve tangled his tongue. I don’t think I’ve ever seen that before.”

Rhett waved my comment aside. “See how my cousin teases me!”

Iona smirked.

I stepped away, taking the cue that they needed space, even if I was absolutely clueless what I would do on my own. Zayne was nearby but unavailable. How I wished I could vanish into his shadows—they seemed far more welcoming than the hungry fae surrounding me. Perhaps I could leave sooner than later. With everyone occupied, maybe this was our perfect opportunity to uncover the shards—

Someone tapped my shoulder, and I turned around, finding myself face to face with

the Starlit King. He towered over me, and my heart began to pound. Fighting the instinct to turn to Zayne, I forced myself to stare up at the king.

“Shall we dance?” he asked, as if it was that simple. He towered over me, radiance spilling from him as if he’d been kissed by the stars and not their king.

My mother had never spoken well of him and neither had Zayne, but nothing had prepared me for the pull of his power. With his gaze boring into me, something stirred on the fringe of my mind, undeniable and intangible.

I didn’t hesitate to take his hand, and the music shifted, becoming a slower piece I thankfully knew.

He spoke as we danced. “I expected to know everyone here, in one way or another. You, though, have surprised me.”

Despite my grace, I struggled not to stumble. “I’m Aida. I’m here with Rhett, er, the Master of the Golden Apple Trading Guild.” Swallowing, I decided to lean into my nervous babbling. “He’s my cousin. You see, I grew up in Valterra, and I’ve never been to the Isles before. So naturally, I’m new here. Assuming, of course, you haven’t traveled to Valterra yourself.”

In fact, I knew that he hadn’t been to Valterra for a long time, not since before I was born.

“I see.”

We took a few steps together, and my confidence slid with each passing moment. Should I be worried that he had singled me out, or was this part of his persona, to know every person in the room? I needed to know what insight Zayne might have. But for now, I could handle this. I had to.

The dance slowed even further, and despite its ease, I was breathless.

“You dance well for someone who is new,” he whispered in my ear.

“I frequented the fae fiddle bars in Valterra.”

“Is that so?” He spun me about, and I realized countless others were watching us.

My skin grew warm, and my hands began to glow. My breaths became shallow. It was all too much. His attention. Their attention. This dangerous game of subterfuge.

Light spread from my fingers and into his, growing hotter by the second.

“Oh, Teyr!” I yanked my hand from his grip.

Had I hurt him?

But the king smiled, seizing me before I could escape. Quickly, my light calmed, as if obeying his touch. “Don’t worry,” he said. “You can’t hurt me, not with starlight.”

“Starlight?” I gaped at him, my act slipping as my feet stilled, too stunned to continue the dance. “I didn’t know what my magic was. My father... I never knew him.”

He frowned. “It’s starlight, through and through. I would know.”

I took a deep breath, steadying myself. I turned my face down in embarrassment. “Still, I’m sorry. It’s my first time beyond the Rift, and I’m still learning to keep it under control.”

He shook his head, sweeping me into the next step of the dance. “You’re first lesson is to never conceal it. After all, starlight was never meant to be hidden away.”

Chapter seven

Rendezvous

Zayne

It was torture, watching Ayla with the Starlit King.

Even her blast of power, this starlight, hadn't been enough to stop him. Every step, every twirl twisted in my heart with the pounding reminder that I couldn't do something so simple as be with her.

Instead, she was in his arms. The monster who I once trusted. It made my blood boil.

This was the fae king who had promised Eleanor and me safety only to exploit our youth at the first chance he had. And yet, the crowd gravitated toward him as if his opinion was the most important in the room. Even if Mer hosted this event, he was its leader.

She couldn't have refused him when he'd singled her out, and I wished Iona had given her something plainer to wear, because dressed like this, she sparkled as brightly as him.

Everyone was staring.

She was young, shiny, and new. I cursed Rhett's plan to call Ayla his Valterran cousin, because once word got out, they'd all shower her with questions about the

humans. They would feast upon her beauty, her grace, and her knowledge of what fae goods Valterra would value most. They would eat her up and leave her empty, taking her for themselves.

But Ayla was mine.

If her powers lay in starlight, so be it, we would still find our way. Our hearts were bound by a tether, our relationship forged by trials everyone refused to see.

Except I couldn't claim her from the shadows. Not now.

Even when the music stopped and she was finally released from his dance, I didn't unclench my fists.

With only a glance in my direction—more than she should have spared me—Ayla accepted a glass of wine and meandered through the curious fae with a demure smile and shy conversation.

Through it all I watched, I listened. I plotted our fastest way out, ready if anything took a dangerous turn.

At long last, she escaped the crowd, a glass of wine in her hand as she leaned against a pillar. Silently, I found a place beside her cast in shadows.

I lifted my voice above my darkness. "Everyone seems to like you."

She didn't look at me. She barely moved her lips as she held the glass to her mouth and replied, "Any other day, I might have enjoyed it. But here..." she shivered. "I don't know who to trust."

"You're smart to be cautious."

“Will there ever come a time when I don’t need to be careful?”

I didn’t have a good answer for that.

She yawned dramatically. “Is it too early for me to leave? Maybe we could sneak out together.”

My heart raced at the thought of taking her into my shadows. “I’ll gladly hide you away.”

“We can search Calindra’s rooms while she’s busy.”

“Agreed.”

Playing up the dramatics, she tilted back the rest of her drink. She handed the empty glass to a servant and waved farewell to Rhett. After a reassuring glance at Ninti, who was chasing Rimu on the outskirts of the pavilion, Ayla wandered in the direction of our rooms, as if she was truly ready to retire.

From the shadows, I trailed behind her. Unable to wait another second, I reached out, allowing my hand to brush hers.

She smiled, the sweet sight a reminder that no matter how distant the shadows placed me, she still only had eyes for me.

We walked through the courtyard, retracing our steps, and once she reached the darkest spot, I set my hand on her elbow and guided her aside. I brought her into my shadows, holding her so close our bodies almost touched.

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She inhaled deeply. “Impressive. I don’t remember your shadows being so impervious before.”

“I suspect it has to do with everything that happened in Gloom.”

She touched my chest and sighed, looking at her hand. “I hope this stops flaring up soon though.”

I leaned closer. “Is it really starlight?”

“So he says.” She glanced away.

“What do you think?”

She frowned. “It’s possible. When he touched my magic, it was like he could control it.”

Zayne nodded seriously. “How’s your control now?”

“Better, I think.” She studied her hand. “After he directed my magic, it makes a little more sense.”

“Small blessings.”

“Regardless...” She shook her head, shifting her skirt to the side to expose a dagger holstered on her upper thigh. “I’ve got other weapons. Ones I actually know how to use.”

My knees weakened at the sight of her skirt bunched aside. When she flattened it out, it did nothing to hide her sharpening essence, spicy as ever.

“For what it’s worth, I’m glad you snuck out,” I admitted. “It was miserable, watching you with him.”

She blinked at me. “You’re jealous?”

“Of anyone dancing with you? Always.”

“Good.” She pressed her palm to my chest and leaned closer as if we were two lovers hidden away and not a pair of palace infiltrators.

I growled, my lips moments from hers. “You’re teasing me.”

“Maybe I’ve decided I’m ready for more.”

She didn’t mention the tether, but the promise of more remained, flooding my imagination with delicious possibilities. I traced a finger down the length of her neck.

She leaned closer, giving me the lightest of kisses. “But first, we have business to attend to.”

“Fine.” Still teasing, my thumb trailed over her nipple, and I treasured the sharp intake of her breath. “Stay close to me. I can dampen sounds, but the less noise we make, the more discreet we’ll be.”

We moved together, staying close to buildings where the shadows were thickest. Hand in hand and wrapped in shadows, we wandered to the royal wing. There, several apartments surrounded an open-air courtyard, a grand pool at its center, its tiled base a mosaic depicting the history Mer.

Several guards patrolled the area, none of them noticing us, and I led Ayla into a narrow alley between two of the buildings. “I’m headed to the Underworld,” I explained. “I’ll be able to see the shard from there.”

“I’ll watch.” Ayla nodded, her gaze darting about.

My awareness settled beyond, and I paused, examining the corner of my cloak that contained the shattered shard. It gave off the slightest of purples, and I focused on it, deepening my connection to its essence.

Satisfied, I looked about, searching for a similar sight, seeking out vibrations that matched the shattered shard until...there.

The shards came into focus, and my chest tightened.

“There are multiple shards here,” I told Ayla, my voice sounding far away.

“More than one? Are you sure?”

My hand heavy, I pointed to the third door from the left, my mind still halfway in the Underworld. “One of them is in there.” Next, I indicated a second door not that far from the first. “And another is in there.”

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“Then we’ll just have to break into both apartments.”

“And there’s more.”

Her breath shortened. “What do you mean?”

I paused, double-checking what I was seeing, but there was no doubt. “There are more shards back in the guest wing.”

“Oh.”

This was more than I had bargained for. It was a relief to know we were so close to our goal. And also, we had so much more to do in Mer than planned.

I found Ayla tense beside me as I resurfaced with the living. “Everything okay?” I asked.

She shook it off. “I always get nervous when you’re in the Underworld. I’m still afraid you’ll get trapped down there.”

“Never again,” I promised her.

Her lip quivered, but her gaze darted back toward the royal wing and the circling guards. “We’ll just take this one shard at a time, starting here.”

“Agreed,” I said, grabbing her wrist and preparing to shadow-step.

She pulled away. “What about the wards? Iona said—”

I shook my head. “I think I can work around them.” My skills were so much stronger than they used to be.

The shadows were quick to obey and easy to manipulate, and twisting them just right, the ward could be bypassed. Soon we had vanished from the courtyard to stand just within the apartment door.

Ayla followed as I led the way deeper into the rooms, drawn by the source of the purple light. The living space was filled with stiff ornate furniture, the walls cluttered with shelving that sealed countless items behind glass, including a collar similar to the one Calindra had sent to Inarus.

Ayla glanced at it and then to me. “I hope they’re not making more of those.”

I didn’t answer, leading the way to the back of the apartment. “The shard’s this way.”

We walked to the back of the suite and passed by two bedrooms, one far smaller than the other and decorated with fresh flowers and cozy blankets, the room at odds with the rest of the apartment. Ayla paused at the door with a frown on her lips. “Iona’s room? She really is different from her mother.”

“I hope so,” I agreed.

Together, we reached an office at the back of the apartment. Thick curtains covered the back of the room where a beautiful window should be. Ayla approached the large desk on the opposite wall.

“This is Calindra’s,” she confirmed, indicating an unfinished letter on the desk. “Where is the shard?”

I pointed to the floor beneath an ornate chaise lounge that never looked sat in. “I think it’s under the floorboards.” I pushed the couch to the side, and we lowered to the ground, our fingers spidering in the search for loose boards.

“Found it,” she said, gripping a panel and shifting it out of place.

Outside, I heard the mumble of voices.

“Quickly,” Ayla whispered.

I reached inside, my hand searching.

The voices grew louder.

My heart raced as my fingers brushed something rough. Shifting, I curled my hand around the object, pulling it free, and purple light flashed across my vision. A rush of Gloom’s stagnation filled me, slowing my breath.

Ayla shoved the floorboard back into place, jolting me back to reality. I shoved the shard into the pocket with the shattered shard, then helped her heave the couch back into its place.

Footsteps neared as I grabbed Ayla’s hand, prepared to shadow-step out of the suite, but I paused at the sight of Ayla, her ear tilted toward the long hallway.

“Mother, I...” Iona said.

“Why are we still having this conversation? Rhett is not good enough for you.” Iona tried to respond, but Calindra’s voice overpowered her daughter’s. “I’ll forgive you for allowing that scoundrel into our home, but I’ve taught you better than to consider yet another dalliance with him.”

“Yes, Mother,” she whispered, the conversation over.

Footsteps creaked nearby, and Ayla squeezed my hand.

Without further delay, I shadow-stepped us to the suite’s rear balcony. Ayla steadied on her feet as I confirmed that the curtains were closed and the windows sealed tight.

The waves crashed against the cliff beneath us, covering Ayla’s voice as she spoke. “If I had realized how Rhett would get our invitation, I would have insisted on a different way.”

“If Rhett didn’t want to reconnect with Iona, he wouldn’t have done it.”

Ayla drew her lips into a line, clearly concerned, but before she could form a reply, a window shifted behind us. I wrapped my arm around her waist and embraced her tighter at the far side of the balcony.

It was Iona’s bedroom. A fae wearing a dark cape crawled out from the window.

From the shadows, we watched as Iona deliberately scaled along the wall and onto

the next balcony, and then the next, moving with enough grace it was clear she'd done this before. When she reached the palace grounds, she scurried away.

Through it all, I held Ayla to my chest, her essence filling my every breath as I clung to each heartbeat. Ayla's hands rubbed along my back, and a low growl gathered in my throat. We needed to move... but nobody was bothering us in the shadows, and I clung to the moments like the greedy fae I was.

Long after Iona had vanished into the depths of the vast palace grounds, Ayla found her voice. "I expect that by the time we return to our suite, Rhett might have a companion, someone who could bring us more unwanted attention."

"Hopefully Calindra will be too distracted to notice the missing shard," I said, checking the pocket where I had stashed the shard. "This will make for quite the scandal."

"So one shard down." She looked about. "Where was the second one?"

I pointed toward another balcony and jumped us there. The lights in this suite were turned on, the curtains drawn mostly closed, movement crossing their narrow gap.

"Someone's in there," Ayla whispered.

I tucked her hand in mine and crept closer to the curtained door, peering through the gap. A male paced within, glanced at a desk, and then settled at it. He picked up a quill and scribbled upon a paper.

It was difficult to find any distinguishing physical features besides the dark hair upon his head. Like most mer, his only fae attributes were his pointed ears.

I glanced at Ayla, indicating she should take a look. She stepped closer to the window

and peered through just as the male leaned back, stretching his hands over his head, his bracelets jangling, before returning to his work.

She pointed to the back of the balcony, and we stepped away.

“It’s Lord Tallus. The chunky bracelets give it away,” Ayla whispered. “According to Iona, he’s Calindra’s co-conspirator.”

We watched for a few more moments. Lord Tallus was hard at work with no indication he had plans of leaving anytime soon.

“We’ll have to come back later,” Ayla suggested. “You said there was another shard in the guest wing?”

I nodded.

“Let’s go then.”

Ayla stayed close as I shadow-stepped us from the balcony, and we roamed across the grounds.

Soon a guard walked toward us, his patrol taking him right into our path. Ayla leaned closer as I hugged the shadows near.

I could have shadow-stepped us away, but when her essence of cherry and spice filled my lungs, I refrained, pressing her against the palace wall instead.

She leaned closer, her forehead against my neck and her arms around me.

A dark desire to trap her in my shadows forever was quickly followed by dirtier ones, wondering how she’d react if I reached past the slit in her skirt to find her thigh. I

settled for brushing my lips along her hairline.

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She sucked in a breath, trembling in my arms.

The guard passed by before either of us dared to make another move.

Soon, I promised myself, eager to return to our rooms once this business was done. Ayla's plump lips tightened in determination even as her hand lingered by my side.

"Soon," she agreed.

I wrapped her hand in mine and led the way, following the perimeter of the grounds until we returned to the guest wing. Despite our silence, Ayla stayed close, and only once we approached the structure did she speak, her tone serious. "I don't think it's a mere chance that there's a shard bearer amongst the visitors."

"Agreed. This assembly is much more than an opportunity to decide how much they'll charge for fae lights."

"The shard bearers will need to make new plans now that Inarus has fallen," she added.

I nodded severely, loving how we thought alike and hating how we'd reached the same dangerous conclusions.

Her gaze darted toward the guest wing. "So where is the shard?"

Once again, I sank into the Underworld, seeking out threads of purple light and finding it far easier now that I held a second shard in my cloak's pocket.

I didn't like what I saw.

"By Teyr," I cursed, opening my eyes to count the doors.

Righteous anger coursed through my veins. None of this made any sense, and not for the first time, I felt like a pawn in his game.

"Who has the shard?" Ayla pressed.

"It's three shards," I corrected. "And they belong to the Starlit King."

Chapter eight

Secrets and Starlight

Ayla

The flirty fun of sneaking around with Zayne sank in my stomach as wariness washed over me instead. "Threeshards?"

Zayne was silent for a long moment. "Maybe they belong to a member of his court."

We glanced at one another uncomfortably, wishing he was right. But if the shards were in the Starlit King's rooms, he had to know they were there.

"But why?" I pressed. "Not even half an hour ago, he toasted to the future of the Isles—one free from shades blocking the trade route. A bright future without Gloom." If he controlled three of seven shards, why hadn't he acted against Inarus earlier?

Zayne didn't answer. Instead, he offered his hand in preparation to shadow-step. "Let's see what we can learn."

Heart racing, I accepted, and as the darkness swallowed us, I fought the fear that we were walking into a game much larger than either of us could see.

We landed in a vast living room. Looking around, I had no doubt these were the rooms reserved for the Starlit Court. Luxurious fabrics draped from every surface, the remainder shining with jewels. The living space overlooked the cliff, floor to ceiling windows opening to a stately balcony.

A member of the court was passed out on one of the couches, the drink on the table suggesting they'd already partied to the point of exhaustion.

There were several doors behind us and a staircase leading upstairs. Zayne paused, his body stiffening as he searched for the shards once again.

I waited, my gaze darting across the room, searching for any threat. Watching his still chest brought back memories of the night he had almost died, and I startled as the lone fae snored, his chin dipping further against his chest. Holding my breath, I confirmed nothing else moved.

"Upstairs," Zayne whispered, pointing to the ceiling near the windows. Relieved, I exhaled.

He shadow-stepped us up the flight of stairs and into a long hallway. Several doors lined the hall, but fortunately, there was only one to the side of the sea. Presumably, it was the largest room—the space the Starlit King would surely claim for himself.

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My mouth dried as Zayne led me through the darkness again, this time into the main suite.

We stood in an office, a bedroom door ajar on the side wall. Most of the room was filled by a large hardwood desk, the window imposing behind it. Like the floor below, the floor-to-ceiling glass looked out upon the sea.

Zayne pointed at the table. “There.”

An ornate box shone from the center of the table, its walls decorated with golden stars set against a dark blue sky. A heavy lid sat upon it, a diamond pommel for its handle.

And once my gaze found it, I couldn’t look away. Something about it felt so familiar, and magic welled within me.

Drawn closer, I stepped from the safety of Zayne’s side.

“Wait” —Zayne snatched my elbow— “Be careful!”

He slowed me down, but I couldn’t stop.

The same power that had burned in my hands when I’d danced with the king returned. My hands glowed, yellow and hot, but I didn’t feel any pain. Opening and closing my hand, I watched as a pinprick of light formed at my palm, growing bigger.

Starlight.

This time when Zayne caught my upper arm, he didn't let go, forcing me to take a step back.

Startled, I blinked several times, struggling to pull my gaze from the box. "What is happening?" I rasped.

"Like calls to like, and that box is built from starlight."

"Oh." Looking about, I noticed how the darkness that had so comfortably disguised us had thinned. "Your shadows..."

"I know." Zayne growled, guiding me back another step, and his darkness grew a little thicker.

"So how do we open the box?" I asked.

Zayne's lips drew into a line. "We don't."

"Why—" I began to ask.

But before I could finish my sentence, he gathered the shadows around us and leapt, leaving the shards behind.

Chapter nine

Escape

Ayla

I gulped the fresh sea air.

Our jump had come as a shock, and my hands still glowed with starlight. Looking about, I saw we now stood on yet another balcony. Realizing this one belonged to our room, I sighed with relief.

Zayne knelt before me, inspecting my hands as his darkness thickened around us in a dim aura. In such a short time, I'd grown to like it here, secured in the halo of his shadows.

"How does it feel?" he asked, probing my palm.

"It's hot, but it doesn't burn me." I said, curling each of my fingers as the last of the light ebbed away. "I'm fine."

"Good." His jaw loosened as he lifted my hands to his lips.

The sensation of him kissing my fingers. The sight of him on his knees. Everything stirred something deep inside me.

"Why didn't we try to do something?" I asked. "You jumped us away before we could even make a plan to open the starlit box."

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“I’ve seen his starlight before. It’s impossible.”

“You have me now! I have starlight too. Maybe if I had—”

He gripped my thigh, his fingers reaching through the slit to find my skin. “Perhaps, but we’re not risking it. Not without a plan.”

I nodded, not only agreeing that maybe we should talk to the others first, but increasingly aware that the way he touched me brought desire to pool in my belly.

All evening, we had stayed close, so focused on the task at hand that our touches only lingered. It had been playful. Except now, returned to the safety of our balcony...

“Is this okay?” Zayne asked, loosening his grip to caress the skin of my thigh. When I didn’t answer, his other hand slipped to my waist. He leaned forward again, pressing a kiss to my belly.

Unbidden, a moan slipped past my lips.

He looked up at me, grinned, and brought his lips to me once more. Leaving him cast in moonlight, I stepped back and gripped the banister, placing cold air between us.

Zayne stood. “Did I do something wrong? I thought you were enjoying that.”

“I-I don’t know.”

I stilled, my heart pounding. I wanted this—I wanted him so badly it hurt. And still, I

was afraid, so afraid...

My head pounded.

I couldn't even remember what frightened me.

But I needed him.

He lifted a hand to my face, ran a finger along my cheek, and at his caressing touch, I melted. Catching me, he pinned me against the balcony's banister, kissing me.

My lips seared, parting as I invited him deeper. I threaded my hand through his hair, finding his horns and locking him in place. He answered with harsh kisses, wandering hands, and the promising pressure of a bulge in his pants. I grinded against him, thrilled by how hard he already was. I leaned into his touch, wondering where this would end and hoping it would never stop.

He broke our kiss, trailing his lips along my cheek. Down my neck. Then collarbone. He went lower, finding my cleavage while his other hand wandered up my waist to cup my breast. Moaning, I tugged the bodice aside, exposing my taut nipple.

Zayne lowered, swirled his tongue around it, and released it with a soft kiss. I moaned at the lack of friction, and he answered by cupping my breast, squeezing it with his hand.

Leaning back, he stared down at me, and I pebbled further. "Ayla, you taste like sunbeams and summer days. Tell me, are you ready for more?"

My breath hitched.

"Because," —he tweaked my nipple between his fingers— "I'd like to kiss you

everywhere, taste you, devour you, if you'd allow me."

I shivered at the way the words caught in his throat.

"Please," I begged.

Zayne obliged, kissing me again, needier than before.

I gulped for air as he lowered to his knees, a hand braced against my thigh. He kissed my belly button, his lips sliding across the fabric of my dress, before he placed another kiss on my hip.

Finally, he slipped a hand under the slit of my skirt, planting a kiss against my exposed thigh. His contact burned me to the core.

As his fingers ran higher, I tugged the skirt wide, easing his journey. His kisses wandered, his tongue not that far behind. I could barely breathe by the time he found my panties.

His fingers wrapped cautiously around the waistband, and I whimpered. He tugged the fabric down my legs, and I stepped out of them, exposing myself to the salty breeze.

Boldly, I held the dress aside as he stared at my crux, my ruddy hair, trimmed low in some hope that he and I would... How I had hoped for this, how I had feared it. And now that he'd found me, my thighs clenched, certain of what I wanted.

He looked up at me, his hand trembling, his firm jaw poised before my sex.

“Please,” I begged again.

He obliged, pressing his lips against me.

My knees buckled, and I leaned back, bracing against the railing as I grabbed his horns.

It seemed impossibly wicked, us against the banister as the sea cracked against the cliff below. Anyone could see us, but with shadows, there would be no onlookers. He could jump us away if we fell. Every element of this thrilled me, and I would never understand how I could trust him with my body while still guarding my heart.

He repositioned, lifting my foot to his shoulder, angling me. His tongue swept across the full length of my folds, and I trembled at his touch.

More. I need more.

I ached as he paused, helping me to settle upon the banister, my legs wide and breath held as he eyed my opening, primed for his taking.

“You’re beautiful,” he rasped.

Then he was upon me, his tongue lapping against my clit. It swirled around my opening. My bliss grew, and I braced, grabbing his horns, pulling him closer.

He leaned in, sucking on my clit with renewed vigor.

My orgasm surged from my curled toes, growing into a strangled cry in my throat. I writhed against him, consumed by the way he worshiped me.

Light ebbed from my hands, and as pleasure rippled through me, wave after wave, I didn't fear my forming magic. I embraced it.

Light flashed; my brain blurred.

Somehow, I landed back in my body, in my own mind.

Whatever had happened, it seemed to be mere light. But it left me gasping, sated, my limbs weak. I was breathless, my heart aching in a new way. All I could do was watch as he leaned back, helped me down, and set my skirts to right, his fingers lingering a little longer than necessary.

And he'd done all of that to me. For me.

My heart swelled. I might be frightened, but it was time to take a risk. I needed him to know how much he meant to me.

Zayne

Ayla held my gaze with fire in her eyes. "I've felt the tether ever since I called you back to the living, and I'm sorry I denied it, denied us. I need you so badly it frightens me."

My chest throbbed as if my heart could be tugged out of it. To hear her finally acknowledge this thing between us... I lifted my chest with pride.

My Ayla was wild, and it was a delight to fulfill her wicked desires. I had listened carefully, taking in each moan as I stroked her with my tongue, feeling how her

thighs tightened around me as she found her release.

She made starlight.

My kisses pleased her, and the success filled me with a heady satisfaction, leaving me flushed and hard. I took a deep breath, increasingly aware that she had stepped closer, now so close that my stiff cock pressed against her stomach.

Looking down at my pants, Ayla swayed her hips, grinding against me with a teasing grin. My clothes dulled the sensation, but they failed to stop a growl from escaping my lips.

She pounced, devouring me with hungry lips. There was no hesitation as she rushed to action, her fingers dipping below my waistband. My body tightened, my cock straining as she sought it out.

Her hand found my erection and wrapped it tight, causing another, louder, growl to rip from my throat. The shadows flickered around us as my control wavered.

She looked about and, much to my annoyance, paused. "You better keep control of the darkness if you don't want to make a scene."

"Oh, we're going to make a scene, are we?"

She didn't answer, instead lowering to her knees before me, and I almost came simply from the sight. She tugged at my pants, opening the ties with a moan as my cock burst forth.

Her lips parted at the sight of my erection. As my pants hit the floor, I seized the shadows. I braced.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:48 am*

First, she kissed each of my pelvic bones, my cock twitching with each touch of her lips. She brushed her fingertip up the side of my shaft, and when she reached the tip, she paused, staring at the droplet of precum gleaming there.

I couldn't move. Couldn't think. Couldn't do anything as she softly kissed my tip, her tongue darting forth to lap up the glistening dew. All at once, she took me in, swallowing me until my cock bumped against the roof of her mouth.

I groaned.

She glanced up, her eyes shining with delight.

I was desperate to say something as my mind stuttered. The tether ached, my heart ripping from my chest.

Ayla encircled the root of my cock with her hand, tightening her grip as she lifted her mouth away. She paused, stroked me once with her palms, and then took me back into her mouth, this time moving up and down, her tongue sliding along the side as her hands stroked the base. Again and again, she worked me, wringing pleasure from me.

It took all my self-control to remain standing as I buckled under her demands. She squeezed and stroked, sucked and teased. She tested and explored until, with growing confidence, she took me even deeper into her mouth.

I teetered on unbalanced feet and wrapped my hands in her hair as I clung to consciousness. The world darkened around us, the shadows cocooning her deed.

“Ayla, I’m going to come,” I groaned.

She looked up, met my gaze, and nodded, turning my warning into an invitation.

Pleasure ripped through me, and I lifted my face to the sky, my growl so great it escaped the shadows, a desperate, primal claim to warn off any who would come near her. Stars dotted my vision.

She nursed me down, her throat tightening as she swallowed. The sensation brought a new wave of pleasure as I emptied myself into her hungry mouth. I trembled, only finding my grip with reality as she released my cock and leaned back, a proud smile spread across her lips.

“That was fun,” she teased.

I stilled my spinning head, too stunned to know what to say. I wrapped her hands in mine and helped her to her feet. Her skirt swayed around her hips, an excruciating reminder that her underwear was still clenched in my fist.

Whatever she saw in my face, it made her grin.

“What is it?” I rasped.

“Just happy to unravel such a proud Shadow Prince.”

My protest failed in my throat. She hadn’t merely unraveled me—she had destroyed me. My earlier obsession felt quaint compared to the demands I now felt.

She’s mine.

Wrapping her in my arms, I shadow-stepped us to our bedroom, determined to keep

her hidden from sight regardless of whether my shadows came undone.

But intentions be damned, I stumbled as we reached the bedroom. Ayla and I leaned upon each other for balance as I took stock of our disheveled state.

Clothes unkempt. Underwear missing. The sweet taste of her seared on my lips. I couldn't shake any of it, and I wished this night could last forever.

Except my vision was tunneling, my eyelids growing heavy as a wave of fatigue claimed me, and judging from her wobble, Ayla was feeling the same.

Barely conscious, we crawled onto the bed. We didn't even have time to pull the blankets over us before the tether claimed us and we succumbed to dreams.

## Chapter ten

### Bright Sun

#### Ayla

The tree of my dreams stood on a hilltop. It still bore the scars of times before, when the bark was damaged and the shallow roots contained. It was beginning to heal, but more importantly, it no longer stood alone.

Another tree had joined the first, this one dark and evergreen, with needles for leaves, the trunk persistent and strong. Even here, Zayne's magic was tethered to mine, and it made the hill far less lonely.

Reaching out, I touched my tree, falling inward.

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No longer thwarted by iron, the roots of my tree grew strong, plunging deep into the bountiful earth. Green branches reached to the dark sky as new leaves unfurled to soak in the starlight.

As before, I was drawn to the roots, the way they reached into the vast earth. They were finally free to weave through the soil, reaching a deeper well, drinking more than before.

They grew deeper still. Plunging desperately into the earth.

Only the tree was changing too fast and in ways it couldn't control. Time would ease the discomfort, time would help it heal, if only there was time.

The roots filled my mind with countless passageways, and I found even more...

The roots of the trees had grown interconnected, those of one tree becoming those of the other. At points, there was no telling where the roots of one tree began and the other ended.

My heart raced. It was beautiful how nature adapted. It was terrifying how the trees were joined.

Trapped, tethered, and bound.

My head throbbed, the dream haunting me as memories from the evening before crashed into me.

The shadows. The shards.

The balcony.

And then we had—

I snapped to alertness, looking down. I had never removed the dress; we'd barely made it into the bed.

By Teyr.

Heart racing, I reached for Zayne. Before I even touched him, he stirred, his eyes wide with alarm that mirrored mine. "What—" he croaked, clearing his throat. "What happened?"

I shook my head, and the pounding grew even worse.

Zayne pressed a hand to his forehead, squeezing his eyes shut. "Are you okay?"

"Something feels strange, but I'm not sure... You?"

"Let me check." He stilled, signaling his descent into the underworld.

The action was a normal routine, but why did it feel so different? I didn't just see him drift away...

The icy chill of the Underworld, the flow of its currents, and the steady, persistent ebb of death. I felt it.

I gasped. "Zayne!"

He blinked his eyes open. “What’s wrong?”

“Death,” I swallowed, still stunned by the power of its grasp. “When you went under, I felt it too.”

He lifted a hand to my cheek, his eyes searching my face. “That’s not possible.”

I leaned into his touch. “I know, but...” The dream. My tree, no longer alone. “I think the tether has changed.”

As he considered my words, I watched as his lip curled with thought and his mind whirled against mine. Concern, doubt, then finally, recognition. His eyes widened. “I feel you, Ayla. Your emotions are inside my heart.”

My stomach tightened, and I shifted away, sitting up and cradling my aching head.

“I never meant to trap you,” I whispered into my hands.

He scooted closer, his concern flooding my mind. He wasn’t alarmed, just curious. But still, every sensation was overwhelming. My emotions were already more than I could manage... and now I felt his too.

My head pounded.

Or that might have been the door.

“Meetings start in an hour!” Rhett shouted from the other side. “I’m sure you two had plenty of fun last night, but there’s work to do.”

“We’ll be ready soon,” Zayne answered for both of us.

“Fun,” I echoed with a chuckle. My mind reeled with the implications of this. Zayne could feel all my emotions, just as I felt his.

And right now, while he was surprised and curious, he wasn’t frightened.

He should’ve been terrified. He was stuck with me.

Zayne crawled across the bed and sat behind me, straddling me with his legs. He wrapped his arms around my belly, pulled me to his chest, and nuzzled the back of my head. It should have been so soothing, but I froze, desperate for him and afraid of him, unable to run away or lean closer.

When I didn’t respond to his touch, he leaned back, putting space between his chest and my back. He began to shuffle away.

“Don’t go,” I whispered. “I meant what I said last night. I’m sorry I denied the tether, and I don’t want to go back to that. I just never thought it would become anything more. I wasn’t prepared to have you in my head, to be in yours.”

“I don’t think anything could have prepared us for this.” He chuckled. How he could find humor in this situation... All the same, the laughter sounded nice.

“We’re a mess, aren’t we?” I asked.

“A beautiful one.”

He leaned forward again, and this time, I snuggled against him, wrapping his arms tighter around my waist.

“Just breathe,” he whispered into my ear. “We’ll adapt. We always do.”

“Okay.” I believed him.

He inhaled, the sound like a calming ocean, and I followed his lead as we took a few more deep breaths together.

“How are you always so calm, so in control?” I asked.

He shrugged against me. “I needed control to survive.”

“And you’re sure...” I paused, the question on the tip of my tongue. Are you sure I’m not a burden? Can you handle someone volatile like me?

“Yes,” he answered. “You are my fire, Ayla. My inspiration and drive. Alone, I would wither away, descending into death when life failed to give me purpose. Your passion is beautiful and not a thing to fear.”

My cheeks heated. No one had ever said that to me. It had always been hold still, stop sneaking out, behave like your sisters... I never meant to rebel, not really. But doing what my family asked felt wrong. Doing things my way had been the only way, but

the price had been a terrible loneliness.

His lips brushed against my ear. “I know you need time, so don’t respond. But surely you can feel it—I love you, Ayla. I’ve loved you for a long time.”

I could feel it. Like I was the most amazing treasure, one he could admire every day for the rest of his life.

The way he saw me...

I squeezed my eyes tight to fight the tears from falling.

If this was love, I wasn’t sure I had felt love before.

“You are not a burden,” he added. “You are not a disaster. And I’ll kill everyone who taught you otherwise.”

“Please don’t,” I laughed through the tears. “I’m pretty sure that would start a war.”

“If you insist, but the offer stands.”

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I turned around to face him, searching his dark eyes, still awestruck to find something beautiful reflected back at me. I wanted to say something, give him something in exchange, but the words caught in my throat.

He shook his head, lifting a finger to my lip. “When you’re ready.”

I nodded, bewildered that he understood. Thankful he could handle me. All of me.

“Now then,” he continued, nodding toward the bathroom. “Showers, clothes. Drink some water to help with the headache because we have a long day ahead.”

I set the phonograph to play easygoing ballads as we prepared. Zayne dressed himself in all black, finishing the look with his dark traveling cape, the shards secured within. For myself, I wore close-fitting dark pants and a loose blouse, a dagger hilted at the waist. I wore my hair down in soft waves, deciding against any of the jewelry Iona had loaned me. Merchant, the look said. Not at all a princess.

We entered the central living room, finding Rhett alone. He picked at his food as Rimu and Ninti chowed down on what looked to be half a chicken.

“How’s Iona?” I teased, swinging in to the seat beside him. “I’m assuming she snuck out already?”

Rhett blushed. “Oh, uh... How did you know?”

“Don’t worry, no one trailed her here,” Zayne added. “I can’t promise anything about this morning though.”

“We needed some time alone,” Rhett finally answered. “And I thought when Ayla vanished into the shadows, the two of you—”

“The two of us were searching for shards,” I corrected. “We had just taken Calindra’s shard when Iona snuck out.”

Rhett put down his fork. “If you have what you need, does that mean we’re ready to leave? Iona needs—”

I shook my head. “There are still more shards here.”

Ninti nosed the last of the chicken toward Rimu, licked her lips, and wandered closer. “How many more?” she asked.

“Four.” Zayne answered. “We couldn’t retrieve any others though. Lord Tallus has one.”

“Tallus?” Rhett shook his head. “Of course he has one if Calindra does. But what’s their plan?”

“That’s something I hope to figure out,” Zayne said. “I’ll listen to gossip today while you two play merchant.”

“And the other shards?” Ninti asked.

“The Starlit King has three,” I explained.

“Fucking Teyr,” Rhett cursed, leaning back in his seat. “There’s no way we’re stealing from him.” When we didn’t answer, he looked between the three of us. “Right?”

“We just need to come up with a plan and—”

I silenced as someone knocked on the door.

“Rhett!” A shrill voice pierced through the door. “I need a word with you.”

He slouched. “That would be Calindra.”

“Can we walk to the throne room together?” she continued.

“Can’t you make me disappear?” he pleaded with Zayne.

“Go.” Rolling my eyes, I ushered him toward the door. “Hopefully whatever you’re doing with Iona will distract her from everything else.”

Zayne vanished into the shadows, and Rhett opened the door. Together, we stepped into the courtyard, Rhett withering under Calindra’s critical gaze. She had trapped Iona’s wrist with one hand and her other was poised to knock on the door again.

“Good. The three of us need to chat,” she snapped.

I gave them a wide berth as we joined the guests ambling toward the throne room, Rimu and Ninti trailing at my heel and Zayne never that far away.

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The headache had passed, but his increased presence remained. I could sense the shadows around him stronger than before, far more certain of exactly where he was. The sense of death was far less alarming than before, becoming a natural part of him.

It made me wonder what sensation my magic gave him. Was it like trapped starlight ready to burn? Because that's what I felt. So much power with nowhere to go.

Except I couldn't lose control. The guests had watchful eyes, and I'd already gathered more attention than I wanted. As the skin prickled on the back of my neck, I struggled to keep my limbs loose.

Aida's curious, I reminded myself, working to stay in character as we approached the throne room.

My stomach pitted as I stepped into the pavilion. Made from so much marble, the throne room was blindingly bright in the daylight, but even that couldn't hide the way countless fae turned toward me.

"Ah, Aida!" The Starlit King motioned to me from where he sat. "The surprise guest of the hour. Come closer, my secretary and I had a few questions about Valterra we hoped you could answer."

Chapter eleven

Long Shadows

Zayne

To her credit, Ayla's hesitation to the Starlit King's request, with her eyes wide and a growing blush, gave the illusion of an awestruck admirer. Only I could feel the way the attention set her nerves on fire.

She's so much better at pretending than she thinks.

I hoped she could feel some of my admiration.

She stood taller, approaching the King and his fellow fae. The two had taken one of the many small, circular tables now strewn throughout the pavilion, each claimed by a royal house or merchant guild. The chatter was light, everyone waiting for the discussion to begin.

"How can I be of service?" she asked, reaching the king.

"We were wondering, with regards to the loyalty of their people, how does it sway?"

Ayla cocked her head, clearly confused by the question. "The queen is well loved."

"Queen Aveline is ill."

Ayla blanched. "I didn't know."

The king's secretary, surrounded by parchments, spoke up. "The queen's condition has been kept quiet, but we have contacts within the court. And if we're in the business of asking you about Valterran sentiment, you should also know that the queen's bastard has gone mysteriously missing."

"Princess Ayla?" She swallowed. "The part-fae eldest."

The Starlit King leaned closer. "Did you know her?"

Ayla shrugged. “I’ve seen her. We visited some of the same fiddle bars—Valterra only has so many of them—but we never did more than dance.” She took a steadying breath, and I sent her all the calm I could muster. “What happened?”

The secretary answered. “To the bastard princess? She vanished on the night of Princess Mariana’s coronation ball, so it’s thought she ran away out of spite. As for the Valterran Queen” —he sighed— “she’s taken to her rooms and sees almost no one but her daughters and the physicians. My correspondents can tell me nothing more.”

“She doesn’t see the King Consort?” Ayla asked.

“It seems not.”

“Which is the reason we’re curious,” the Starlit King continued. “If something has happened to their beloved queen, who are the Valterran people more loyal to, the King Consort or the Princess Heir?”

Ayla glanced away, deep in thought, her concerns radiating into me. The whole situation was alarmingly relevant to this assembly. Grayson, the King Consort, had only married the Queen to secure an alliance for the movement of fae goods.

He was a prince of a southern kingdom—one of many countries that sprawled across the continent beyond the mountain ranges that separated Valtterra from the remainder of the human kingdoms. In the years since the collapse, while fae goods had become sparse in Valtterra, they had become exceptionally rare further south.

If Grayson took control of Valtterra, he would certainly facilitate the movement of fae goods further south. It had always been his goal.

Finally, Ayla answered. “Why would the people have to choose between them? I

thought the King Consort and Princess Heir were friendly, so she would ascend, and he would support her. After all, she is his firstborn.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:48 am*

“So they say,” the secretary agreed. “But the news that the queen refuses to see her husband is a strange development.”

Ayla shrugged. “Either way, it would be a surprise if anyone but Princess Mariana ascends. It’s what the people expect.”

“Indeed.”

Ayla glanced toward the nearby steps where Rhett, Iona, and Calindra were finally approaching. “Beyond that, I’m not sure I can be of much help. Apologies, Your Highness.”

She scampered off, eager to join her ‘cousin,’ her heart hammering even faster than before. I frowned. For all that the queen had gone to great lengths to block Ayla’s magic, Ayla still didn’t wish her mother ill, and the news had clearly shaken her.

Rhett claimed an empty table, and as Ayla sat beside him, he leaned closer, whispering in her ear. I stepped closer so I could hear. “Calindra’s furious. Since she no longer has legal authority over Iona, like when we were teens, she can’t control Iona’s choices. But she can make it very difficult for Iona to leave Mer.”

“What does Iona want?” Ayla asked.

Rhett watched Iona, now gliding into a seat toward the front at a table she shared with her mother. “To be honest, there hasn’t been time to ask, but if you’re looking for dramatic distractions, it looks like you’ll have it.”

I didn't doubt it. Everyone was now glancing between Rhett and Iona, the whispers already stirring.

Clearing her throat, Calindra stood, patting Iona's shoulder as she addressed the room. "If we're all here, let's begin," she continued, setting an agenda for the day. "Soon we should be celebrating our new agreement, one that sets a clear precedent of how the Isles will trade with Valterra."

Pens began to scratch, royalty yawned, and I settled into one of the few remaining shadows of the bright room.

First order of business, the Starlit King's secretary recapped why trade had changed and how the shades had fallen. Only...

Their version of events was quite different from mine.

Ayla impressed me, her expression remaining interested and curious, as if she hadn't actually been there for the events in question. As for myself, I was fortunate to hide in the shadows where I could fume in peace.

The way the secretary told the story, once Eleanor had been denied public permission by the Starlit King to claim her throne, he had apologized in private, giving her resources to complete the task in secret. Allegedly, the deception was to ensure Inarus's spies didn't suspect her arrival.

Lies.

"They were successful, but their success depended upon means we didn't account for," the secretary continued.

My skin crawled, wondering what level of deception they were weaving next. None

of it explained why the Starlit King would go through such lengths to create a false narrative.

The secretary cleared his throat. “We have learned that through their fight, Zayne, the Shadow Prince, fell to the dark persuasion of his former teacher. He destroyed Inarus through necromantic means.”

Ah.

There it was.

Abruptly, whispers broke out throughout the room, some crying out with disgust. Despite the fury raging in my chest, I cautioned my shadows to remain close.

Perhaps in this case, the truth was far worse than a lie.

A merchant stood to shout. “You mean the shades can return at any time?”

“Fortunately, Prince Zayne would have to rebuild the army, and since the isle is largely uninhabited, any attempts to do so would take time.”

“No wonder the Shadow Prince showed such a poor aptitude for conventional shadow magic,” a member of the Dawn Court mused.

The secretary nodded. “His powers were dulled within the Starlit Court. Another reason our king was merciful to host the exiled siblings.”

Another asked, “Is he still working with his sister, the Shadow Queen?”

“We don’t know.”

The questions continued, and I watched, increasingly frustrated by how easily the Starlit King pulled the strings.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:48 am*

What's his endgame?

I didn't dare make my move until I was sure.

For the remainder of the day, I lingered in the shadows, watching and listening, eager to learn any breadcrumb I could gleam. The talks continued, and soon, the Starlit King's excessive port fees became the assembly's focus.

Calindra listened to it all with meticulous notetaking, and soon Lord Tallus passed her a hastily written note. She replied just as quickly, their parchment traveling back and forth with their scribbles. Curious, I tried to get closer.

Iona turned to me, her gaze sharp upon my location.

Startled, I lurched backwards, further to the shadows.

Slowly, her attention shifted back to the assembly, but I didn't dare get that close again.

The day went on.

Every now and then, someone asked Ayla something. They asked her how much value humans had for such-and-such faegood, or if the humans would be interested in something that had never been sold before. She handled it with ease, lying just enough to pretend her knowledge was that of a merchant and not a palace education.

Over lunch, they argued about what sort of port fees the Starlit King could be talked

down to. Meanwhile, the Starlit King himself was careful to stay to the prepared script and there were no slips for me to pry from. Little caught my attention as the day yawned on.

At least, until the late afternoon break.

Queen Reina of Wisp approached the Starlit King, her dragon wings revealed, making a fierce display.

What does she want from him?

It surprised me she was even present. The dragon fae tended to stay on their distant volcanic island. She had been quiet through the proceedings, huddling over a table with her mate, taking notes, and referencing ledgers of her own.

After all, Wisp had been trading with humans far longer than anyone else, and they had their own ways about it. Despite their limited ports—their isle more volcano than land—they remained the only other isle who could claim proximity to Valterra.

“You wear it so proudly,” she addressed the Starlit King without preamble.

“Ah, Reina, it has been too long. Would you like to reconsider using the Starlit Isle’s ports? Once, they served you so well—”

“You stole that dagger from Wisp.”

Ah. I’d heard rumors of the dragon blades, divine weapons that Wisp never intended to make. They’d been scattered before Reina ascended, and she’d spent the last century hunting the blades down.

I’d seen the dark dagger the Starlit King wore my entire life, but I’d never given it a

second thought. It was always with him, and I assumed it belonged to his bloodline.

If the blade was one of Wisp's lost dragon blades, it was something he kept secret.

The Starlit King shook his head. "We've been arguing about this for a century. I found the blade. I went on a grand quest to find it. While I'm sorry that the dragon fae lost it, what's done is done."

"It's valuable, we're in agreement," she leveled with him. "But tell me, what can I give you in exchange for its return? Our treasure rooms are far more splendid than the last time I offered."

The Starlit King sneered, his face fiercer than I had ever seen as he gripped the hilt. "Never. It's mine, Reina. Accept that and leave me be. The dragon blade will always be mine."

## Chapter twelve

### Damnably Dancing

#### Zayne

"So that accounts for six shards," Ninti mused.

I'd just finished recounting exactly what had happened the night before as Ayla prepared for tonight's dinner. The rest of the crew lingered in the living area, Rhett lounging on the couch as I ate the provisions they'd snuck to me.

"It leaves only one shard unaccounted for," I concluded. The firewolf nodded. She and Rimu had settled on an armchair, their rumps cuddled against one another. The two had spent the entire day together, prowling the palace grounds. "I don't have a

clue where the last one is. I had hoped to hear something helpful today, but I'm not even sure Calindra knows we've taken her shard."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:48 am*

“She’s anxious,” Rhett observed.

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure that’s your fault.”

“Technically, I think it’s Iona’s. I will only accept responsibility for stoking the fire.”

I studied him, debating if his heart was on the line. If it was, the risks of our quest rose considerably.

He smiled dreamily. “I love seeing Iona standing up for herself. She deserves so much more credit than her mother gives her. She’s special. The way she laughs, the way she thinks, and by Teyr, the way she moves that perfect body.”

We’re screwed.

“Is she asking for your help leaving Mer?” I prodded. “Because we really don’t need the mer guards following us when we leave.”

“I know that!” Rhett said defensively and then sighed. “But she’s finally giving herself permission to choose me after all these years, and you’re—what—suggesting that I tell her to back off?”

I shrugged.

“Zayne, I know what we’re doing is dangerous. But she’s been told what to do her whole life, and if she’s finally ready to break free, I can’t let our little heist get in the way.”

“Awe, that’s kind of cute,” Ayla teased from the doorway, “if it weren’t so dangerous.”

My mouth dried at the sight of her. Tonight’s dress was somehow more luscious than the last, her bold red bodice turning into a tight, short skirt that showed off her long legs. Her emotions, calmer now that she’d confidently navigated the meetings of the day, only added to the sexy effect.

“Dangerous,” Rhett echoed, glancing from her to me. “I could say the same about you two.”

Ayla playfully smacked the side of his head. “At least we’re not keeping secrets from each other about why we’re here.”

No, we’ve just lost sense of our individual emotions. Definitely safer.

Not that I minded.

“Our messy love lives aside” —Rhett stood, turning toward me— “keep a close ear from the shadows tonight. A good merchant knows the deals aren’t made in daylight. They happen under the disguise of night.”

I leaned back, relieved Rhett was finally giving some useful advice.

Ninti jumped down from the chair, shook, and looked up at Ayla. “We’ll need to come up with an excuse for you to skip a couple hours of tomorrow’s meetings.”

“Why?”

“I want to train with you. I suspect the Starlit King is right and your powers are starlight. Maybe with a little practice, you’ll be able to open that box with the

shards.”

Ayla rolled her wrists, glancing at them to confirm no light ebbed from her hands.

“You think so?”

Ninti nodded. “You’re already controlling it far better today. I didn’t see a single outburst.”

Ayla nodded, her playful expression hardening into determination. Still, I felt the doubt in her heart. “A little practice might do the trick.”

“We’ll say you need a nap,” Rhett offered. “Teyr knows the meetings are boring enough. I’ll make your excuses.”

“Excellent.”

The chattering of guests grew louder on the other side of the door, signaling there could be no more delay. The second evening of festivities had begun.

“Shall we?” I asked, nodding toward the door.

Ayla playfully offered me her arm, allowing me the privilege of three steps at her side before I vanished into the shadows.

If only we could spend the whole night together.

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Soon, we joined the crowd that gathered in the throne room. The tables where we had worked all day had been cleared, replaced by a large sand sculpture. It depicted a grand shipping vessel, the symbols of each isle displayed across its base, and across the room, the artist was hard at work on a second masterpiece, entertaining questions by the curious courtiers.

Ayla and Rhett were quickly approached by several other merchants. Through their niceties, it was obvious what they wanted—insight into Valterra. What goods did she think would be in highest demand, what did the humans need that had not been developed, and on and on they went.

Keeping her in my line of sight, I wandered through the room, catching breadcrumbs of conversation barely detectable over the live music.

“...the sand sculpture snubbed Wisp. Their symbols are missing.”

“...such interest in the part-fae is unnecessary, as if we don’t have ledgers of our own to tell us what humans value.”

My fist clenched at the sound of this, eager to send the message of exactly how far they underestimated Ayla, even if their disinterest should have been a relief.

“...we’ve finished producing the first delivery of weapons you requested.”

I froze, overhearing this final phrase, uncertain who the speaker was. The words had come from behind a pillar, the fae tucked out of sight just beyond the pavilion. I settled into the darkness behind them.

Bracelets clinked as the speaker rolled his wrist and continued. Lord Tallus. “The collars are frustratingly intricate, so I hope you aren’t asking for many more. Fortunately, the enchanted spears are straightforward, and we’ll be able to produce countless more.”

“Excellent,” his companion replied, and I shifted my position, finding there was no location in which the light hit his face. Regardless, I would know that voice anywhere.

“How are the other prototypes?” the Starlit King asked. “The siege weapons, the poisons?”

“Promising, but our artisans are still fine-tuning the process.” Tallus glanced away nervously. “And who, dare I ask, are you planning to sell these weapons to?”

The Starlit King just smiled. “Do not worry. The Isles will remain safe, and moreover, we will all prosper. Trust me, for all your assistance, my dear Collector, Mer will benefit.”

Collector. Tallus had worked with Inarus under that name, providing the necromancer with supplies and gold.

Amused, Tallus glanced at the mer throne, the ancient fae kings having never made an appearance. “Someone needs to ensure Mer’s future.”

“Indeed,” the Starlit King agreed.

I leaned closer, hoping to learn more, except Tallus left, sliding back into the festivities as if he had never been on their fringe. But I wouldn’t forget.

The Starlit King was buying the weapons Mer was producing. Weapons he claimed

wouldn't threaten the fae.

All of it troubled me as I watched the Starlit King linger behind. He glanced at the throne and tapped the dagger at his waist. It was a nervous tick, one I'd watched for years, and after learning that this dagger was one of the mysterious dragon blades...

There was more to this than a nervous habit.

Suddenly, the Starlit King stared in my direction. His lips tightened into a frown.

My breath caught, my shadows thickening. His hands were dull, and without accessing his powers, he couldn't possibly pierce my darkness, right? I waited.

No, he was looking through me, glaring toward the west. He looked almost... wistful.

And then the moment passed. Shaking his head, he returned to the ballroom.

Curious, I turned in the direction he had been looking, bringing forth the lens of death. In my pocket, the two shards glowed bright. To my left and right, the shards of Lord Tallus and the Starlit King gleamed from their respective wings of the palace. And before me...

A low purple hue simmered on the western horizon.

The Isle of Dusk.

The seventh shard was there. I was now certain of it, and my fist clenched, suspecting the Starlit King knew this too. If he had studied the shards enough to collect them, he must have suspected where the seventh was hidden.

Only to never collect it.

My stomach pitted. A wave of uncertainty filled me—but the emotion was larger than expected. No, this dread was far thicker than my emotion alone.

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This feeling wasn't mine.

It's Ayla's.

I spun, turning in time to see the Starlit King approaching her. The crowd parted before him, giving him a clear path, and when Ayla also tried to duck out of his way, he dipped his chin, making eye contact with a smile and a wave.

Her heart pounded as if rising out of my own chest.

Rhett danced with Iona, terribly and awfully distracted as the Starlit King approached.

Slipping between the guests, weaving between the dusky shadows, I reached her side, offering my silent support. Her fingers twitched as if reaching for me, her newfound relief coursing through me as the Starlit King arrived.

"May I have another dance?" he asked, echoing the night before. He extended his hand.

Ayla looked away, demure and shy, her act convincing to anyone but me. Only I knew how conflicted she was, torn between the intensity of his gaze, commitment to her role, and...something more.

My fist clenched.

Her magic is like his. It draws her in...

She made a half-hearted attempt to deny his invitation, and her confusion muddled through our bond.

He took her hand, leading her to the dance floor.

If I hated him before, it was nothing compared to now. Before, he had hurt everyone I loved, everyone I was supposed to protect, and now, he targeted Ayla.

Anger pulsed through me, exploding through the tether. In response, light burst from Ayla's hand, and starlight flashed through the throne room.

I grasped for shadows as her magic threatened to tear them down. My skin flushed from the radiance of her power.

When the moment passed, everyone in the throne room had turned toward her, rubbing their hands to their aching eyes. Ayla glanced at them all, her lips turned in a frown.

I forced my shadows to steady, my heart to calm.

The Starlit King studied her, unfazed from the eruption of raw power. "If you're not careful, your lack of training could hurt someone."

Ayla froze.

"That won't do." He tugged her toward the guest wing. "If you come with me, I could help you find control—"

Ayla yanked her hand from his grasp. "No, thank you."

He frowned. "Let me know if you change your mind, and I'll give you a lesson in

starlight. I'd hate for you to hurt someone you care about."

Ayla gulped and nodded.

The king looked about the room with a humorous smile. "Nothing quite like the power of starlight, is there?"

The others laughed, and the bitter taste of jealousy coated my throat.

Ayla blushed, meeting Rhett's eyes from across the room. He squeezed Iona's hand and let her go, meandering across the throne room to join us. Not that far away, Ninti followed suit.

I scowled from my place in the darkness. It had been my fault she'd lost control, my emotions that had erupted, and I had to do something before it happened again. Already, I was so tired of watching from the shadows.

Rhett led us to the edge of the pavilion, and I followed as they settled behind a column, relieved that the shadows were plentiful here. Ninti settled on her rump and looked up, Rimu beside her.

"I have to go," Ayla whispered, her voice shaking with fear. "The Starlit King is giving me too much attention, and I need to get my magic under control. Now. Ninti and I will find an abandoned beach and—"

"We have to go," I agreed, eager to seize this opportunity.

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Rhett eyed my general location, brow furrowed. “So let me get this straight—now that you’ve stolen one shard, you’re going to just... leave? All because the Starlit King wants to help you.”

“Do you really trust him?” Ayla pressed.

Rhett frowned. “Not in trade and certainly not with your safety.”

I glanced between them. “Nothing about this so-called ‘Trade Assembly’ is trustworthy. I overheard Lord Tallus and the Starlit King talking, and there are new fae weapons, ones that the Starlit King is eager to acquire. He claims they won’t be used within the Isles, but...” I allowed the concern to hang in the air.

Ayla glanced at Rhett.

He frowned. “Iona is concerned about the weapons—so something is definitely happening. But I don’t think she knows who the intended buyer is.”

“There’s more,” I continued. “If we go to Dusk, I suspect we’ll find the seventh shard.”

Ayla turned to me, surprised. “The seventh shard?” Her gaze pierced where I stood in darkness. Beside her, Ninti tilted her head curiously.

“Something about the Starlit King prompted me to check to the west—and I can see it, vaguely. The Isle of Dusk is in that direction. And since Ayla needs time to train with Ninti, we’ll find an abandoned beach along the way. It’ll also give her a chance

to step out of the spotlight for a time.”

“Okay then, let’s go,” Ayla said, already taking a step toward the guest suites.

Rhett shook his head. “Wait a second. That’s a big hunch. What about—”

“We’re doing it,” I hissed. Something worse than a starlit outburst would happen if I had to endure another day of coveting Ayla from the shadows. “If we leave tonight, we’ll be back the day after tomorrow. That gives you time to sort out everything with Iona. See if you can learn anything more about this weapon’s deal.”

Ninti nodded her agreement without saying a word.

“What about Mer’s gate?” Rhett asked.

“Those signed papers you so wonderfully provided give us free access through the duration of the event, don’t they?”

Rhett nodded, lips pursed. “So what am I supposed to say? It was one thing to say Ayla needed an afternoon nap, and now you’re asking for a full day? Everyone is curious about the part-fae.”

“Which is exactly why I need to leave. This disguise isn’t foolproof.” Ayla crossed her arms. “One day, Rhett, that’s all I need.”

“Fine.” Rhett sighed. “So new plan. I’ll say you’re touring the island—perhaps you have a friend on the opposite coast, and you want to spend a day with them, and I stayed because I’m the merchant prince.”

I rolled my eyes as he repeated his self-appointed name.

“It’s perfect,” Ayla assured him.

“Fine, I’ll do it.” Rhett nodded, frowning in my direction. “Zayne, you better keep her safe or I’ll never forgive you.”

## Chapter thirteen

### Umbral Star

#### Zayne

I had to have her.

I couldn’t imagine another night sleeping by her side without claiming her. Last evening had awoken what we shared, and now, watching the way that red dress hit her body, the way everyone watched her like she was a treat...

We couldn’t board the boat fast enough.

Quickly, I told Vanessa of our plans, instructing her to sail through the night. I barely noticed how sweetly Rimu said goodbye to Ninti, their noses touching. And when we finallyfinallypassed through the gates of Mer—the guards opening and closing them just for us—I tugged Ayla’s hand, dragging her into the small cabin.

My shadows constricted as we entered, ensuring nobody would hear the moans I planned to draw from her lips.

Honestly, Ayla didn’t seem to mind.

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She slammed the door behind us and flung herself against me, colliding her lips with mine. Immediately, her hands slipped under my shirt.

Gasping, I kissed her back, one hand digging into her hair. I wrapped my other hand around her, lifting her as her ankles wrapped around my waist.

“Mine,” I growled into her lips. “Watching you tonight, trapped in the shadows... It was torture.”

She tensed in my arms as our tether stiffened. Light ebbed from her hands. After a painfully long heartbeat, she closed her eyes with a long, steady exhale. “I’m not used to being important. And the Starlit King... My magic...”

I placed my finger on her lips. “No more talk of him.” Not when I needed all her attention on me. “We’re together now.”

“I want that. I want you, Zayne.”

She didn’t have time to finish saying my name before I was upon her, lips joining hers as I settled her on the large bed that filled most of the cabin. She leaned back on her hands and looked up at me, arching her back as her nipples peeked through the red sweetheart bodice.

My fingers ached to remove the dress completely. “Ayla, I claim you. You are mine.”

“Yours,” she agreed, her hands on my chest.

I lifted my shirt over my head. “I vow to learn everything about you. Maybe you’re not used to being treasured, but you will thrive under my care.”

Whatever resistance remained faded away as her gaze drifted over my chest. Her lips parted, but she didn’t find any words.

“Mine,” I repeated, crawling onto the bed and trapping her under my arms. She widened her knees, allowing me to fall between them. I leaned down and teased her breast into my mouth, wetting her nipple through the dress. She mewed beneath me, grinding her hips against me, still clothed. I groaned in reply.

“Zayne, I...”

At the sound of her hesitation, I surfaced from my all-consuming need, and when I looked around, I caught sight of the brilliant light radiating from her hands. She stared at it, gaping.

I sat back on my knees. Her magic had flared up, just like her arousal. Her short skirt bunched around her waist, showing off her drenched lacy undies. She squirmed under my gaze, and I couldn’t tell if she wanted me to pleasure her or back off.

Both, the tether suggested.

“I’m not ready for sex,” she finally gasped. “At least not in that way.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I’m not ready for you inside me.” Another breath. “Do you understand?”

My mind sputtered, and my cock twitched. I ignored them both. “I don’t need to be inside you to give you pleasure.” I leaned back, gripping her thigh and stroking the inside with my thumb.

She shimmied against my hands. “I still want you... We’re just...”

I cupped her chin, hoping she’d look at me. “I understand. You lead the pace, okay?”

“Okay.” She met my gaze, making my stomach summersault. Her lips lifted in a nervous smile. “What now?”

“We take it slow,” I answered, sliding my hand higher up her thigh. “Is this all right?”

“Yes.”

Moving higher still, I edged my pinky to the fringe of her panties. “How about this?”

She squeezed her eyes shut, adorably frustrated. “I want more than that. And I think you know it.”

“I do.” The tether clamored with her need.

My knuckles grazed her sex as I reached for her hip, tugging her panties down, sliding them off. I tossed the thin lace scrap to a corner of the room, her scent blooming on the air. Cherry and spice.

I looked down at her sex, her glistening folds begging for my touch. “You’re beautiful.”

She tilted her hips, moaning in reply.

How I longed to reach out and satisfy her, but first... I glared at the complicated ties that fastened her rumpled dress in place. “Will you undress for me?” I begged. “I want to see all of you.”

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She leaned up on her elbows. “Under one condition.”

“Anything,” I rasped.

“You get naked first.”

Ayla

“You get naked first.”

I flushed, embarrassed I’d just said that, ordering my shadow prince to undress even as I asked him to slow things down.

I trust him. I really do.

The tether was warm, assuring me that his intentions were kind. And, by Teyr, I was desperate to see him, to learn him beyond the shadows of the balcony. When he hesitated, I leaned closer and looked down the bed toward him, still kneeling between my thighs.

In answer, he loosened his pants. “If that’s what you want.”

Had I ever wanted something this bad?

I held my breath as his pants slid away, dropping to his ankles. My eyes soaked in the sight of his muscled stomach, with abs that cut a perfect line down to his defined hip bones, and my gaze narrowed, centering on his cock, bulging against his snug

underwear.

He loosened his shoes and stepped out of them, moving far too slow. “Is that better?”

“Not quite.” My mouth dried as I shifted to the edge of the bed and kissed his hip. My fingers wiggled under his waistband, pawing at him with growing need. He set his hands over mine, and together we tugged the last of his clothes away.

His cock sprung forth, bulging like it must hurt him. His erection was long, longer than I had realized. And my stomach knotted, awed that I had taken him so deep into my throat the night before.

He was a miracle, and I teased my lip as his cock throbbed between us.

“Now will you please take off your dress?” he asked, stepping closer, his cock bumping against my cheek. “Or else I’ll ruin it.”

My throat tightened as I reached for the hidden ties. The dress slipped down, bunching at my waist as my breasts tumbled free.

He shifted his weight, clenching his fist with restraint as he tore his gaze from my chest to the cinched fabric. “Take it all off,” he instructed.

I glanced at his cock and didn’t think twice, shimmying the skirt over my butt. I tossed the dress aside.

He froze, his gaze piercing as he raked my body. My butt clenched, back arched, and thighs widened as I exposed myself to him.

I’d never felt more naked, more exposed. More safe.

He lunged upon me, kissing me, touching me. Through our bond, I felt his hunger for me as I grabbed his cock, desperate to feel him. He groaned at my touch, relieving any doubt that I wouldn't be enough.

He adored me, treated me like I was valuable. His embrace made me burn.

I stroked his length, up and down, and then squeezed. The resulting growl crashed into my core as fresh desire pooled along my folds. He groaned again.

Loving that sound, needing to see him lose control, I continued to work him, but he pressed his fingers into my hip, trailing them down to the hairline of my sex. "Not yet. I want to explore you first. Tonight, I will learn every inch of your pleasure."

At the promise in his words, I moaned. The sound was barely out of my throat before he touched me, his fingers teasing my folds open. He ran a finger inward, and when he brushed my oversensitive clit, I lost it.

Pressure pulsed through me as my nerves sparked. I lifted my hips and grinded against his hand. He stroked me, his petting becoming almost abrasive as he answered the rising volume of my desire. I writhed against his palm, showing him my sensitive spots. My light grew brighter, a halo surrounding us, protecting us.

He listened so well, as if my cries were a language he understood like a native speaker.

Soon I could smell my own desire, and from the glazed expression on Zayne's face, I knew the scent had struck him too. It was that fae sort of look. Carnal. Hedonistic. The craving for pleasure that humans never seemed to understand.

And he's mine.

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The tether tightened, tying us further together as it strengthened into place. My magic glowed brighter still. Zayne's eyes widened, and when he rubbed his palm against me, his lips curled into a snarl.

I rubbed myself against him, heat rising in my core.

More! I need, I need...

I reached out to touch him, but as I neared his cock, he batted me away. "Not yet. Let me claim you."

Claim.

He already owned me, first my heart and now the tether. We were bound—what more could he want? I didn't know. Couldn't think. I fell back on the bed and surrendered.

"I need this." He lifted his hand away, and I whimpered from its absence. He pressed his palms to my thighs, spreading them further apart, baring my sex for his gaze. In the absence of his touch, cool air kissed my moist lower lips.

Desperate, my hips lifted, searching for friction.

"Nobody can know you the way I do." Zayne leaned forward and pressed my clit like a button.

I gasped, crying out at the onslaught of sensation.

“Nobody can pleasure you the way I can.” He touched me again, but this time, softer and with a swirl. “Ayla, you’re mine.”

I never knew being claimed could feel so good. I melted against his hand.

His fingers drifted lower, finding my entrance. He dipped a single finger within, hooked it, and swept it around my outer wall, probing. Pressure built within me, slower than before, but steady and growing stronger. His thumb found my clit as his finger pressed the sensitive spot within.

It felt good. All of it.

The tether pulsed between us, my desire rising higher as his chased after. We were bound, one and the same. I found his gaze as he pressed a second and third finger inside me, still thumbing my clit.

My body seized. I cried out.

It was so easy, so simple, to surrender to him.

To come undone.

I burst, light flashing as I fell over the brink of my orgasm. I thrummed, core clenching and hips writhing as I rode his hand, wringing forth every ounce of pleasure he so willingly gave me.

“That was good?” he asked as my trembling subsided.

I took a deep breath, unable to speak. Magic swelled in my hands, my light our constant companion. I ignored it. The fae part of me, that hedonistic ecstatic part of me, rose up, begging, already, formore.

“Ayla?” he asked, lifting his hand away.

I swallowed. “You’re so good at that I forgot how to speak.”

He smiled devilishly. “I will learn your body until I know it better than my own. I will discover what makes you moan, tremble, and squirm.”

My face heated. “That’s quite the—”

My words fell unfinished as he lowered his mouth to my opening, stealing the air from me. Fresh pleasure streamed through me, and I found the single word that mattered...

“Zayne, Zayne.” His name fell from my lips as another orgasm seized me. I quivered and released and...

And he kept going.

Pleasure pinched with pain, and I ran my fingers through his hair and lifted his head, moaning anew at the vision of him between my legs. I needed a break—no, I needed more. My gaze landed on his cock. “Can I touch you yet?”

“Soon.”

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He smiled into me, kissing my entrance farewell before licking my thighs. Slowly, aching, he crawled up my body, running his tongue up my stomach as he went. He lapped at my nipples and kissed my neck before straightening over me. His cock bumped against my belly.

“You’ve been claimed,” he rasped. “You’re mine.”

“Yes. Yours.”

Desperate to touch him, I lifted my hips. His tip was warm, and I wiggled, spreading his precum across my stomach.

He moaned with surprise, his eyes closing, surrendering to me, if only for a moment. Pressing my advantage, I pushed against his shoulder until he was on his back. I rose up on my knees, straddling his thighs as I looked down at him.

“My turn,” I grated. “You’re mine too.”

He tried to sit up, but I didn’t give him the chance, seizing his cock with my mouth. I smiled around him as he groaned, throwing his head back onto the bed.

When I released him from my mouth, I ran my tongue up along his length, looking up at him. “Zayne, you belong to me as much as I belong to you. This thing between us? It cannot be broken.”

I lashed his tip with my lips and then licked his stomach. Dragging my tongue up his body, I lapped up the taste of him, cedar and rain.

“Mine,” I echoed, trailing his torso with kisses as I neared his face.

Zayne’s gaze found mine, our lips inches apart, his expression mirroring the intensity that had overtaken me. I snarled, consuming his lips with another kiss as I reached down to stroke his cock. My other hand reached for his horns, pressing into my prince’s sensitive spot.

He moaned. Shadows wavered as his control faltered. His length spasmed, rhythmic in my grip. Warm cum sprayed against my belly, forming ribbons on his stomach. He writhed beneath me, causing my own sex to clench at the sight.

I flushed, curious how his cum would feel inside me.

As his ecstasy subsided, he blinked up at me. For a heartbeat, we were all that existed. I soaked up the certainty that the pleasure we shared could be enough to sustain us—it had to be.

Abruptly, his lips sharpened into a smirk. This time, he pressed against my shoulder, forcing my back against the bed.

“My turn,” he growled, pressing his palm to my sex.

I cried out, frustrated by his sudden claim for control. A frustration that he quickly soothed with pressure to my clit and several fingers inside me.

He worked me to my peak again—and again. I fought my magic as it threatened to overcome me. With each climax, our tether grew stronger still. And all the while, I watched with increasing hunger as his cock grew hard again.

When I next had him at my mercy, I memorized the shape of his cock with my tongue. I learned how to draw a particularly gaspy, desperate moan from his throat.

The night became endless. Light and shadow, we were an infinity of our own. We left so much unsaid, our bodies speaking a dialogue faster than words, and too soon, the dark purple of early dawn threatened through the window. We were spent and sore and still tempted by another round.

“Here,” Zayne said, scooting to the end of the bed. He took a long swig of water, wet a washcloth, and handed the water skin to me. I took a deep, delicious drink as he ran the cloth over my breasts, now sticky with his cum. He fondled them lightly, and then wiped up my sex. “You took everything so well.”

Despite the soreness, I rubbed myself against the washcloth. “Even if we didn’t...”

“There is far more to sex than me putting my cock inside you.” He threw the washcloth aside and scooted behind me, snuggling me close and cupping my breast in his hand.

I shuddered, all too aware of every inch of his skin, his hard, warm cock pressing against my back. I leaned into his touch. “You’re teasing me again.”

He nipped at my ear. “Ayla, when I’m inside you for the first time, I want you rested and needy. When the time comes, you’re going to beg me for pleasures you’ve never known, and I’ll show you every sensation until you can think of nothing but me.”

I gasped, squirming against him, trying to turn around, but he pinned me firmly in place.

“But first, for at least a few minutes, we need rest.”

## Chapter fourteen

### Dawn at Dusk

Zayne

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:48 am*

I next stirred with Ayla snoozing in my arms, full daylight slipping into the cabin's small window. My mind flooded with memories of the night before, recalling the ravenous way we had devoured one another.

I held her close, all too aware of my hardening cock pressing against her butt. The tether tugged at my chest, an increasingly comfortable ache, so long as she was close.

Ayla will be my undoing.

And last night, I had her in so many ways.

Still, I needed more—and not just the embrace of her sweet heat—I longed to know that she was destroyed the same way I was ruined. To learn I was not alone in this obsession. It was impossible to turn away from this unscathed. We were bound, and I'd be torn asunder if she left my side.

In her sleep, she made a soft moan and wiggled deeper into the nook of my body, further constricting my cock. Lifting onto my forearm, I kissed her cheek, admiring the wisps of red hair that framed her face. For someone so fierce, she could be so soft.

Regret tugging at my heart, I wrapped the blanket tight around her. We were still on a mission, and I needed to check our bearings.

Silently, I slid down the bed toward the cabin's tiny standing space. I dressed quickly, bracing for the cold morning with my cloak wrapped around my shoulders. I patted the pocket with the shards, both reassured and concerned by their weight.

I set a refilled water skin next to Ayla and turned to the door. It squeaked slightly, and I turned to study Ayla's sleeping form one final second, reassured that she slumbered so deeply she wasn't disturbed.

I shielded my eyes and faced the morning light. Striding to the bow of the boat, I examined the vast sea before me as I brought forth my sense of the Underworld, confirming that Vanessa had steered true through the night.

The sun had risen high enough to cast the Isle of Dusk in a harsh, mountainous silhouette against the morning sky. This close, the shard at Dusk glowed brighter still, an imprint of undead purple light splashing over the Living Realm.

My hunch was right. Last night, the Starlit King had been looking toward the final shard. It was as reassuring as it was alarming. In his youth, he had built a reputation for uncovering countless fae relics. His personal collection filled half of the palace museum, and it should have been no surprise he carried not only a dragon blade but three black diamond shards.

So the fact that he hadn't yet claimed this shard, only looking to it wistfully, was informative. I knew of a few places he could never go, places I'd only read about in my ancient necromancy texts. Truthfully, I knew little of my craft. Everything I understood was gleaned from a few forbidden books, the rest coming through trial and error. There was no one to teach me—I myself had killed Inarus, the only other necromancer I'd ever known.

My instincts had to be enough.

I looked to Dusk anew.

The fugue of death overshadowed even the mountains, far stronger than it had any right to be, and my resolve wavered. Ayla and I were here on a mission that would

not only end the Gloom's expansion, but something more. Something intangible that worried me.

"Why so broody, Shadow Prince?" a chipper voice asked. Vanessa had wandered down from her crow's nest.

"I'm not brooding."

"If you say so." She settled her small frame on the railing before me, wetting my arm with the droplets that spiraled around her bright blue skin. "At this pace, we'll reach the isle in an hour."

"Perfect."

"If you say so," Vanessa quipped. "I thought you were brooding because you wanted more time with Ayla."

I shook my head, somewhere between laughter and exasperation. "If my brooding annoys you so badly, why did you accept another job from me?"

"I never said it annoyed me. Though perhaps, it should. No sane sprite would keep you as a client, no matter how much coin was involved. You have a bad habit of saying, take me into danger, again and again."

I arched a brow. "So why do you stay?"

"Because I'm hell-bent on mischief!" She cackled. "I'm increasingly convinced it's a personality flaw."

"Like the time you got trapped on Valterra?" I asked, leaning forward. "You never explained how that happened."

“It’s impolite to ask a sprite personal questions.”

“I didn’t think you were the type to care about etiquette.”

She pursed her lips.

“So, how did it happen?” I pressed.

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The water surrounding her tinged with red, reminiscent of a blush. She glanced away. “I fell in love with a human.”

“A human who lived in the Isles?” Like any sprite, Vanessa withered south of the Rift.

She nodded. “She’d left Valterra on a teenage whim, seeking more magic than the human world had to offer. That was before the Collapse, back when travel was safe.”

“It still couldn’t have been easy for a human to live amongst the fae.”

Vanessa shrugged. “She was clever and brave and, most importantly, a very good cook. No fae would hurt her for fear of missing out on her food.”

I chuckled. “How’d you two meet?”

“I was working on a fishing vessel, and one day, she came along to better understand how the fishermen preserved their wares, and as the day dragged on, we got to bantering, and well... before I knew it, I had found myself a permanent table at her establishment.”

“I didn’t know sprites ate food.”

“We don’t, but it’s the sentiment that counts.”

My brow furrowed. “So if things were going so well, what happened?”

Vanessa turned to the sea. “One day, she received a letter from her brother saying that her mother was ill, likely to die. Since her family couldn’t afford the few fae healing elixirs that made it to Valterra, she took the risk of transporting them herself.”

I clenched the railing. Everything Vanessa said was a reminder of how much damage Inarus and his shades had caused. “Traveling south was an even bigger risk for you, a sprite.”

“Remember my penchant for mischief?”

I chuckled.

“Zayne, I took that risk because I loved her. I wanted to meet her family. She’d told me so much about them, and I had to meet the people who had shaped the love of my life.”

The water around her bounced on the railing, cheerful if only for a moment before stilling as her expression darkened.

“The shades attacked on your journey south?” I asked, putting the pieces together.

She didn’t answer. “Necromancers can’t make shades from sprites, can they? Whenever they attack, my kind always survive.”

I nodded. “Since you’re made from the elements themselves, without a corporeal body, the magic can’t hold.”

She nodded slowly and was silent for some time. When she did speak, it was a recitation without emotion. “The shades ignored me during the attack. I tried to fight, but there was only so much I could do. I watched as they branded everyone on the ship. They rushed them all away, and after, I was so tired... I collapsed, and the boat

drifted south of the Rift.”

My heart ached. “Someone found you?”

“A merchant’s vessel. They thought they were doing me a favor, but they were headed to Valterra. The only good that came of it was that I still had the healing elixirs.”

“After all that, you delivered them?”

“Of course—they were her family.” Vanessa shrugged. “And for the record, it worked. Her mother was healed. Only they couldn’t cover the cost of my ticket back to the Isles. I had no real way to get home, nothing at all, so I returned to the port in the hope someone would need a sprite badly enough to pay for my passage. I thought I was going to die there until you arrived.”

When we’d first met, her watery skin was so sickly that she was now barely recognizable from then. It made me angry—someone should have taken pity on her long before I’d come along. “What was her name, your love?”

Vanessa swallowed. “Jasmine.”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

“I thought so too. I even made her a scarf with little white flowers on a field of emerald. She was wearing it when she died.” She glanced up at me hopefully.

Heart wrenching, I shook my head. “I haven’t seen a shade wearing a scarf like that.” And now all the shades had been put to rest.

Water settled around her, dripping down the banister. “I don’t know why I hoped.

Just to be sure she's not still out there, being animated by someone else."

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It sickened me. All of it. Everything that Inarus had done. “Inarus should have allowed Gloom to claim the Isles rather than create his shade army.”

Vanessa shrugged, the water still dripping. “As long as someone was controlling Gloom, people would have died. We must find the shards. This has gone on long enough.”

### Chapter fifteen

#### Morning Light

#### Ayla

I stirred, languid and sleepy, stretching out across the bed. Despite sleeping for only a few hours, I felt more replenished than I had in months. My body had been worked and pleased and now relaxed in places I hadn’t known were tense.

For the first time in my life, I was no longer terribly lonely. Even alone in this bed, I knew Zayne was just outside—I could hear him speaking with Vanessa, his steady presence through the bond reassuring me.

The sea rocked the bed, and I debated surrendering to sleep or racing onto the deck just to be with him. I curled on my side, pulling the blanket higher, questioning the impulse.

I never wanted to need someone the way I need him.

The thought ricocheted through my brain, and I rolled onto my back, looking at the ceiling.

Curiosity drifted through the tether as if Zayne was checking on me. In reply, I broadcasted sleepy contentment through the connection, hopeful he understood the message: I'm fine.

Truthfully, I was only fine enough.

But I needed a few moments alone.

Zayne paused the conversation with Vanessa, but after some consideration, he carried on. Relieved, I relaxed into the bed. The room still smelled like him, cedar and rain, enticing and amazing. If he entered, I wouldn't be able to resist the urge to pull him into bed just so I could taste him again.

At the idea of it, my mind burst with memories.

The blur of pleasure, skin, and moans; my memories fractured by fervor. And the bond... There was no denying that it was stronger than the day before.

I craved to have him always by my side, touching me, with me. Inside my mind.

And that frightened me.

Deciding that I was awake, I shifted the sheet aside, my attention drawn to my naked skin. Memories flashed again—the sight of him gripping my thighs, his tongue rolling along my clit.

It was so hot. All of it.

I really wanted to do that again. And more.

I swallowed, flushed and aroused and uncertain of it all. I reached for my neck, and light flared where my hand touched my throat, as if my skin remembered when he'd kissed me there.

It was dangerous to have someone that close to me. The fact that I trusted him as much as I did was a miracle, and the level of vulnerability this evolving tether required...

Shaking it out, I reached for the water skin Zayne had left and took a long drink. Dressing, I found my worn leathers to be a welcome reprieve from the fae finery, the red dress from the night before still crumpled in a corner.

As I prepared, my hands glowed and dimmed, the insistent yellow-white light and hum of power increasingly familiar. It was getting harder to control, and I couldn't deny the power was strengthening.

Hopefully training with Ninti would help.

I needed control before I saw the Starlit King again. Before he could offer another lesson that I honestly needed. He was dangerous, a familiarity to him that was far more worrisome than the warnings.

My light flared again, thrumming louder. I squeezed my eyes shut, willing it to go away.

This time when he checked on me, Zayne didn't waste time with the tether. He opened the cabin door. His silhouette filled the frame, imposing and intense. Dark shadows rippled out from him, and all I wanted was to be inside them. The memories of what we had shared suddenly felt far too intimate to be real, and I craved the

evidence of him.

My light flared again. Embarrassed, I yanked my hands close to my chest.

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The tether pulsed as he reached for me, cupped my chin, and guided my gaze to his. “Is everything okay?”

I breathed, just breathed, soaking him in, the perfection of his fae face shaking me to the core. “My light is getting more intense.”

His fingers traced down my arm, finding my hand, my skin still hot. His touch was cool as he weaved his fingers through mine. “We’ll figure it out.”

I calmed at his touch, and the light began to ebb. “This is so frustrating.”

He leaned closer, our foreheads touching. “I know.”

“After our time in Gloom, I thought I was recovered, taking care of myself. But since we’ve left, everything’s been so intense, and... Zayne, I’m afraid of losing control.”

The scent of him filled my lungs, and my breath hitched with the memory of him on top of me, stroking me between the legs, his mouth on my lips, another hand tight on my breast.

“You didn’t lose control last night,” he whispered in my ear.

“Maybe,” I considered. “But I’m always safe around you.”

Leaning in, I kissed him. His lips parted with the promise of more. Arousal pooled anew in my belly, further fed by the desire streaming from his side of the tether.

“We’ve almost reached the Isle of Dusk,” he whispered against my mouth.

“I figured.”

Still, my fingers trailed his skin. It felt too good to be near him, and I never wanted to let him go. I clung to our connection like a lifeline in a storm. His fingers traced the back of my spine, and I leaned into his embrace, soaking it in.

Too soon, Vanessa’s voice resonated throughout the ship. “Not to interrupt, but we’re nearly there. Where should I anchor?”

I hugged him a little tighter, hating the inevitable. He kissed me one more time and let me go.

“Tonight?” I asked, sliding on a boot. “We’ll pick up where we left off?”

“Tonight,” he agreed, kneeling before me. Taking the laces of my shoe, he tied them up. Leaning forward, he kissed my thigh. “Tonight, I’ll give you everything you want. And more.”

Chapter sixteen

The Black Beach

Ayla

I stumbled on the rocks, shifting my footing to find a stronger stance on the rocky black beach of Dusk. Zayne had just shadow-stepped us here.

This far north, the isle turned to desert, and the beach that drew Zayne’s attention was particularly derelict. The flat earth yawned before us, an expanse of flat black rocks

filling the horizon. Behind us, the ocean roared, waves crashing against the slate. Other than the faint glow of Vanessa perched upon the Umbral Star out at sea, there was not a living thing in sight.

Ninti took a few steps inland, avoiding the spray that hissed against her fur. Still in her dog form, she bounded off before quickly circling back to us. Her haunches were raised. “I don’t like this place.”

“Agreed.”

This wasn’t safe. Not with the way it made my skin crawl.

Zayne’s gaze grew distant, evaluating from the Underworld, and my senses heightened in reply. “That way,” he pointed.

Ninti’s flames sharpened, but she said nothing.

“The shard’s definitely here,” he continued. “But it’s underground. I think it’s a vault.”

Ninti growled.

“A vault?” I asked.

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“A necromancer’s cache,” the firewolf explained. “A place to store the undead. They’re enchanted to help preserve them.”

“Inarus made vaults?”

Zayne stiffened. “No, Pyrian did.”

“Pyrian...” The same necromancer who had controlled the black diamond before.

“Allegedly, he made several of them, but I don’t have a record of where any of them are.”

“Once, there were three vaults,” Ninti corrected, her voice lowering. “Dusk, Bog, and Shadow Isles. I never knew the precise locations, but their regions were impassable during the war. After Pyrian died, I assumed they were lost to time.”

“Apparently not.”

We walked in silence, our destination invisible to me while obvious to Zayne. Through him, I sensed the heavy weight of death long before we reached the large black slab. So smooth it caught our reflections, it was large enough that a dozen shades could stand shoulder to shoulder.

Cautiously, Ninti sniffed at the edge. She shifted into her full-sized firewolf form, her flames licking the dark stone.

Zayne walked to the center and crouched, reaching for the stone with his hand. As his

consciousness drifted away, I scanned the horizon, confirming no one and nothing was near.

“How do we get inside?” I asked. “Is it a door we need to open?”

“It’s not meant to be opened by the living,” Zayne whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s called a death gate, and it’s only breached by moving through death, securing the vault on the other side for necromancers only.”

My breath hitched. Wherever he was going, I couldn’t follow. I forced my nerves to steady.

Zayne held my gaze as he took a proper seat upon the slab. “I’ll see what I can learn from here.”

I nodded, glancing around nervously as he quieted his body and dropped into death. Ninti sat at my side, facing the opposite direction as me.

Moments passed in eerie silence as Zayne’s body grew still, and soon, not even his chest moved as he wandered away. The tether stretched as the distance between us grew. Ninti’s flames grew hot against my legs, but I didn’t ask her to step away. Despite our silent surroundings, everything set me on high alert.

Under the tension of the moment, my focus honed.

Nothing moved. Nothing changed. Breaths passed.

Then Zayne’s mood darkened. Something he saw in the vault troubled him deeply,

something far too complex for me to understand through our connection. Anticipation rushed my heartbeat as I reassured him through the tether that the coast was clear and he was safe to investigate.

More minutes passed in wary waiting. As he journeyed further away, his emotions grew dull.

What happens when we're apart?

My throat tightened with the thought.

When he finally approached the surface of the Underworld, I felt him rising, the bond increasingly vibrant. It was a reassurance to know he'd return soon, but all the same, my breath stilled as Zayne took his first one, sucking in life again. At long last, my shoulders relaxed—for all that I trusted him in the Underworld, watching his descent still made me nervous.

It always would.

“The shard is definitely inside,” Zayne began.

I waited, lips pursed. He'd been down there far too long for that to be all. Ninti glanced from him to the distant sea, where the Umbral Star bobbed in the water.

Zayne's fist clenched, and I felt the rising pulse of his concern. “There's also a shade army inside. Thousands strong, I think.”

Oh.

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All the shades had turned to dust when he'd defeated Inarus. Or so we'd thought

Ninti considered this. "They must have been protected by the vault when you removed the rest."

He nodded. "But from here, I can't tell who made them, whether the shades were Inarus's or... something older. Hopefully, I can learn more inside."

My stomach curdled at the idea of him going into that place alone.

"Ayla and I will train while we wait," Ninti said.

"Great," I agreed, not completely convinced. Training would distract me from my worry, and while there were clearly no threats from the living realm, I hated to imagine what Zayne could face alone.

He looked at me, his emotions steady as the rock he stood upon. The tether flared, reminding me that anywhere Zayne went, he wouldn't be alone, no matter how thin it became. He stepped closer, wrapping me into his shadows as he lowered his chin and took my hand in his. "I'll be fine."

"I know."

"I'll be back soon." He kissed my brow, squeezed my hand, and vanished, shadow-stepping beyond the death gate.

Chapter seventeen

## The Vault Beneath the Earth

Zayne

Stagnant air filled my lungs, and even the necromantic tang of rot was almost undetectable as life slowed to a crawl.

I stood on a large landing just beneath the gate, the entrance of a cave carved out under the beach. Ancient fae lights reflected on the black slate floor as motes of dust spurred to life in light of my abrupt arrival. The crash of the ocean against the beach thumped like a distant heartbeat.

My senses fired into high alert, the Underworld overlaying onto the Living Realm as I examined the vault. Rough hewn walls surrounded me in every direction except for the one opposite me.

Nothing undead haunted this level, but still cautious, I slid along the edges of reality, shadow-stepping to the other side and looking down. An expansive spiral of steps filled a deep hollow in the earth, beckoning me to descend.

From my earlier exploration, I knew a vast vault lay below, the tomb of a shade army I failed to destroy. And beyond them, the black diamond shard.

I continued down the stairwell, not by walking, but by gliding from one shadow to the next, only jumping the distance I could confirm by line of sight.

Halfway down, I approached my first obstacle.

The Underworld had warned me of the undead aberration. Threads of magic bound them to both the dead and the living, as if they were a denizen of both.

I squinted at them from the distance, keeping a flight of stairs between us. Despite the low lights, there was no denying the gleaming white of bones that blocked the stairway.

A skeleton.

I paused, shocked they existed at all.

My texts claimed that no skeletons remained, the art of their creation lost with Pyrian's original texts. Clearly, even the authors of my books kept their secrets, some mysteries reserved for initiates who ventured beyond the page.

While shades were the undead horde perfected for a necromancer's obedient army, skeletons were independent beings. They carried the memories of their life—a form of immortality that would last until their bones shattered.

Despite my aloof approach, the skeleton shifted. Bones creaked as they lifted an arm to their chin, as if they were thinking. I braced.

“We have not met,” the skeleton finally said, his deep voice creaking with disuse. When I didn't answer, he shifted each limb in turn, as if stretching after being immobile for a very long time. “Speak up. Your name, your lineage?”

I debated shadow-stepping around the skeleton, but decided any information—intentionally or unintentionally shared—would be invaluable.

“I was Inarus's student,” I half-lied. Inarus might have never taught me necromancy, but he had taught me.

The skeleton took a step closer to me. “You are the one who did not know what he was? The Shadow Prince, Zayne. Am I correct?”

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I decided not to answer that. “You knew Inarus?”

“All necromancers find themselves here. Eventually.”

He took another step. Taller than seemed natural, he curled his back to stare down at me. The sound of a deep inhale reverberated against the stone walls as threads of his magic probed me. Annoyed, I waved them away.

“I smell the death of Inarus on you,” he said.

I reached for the shadows.

“Do not fear it. You are not the first of your kind to kill their teacher. It is the way of our world.”

I braced to shadow-step. Speaking with the skeleton no longer seemed worth the risk.

He tilted his skull with a creak. “Inarus said you would visit. That you would need the black diamond shard.”

I stilled.

“He also left a present for you. I will show you.” The skeleton turned around and began walking down the stairs, his boney feet clattering upon the stone steps.

I didn’t budge.

His skull swiveled fully around while his feet continued the descent. “Call me Guardian. Please follow.”

The skeleton carried no weapon, but however limited his link to life, I kept my senses sharp, looking for traps as I took my first step down the stairs.

“You are a skeleton, right?” I asked.

“I am. Inarus never spoke of me?”

“We, ah—it’s complicated. I read that all the skeletons were gone.”

The guardian laughed, a chortle that echoed ominously in the dark stairway. “Those who remain prefer to be left alone.”

“Were you a necromancer, before?” I asked.

“Long ago.”

“Before Pyrian?”

He was quiet for several long seconds, the click of his feet his only answer for quite some time. “Yes. Before Pyrian.”

He led me further into the vault, the stairwell silent except for the clatter of his feet. Deeper, we journeyed into the earth, approaching the shade army, its enormity now too great to ignore. The black diamond shards in my cloak glowed brighter as we approached the one hoarded here.

When we reached the final steps, Guardian stepped aside, arm raised in presentation of the vast chamber beyond. “Your present.”

An undead army sprawled before me.

Shades. Thousands of them. Fae, humans, gnomes, trolls, and more. They lay upon the stone floors beneath a tall arched ceiling, dimly lit in the fae lights.

I stepped closer, soothing my urge to burn the whole place down.

Their bodies were arranged in a military formation, the Gray Generals laid to rest at the front of their troops. Not a single shade stirred, but their silent presence flooded my mind.

“Inarus said you would value his gift.”

My fingers curled at the thought. I had no need for a shade army—I wasn’t him.

“Perhaps today is not the day for appreciation. I will show you to the shard.” Walking nonchalantly between the dead, Guardian pointed to the far side of the chamber. “It is in the study.”

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There, so distant it was barely perceivable, was a single black door built into the far wall, the purple light confirming the shard concealed within.

Shoulders tightening, as if I could make myself smaller, I followed Guardian through the ranks of undead.

Now that I knew of this army, I was determined to destroy it. Today, I didn't have the time or the means, and I wasn't precisely sure how it was best done. But as I was forced to walk between them, step after step through the trenches of lives Inarus had stolen, I vowed it would be done.

And even if I lacked the resources to immediately turn them to ash, I could still honor the dead. Walking through their ranks, I refused look away, taking in the shades, their bodies in varied stages of decay with frayed clothes that clung to their bodies like vestiges of the life they led before.

We had reached the halfway point when something snagged my eye. Little white flowers on a field of green—

Jasmine.

This had to be Vanessa's former lover. I kneeled beside the human-turned-shade, reaching out for the cloth and allowing its tassels to run through my fingers. The scarf was exactly as Vanessa had described.

Clutching the scarf, I entered the Underworld, searching for what remained of Jasmine's soul. All I found was her shade, an obedient servant waiting a

necromancer's command.

Bone creaked. "A friend?" Guardian asked.

"Friend of a friend," I answered.

"If she is important, she can become a skeleton."

I shook my head. "No one knows how to make skeletons anymore."

"So they say," Guardian replied, walking on, his bones rattling.

I frowned. Even if the art of making skeletons wasn't truly gone, I didn't want to know. Turning back to Jasmine, I carefully unwrapped the scarf from her body. Tucking it in a pocket of my cloak, I turned away.

Guardian led me to the door at the far side of the hall, holding it open so I could step inside. Eyes darting, wary as ever, I entered the ancient study.

Similar to Inarus's rooms at the stronghold, the walls were lined with books and instruments. An ornate meditation cushion laid at the room's center, the cushion permanently indented where knees must have rested for hours.

And there, on a pedestal before the cushion and sealed within a crystal orb, was the black diamond shard. It floated in the orb's center, glimmering within its casing, its dark sharp edges catching the light as if in greeting.

Guardian positioned himself beside it, bringing his body to eerie stillness.

Cautiously, I inventoried the remainder of the space, noting the small bedroom, bath, and kitchenette, each added as if an afterthought. No traps, no apparent danger. I

slowed only to peruse the books, all of them far more worn than any text in my possession.

There would be far more to accomplish here than simply releasing the shades. Countless mysteries of my craft could be uncovered here. When we were done with Mer, I needed to return.

I returned to the enclosed shard. “How do I retrieve it?” I asked Guardian.

He motioned toward the meditation cushion. “The answer will not be found in life.”

Swallowing, I followed his lead, settling where countless of my predecessors had rested before. Here, I entered death with ease, the veil thinned by centuries of its parting.

Threads of power locked the shard within the crystal orb. Reaching out, I examined them.

“Hello Zayne,” the spirit of Inarus said at my side.

Chapter eighteen

When Stars Strike

Ayla

To prevent my magic from discharging accidentally, I had to learn to emit it on purpose. It made perfect sense, in theory.

I glanced down at my glowing hand and the pitch black rock trapped within. Beside me, Ninti sat down on her haunches, her gaze not straying from the stone.

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Judging from the tether, Zayne was now deep within the vault, but the knowledge didn't stop me from impatiently searching the death gate some distance from us. I couldn't wait until he returned and ended this embarrassing lesson.

We'd been staring at the damned rock for ages now, but despite my best attempts to fill it with light, the rock remained dark. So did my hand.

"Are you sure this will work?" I asked her.

"Not exactly," she admitted. "But..."

I nodded. If this didn't work, I didn't know who could teach me beyond someone in the Starlit Court. Whomever my father was, he must have been one of the countless courtiers who had traveled south, drawn to the sheer thrill of traveling beyond magic. Before the Collapse, many fae had done just that.

If I felt up to the challenge, maybe I could determine the top contenders for my father's identity, especially now that I was certain he was from the Starlit Court. It wouldn't be too hard. Countless Valterran courtiers had long ago placed their bets on my paternity, and while I could ask Rhett for his shortlist... I didn't want to know. Not really.

My father had never stepped forward, never claimed me.

Regardless.

My magic was getting harder to control. Last night, secured in Zayne's shadows,

losing control hadn't mattered. But anywhere else, especially somewhere like Mer...

I needed control of my powers.

And as uncomfortable as it was, my magic responded positively to the Starlit King's. The same way his starlit box had drawn me closer, like calling to like, his magic recognized mine, and if anyone was to understand my magic well enough to show me how to wield it, it would be the Starlit King.

On some level, the lessons didn't strike me as an entirely bad idea. It's why I'd run last night, insisting we leave. The moment the Starlit King offered his help, promising that he could help me learn to regulate my magic, a fraction of me had been tempted.

Like now. When I couldn't summon a wisp of starlight.

Even Ninti's well meaning advice was starting to feel fatigued, like we both knew there was something missing. If I felt threatened or excited, my light was unstoppable, but now, when I tried to expel it intentionally, it evaded me.

Unfortunately, that didn't stop the magic from building within me. Filling me up.

I had been thinking about light, drawing it in for so long that I was now like a dam ready to burst, the power pent-up inside of me. The longer I tried to shift the light from my hand in to the rock with nothing happening, the more the pent-up magic roiled in my stomach.

Nauseated, I shook my head and lowered to the ground, setting the rock to the side. "The power is trapped inside me now." My vision swam.

Ninti picked up a smaller rock with her mouth and brought it back to me. "Let's try something smaller."

“It’s not working!” I squeezed my eyes shut. “The more I try, the sicker I feel. Everything’s jumbled and agitated. I need... something different.” I took another deep breath. “I need to take a break.”

All my life, I had wanted fae magic, believing it would finally make me happy. I had wanted to meet my firewolf, believing she could solve all my problems.

Now...Ugh.

I leaned forward onto my hands and knees, swallowing down the urge to vomit. Negotiating with my magic felt like swimming under a waterfall.

Ninti nuzzled my shoulder, her fire sickeningly hot. “Take all the time you need.”

“Thank you.” I breathed, just breathed, praying something would take away the turmoil within me.

Magic wasn’t nearly as intuitive as I had hoped. When I had trained as a soldier, at least I had instructors who knew what they were doing. And now...

We were doing the best we could.

“You’ve never taught someone how to use their magic before, have you?” I asked, hoping conversation could distract me from the nausea.

“My previous companion had grown up in the Isles, yes.”

“So I’d guess that, unlike me, he eased into his magic from childhood.”

She nodded sadly. “Yes.”

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Does she regret choosing me?

The thought aggravated the ache in my stomach.

Sighing, I leaned back, stretching out my forearms. “How does your power work, anyhow?”

“Actually—” her ears tucked back in embarrassment “—I can’t use magic, not really.”

“I thought you strengthened the Shadow Throne.”

She shook her head. “Exactly, I gave power to something that was already there—I didn’t make anything new. Deity magic is different than fae magic. Yes, I can move raw power from myself into another, but I can’t shape any of it. When you lifted Zayne from the underworld, I fueled your effort, but you created the pathway.”

I gaped at her. “So you’re dependent upon someone else using their magic first?”

“Unless I’m trying to shift my form or raise my fire, yes.” Proving her point, the firewolf grew even bigger, towering over me before returning to her wolf size. “Maybe I can’t help you use your magic because I... can’t. And that’s my job, isn’t it? To be your companion, to help you?” She looked away.

Eager to soothe her fears, I fought the urge to pet her. She wasn’t a normal dog. But seeing me hesitate, she leaned closer, tilting her head in invitation. I began to scratch the space behind her ear. “I need you, Ninti. You’ve always been there for me, long

before we could speak.”

“You were a very precocious child,” she mused. “Always up to mischief.”

“But you warned me whenever that mischief went too far.” I looked away nervously. “It’s not just you. I worry you think I’m a terrible companion too.”

She laughed, her fur brushing against my cheek. “Ayla, I never wanted anyone else. You’re far too much fun, mischief and all.”

“What does it really mean that we’re companions?”

She shrugged. “It means Leo approves of you. Beyond that? We’re whatever we make it.”

“I like that.” My doubt subsided, replaced with renewed curiosity. I sat a little taller. “So tell me more about your first companion, what powers did he have? Maybe we can learn something that’ll help me.”

Ninti quirked her head. “He grew up fae, as you guessed. He had Dawn powers, the gift for creation.”

“So if he crafted a vision, you could give him the power to complete it.”

Ninti nodded. “Exactly.”

Despite her assurances, jealousy gnawed at me again. Ninti had been so well matched to her last companion, but now, she had me.

“It wasn’t always easy with Coran,” the firewolf added.

“Coran,” I mused, recalling that name. “He’s mentioned in a few songs, right? Lord Coran of Dawn, carry the banner south. Plant it in Teyr’s ash, break the world in two.”

Ninti smiled as I softly sung the words. “It’s close to the truth. He wasn’t a lord though—at least amongst the fae. He became one on Valterra, though.”

My stomach sank. By that time, Ninti had left with Leo. “Will you leave me too? Once Leo says so?”

“If she has her way, yes.”

“I see.” I met her big green eyes and leaned closer, my forehead meeting hers. It felt wonderful, the brush of her fur, everything a reminder that she trusted me. I still didn’t really understand the nature of my relationship with Ninti, and I wasn’t sure I ever could.

“As for me...” Ninti continued. “I’m tired of watching the world from afar. Ayla, you’ve given me a way to be part of the Isles, and this time is invaluable. So long as you keep that ruby safe, you’re giving me the chance to live.”

I smiled, remembering the way she had prowled around the stronghold, and now, exploring Mer with Rimu at her side. She seemed so alive, so excited and thrilled to be part of the world.

I couldn’t risk anyone hurting her—I had to protect the ruby, and that meant understanding my magic. With a fresh wave of determination, I reached for the smaller stone. “Let’s try again.”

Ninti wagged her tail. “Actually, I have an idea. What if you drew power from me? I have learned a few tricks for shaping magic, in theory, so maybe if you’re connected

to me, I could help you shape the magic.”

“Great!” I was ready to try anything.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:48 am*

She turned around, showing me her back. “It’s easiest if we’re touching.”

Obedient, I wrapped the fingers of one hand into her fur while holding the stone with the other. Steadying, I took several calming breaths before once again, reaching for my starlight. Already, it was a smoother journey than before, my mind calmed by Ninti’s reassuring presence.

Meanwhile, Ninti’s magic reached for me, threads of power reaching from her body. I accepted, binding us together in the effort.

I gripped the stone. Light, I told it.

All at once, power rushed through me, connecting me to a source that gripped me in return.

The stone flared with light.

Thrill lit in my chest.

It’s working.

I could feel Ninti’s assistance. She oriented me, directing my power. Bound to her, what had been a pool of trapped starlight became a steady beam that poured from my hand and into the stone.

Only, it didn’t stop.

And I couldn't let go.

More light entered the stone.

It couldn't take anything more.

Bursting, the stone exploded.

Dust plumed in the air, filling my lungs. I began to cough, my lungs burning with the acrid combination of heat and grime. I let Ninti go, but even as I broke contact, the threads binding us refused to part.

Overwhelmed, I pressed my hands into the earth.

Still, power flowed.

And flowed.

And flowed.

It won't stop.

My chest burned, each breath tasting of thunderstorms. My arms began to shake, and still, I drew more power. It rose from the stars, from Ninti. Everything flooded my body, reducing me to a mere conduit as I poured the power back into the earth.

Ninti sagged, her body growing limp. My heart raced at the sight, and even as I watched her eyes close, I failed to stop the endless stream of power.

The stones around me crackled with strain.

The earth buckled but did not break.

I resisted. I fought.

My vision blurred with tears.

I don't know how to stop this.

Any semblance of control Ninti had offered was insignificant compared to the well of power forcing its way through me. I was trying to control a river with a pipe.

With a harsh snap, the earth fissured, opening before me. The crag grew. Deeper. Wider.

Zayne... He was trapped below the earth.

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“Please stop,” I begged my magic.

My vision tunneled, my gaze locked upon Ninti, her flames dull, her fur ash gray. The heat grew unbearable, each breath like fire as I crawled forward, squinting at the horizon.

There, a figure appeared.

I’m hallucinating.

Her feet were cast in shadows, her face the color of the setting sun. She was wrapped in a robe of purple twilight. A deity.

The isle herself, Dusk.

“Child of Starlight,” she said, her voice haunting as the wind. “This once, I will help, but do not make a habit of it. It would disrespect me.”

I barely understood, except that when I next exhaled, a stream of starlight fell with my breath. The grip of my magic became a little lighter, a little less terrifying.

“That’s good. Again.”

Under her guidance, I repeated the process, my power loosening breath by breath. My power slowly separated from Ninti.

Dusk watched, standing ramrod straight as I exhaled one final time. My connection to

Ninti fell away, and I collapsed at her side, my vision too blurry to check her breath.

“Will Ninti be okay?” I asked, the world tunneling.

“After all this time, the firewolf still hasn’t learned her limits.”The deity scoffed. She glanced at me a final time. “This once, I helped, but for the sake of the Isles, you must learn to control your power.”

She vanished.

## Chapter nineteen

### Claiming the Shadow

Zayne

Far above me, the earth shook, a rattling sound that caused my breath to catch. The vault surrounding me didn’t stir, untouched by whatever happened above, but the tether...

Ayla is in trouble.

I stared at Inarus, the spirit of my mentor haunting me even after his death. Guardian acknowledged the elder necromancer with a nod before returning to stillness.

Whatever my old mentor was doing here, I had no time for games. “How do I get the shard?” I asked.

“Not even a thank you?”Inarus taunted. “Despite everything you did to me, I left you an entire army, one hidden away from your noble refusal to draw upon the gifts you were given. I gave you my second shard.”

I scowled. It was a pity necromancers were so adept at climbing back out of final death because I had no time for this. Above, something was wrong with Ayla. Maybe I could safely leave this shard behind since no one except a necromancer should be able to reach it...

Inarus crossed his arms. "Claim the army. Accept my gift, and like everything within the vault, the shard will become yours."

"It's that simple?" That simple and that terrible. I had no interest in possessing a shade army.

"That's it."

Already, the bright light of Ayla's magic had turned radiant and destructive. Her emotions were riot with adrenaline and... defeat.

Lips tightening, I decided. There was no choice, not when Ayla needed me. No choice when I truly couldn't risk an unknown entity claiming the shard instead.

It has to be done.

"Fine."

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I reached out for the threads of necromancy binding the army, starting with the Gray Generals and using their hierarchy to claim thousands of shades in moments. With Inarus dead, his bindings to the shades were thin, and dismissing them was as simple as clearing an old cobweb.

In little more than a heartbeat, everything changed as the undead army became mine.

Never had my magic felt more natural, more necessary, and if I hated myself for what I had done, at least I would have the power to keep Ayla safe.

I opened my eyes as the new bonds snapped into place, my consciousness filled by the army now bound to me. The entire vault listened to my whim, the structure itself ready to serve me. Quickly, I singled out the strand of magic that trapped the shard in the crystal orb.

Under my instruction, the orb dissolved, and I reached inside to retrieve the shard, snagging it before I could second-guess what I had done. Quickly, I shoved it into the pocket with the other shards, cringing as they clanked ominously.

“Thank you,” I gritted to Inarus. “Not for the army, but for explaining quickly.”

My deceased mentor smirked. “Zayne, I once said you would become the same as me, and that still hasn’t changed, even if you don’t understand.”

I let his words roll off me like water on oil.

Rising, I nodded to Guardian, feeling my connection to the skeleton, like everything

in this vault, had shifted.

“To the surface, Adept Zayne?”

I hesitated at the sound of the new title.

“When should I expect your return?” Guardian asked.

I shook my head. “I’ve got to go.”

In a rush, I shadow-stepped from the room and was halfway across the length of the vault. In another moment, I reached the landing halfway up the stairs where Guardian had once stood. I rushed through the dark hallways that were now mine, worried what I’d find at the surface.

Ayla’s emotions had shifted again. Devastation and...

I jumped again, this time reaching the top platform. With a final step through both shadows and the Underworld, I passed through the death gate, finding myself standing before a broken beach.

A whirlwind of grainy dust whipped against my face, and I squinted, struggling to recognize my surroundings. Not far away, the ground was split. Nearby, a rock smoldered, giving off an acrid smell.

And Ayla...

The tether pulsed in my chest. My heart raced.

There.

Ayla was sprawled across Ninti's belly. The firewolf was ashen gray with not even a flicker of her tail.

"Z-Zayne?" Ayla croaked, looking up at me.

Relieved, I collapsed to the ground, searching her body with my hands, prodding gently as I asked, "Are you hurt?"

"No, I..." She looked like she'd been crying.

Panicked, I looked her over once more.

"But Ninti..." Her face paled. "I screwed up. I took too much power from her, drained her. I think."

"Let's get back to the boat."

"I'm fine." She stood up, making her point even if she did wobble slightly. She squeezed her eyes tight. "Can you carry Ninti?"

With a grunt, I heaved Ninti over my shoulder, hiding from Ayla how heavily the unconscious firewolf slumped against me. Her eyes were closed, breath shallow.

The firewolf was strong enough to help us take down a shade army. Ayla couldn't really drain a deity... could she?

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“Grab my arm, and I’ll shadow-step all of us,” I instructed Ayla.

It took me a single step to reach the shore. Landing, I blinked at the horizon, surprised by the second form that now bobbed beside the Umbral Star.

Ayla stumbled, barely catching herself. “Leo,” she gulped. “She already knows.”

The giant turtle paddled next to the Umbral Star. Side by side, they bobbed in the waves, the turtle dwarfing the ship.

“Vanessa!” Ayla shouted across the waves to our nearest interpreter. “Can you ask Leo if we can shadow-step onto her shell?”

“Let me ask!”

We waited, Vanessa speaking with Leo on our behalf. I turned to Ayla. “What happened?”

“I could ask you the same.”

“I have the shard, that’s what counts.” I did what I had to do.

Still, had I been to slow?

Ayla was fine, shaken but...

I held Ninti close, her gray fur filling my arms. The firewolf would be fine. She had

to be...

“Leo’s waiting for you!” Vanessa finally answered.

Nervously, I swallowed. Presumably, the giant turtle wouldn’t be happy with Ayla. Leo may be on our side, but she was deeply possessive of her sister.

“Go,” Ayla insisted, squeezing my arm. “Ninti needs her.”

She was right. Leo might be ancient, her powers unknown, but we needed every ally we had. Even those we didn’t understand.

Our quest had garnered the attention of deities. If we were to have any chance at succeeding, we had to accept our strange new allies.

Just as we had to embrace every aspect of our powers.

Ayla, the starlight. And me, the shadows.

Chapter twenty

Companion of the Firewolf

Ayla

I steadied on the turtle’s massive shell, bracing against Zayne’s arm to catch my balance. My gaze locked on Ninti’s fur, so dull without her light, for only a second before I glanced away.

We stood toward the front of the shell, Leo’s head not far behind us. The canopy of trees towering over us swayed in the breeze, and a carpet of moss spread before us.

Sea breeze mingled with the scent of fresh dirt.

Critters scurried closer to us—birds, squirrels, bunnies, and more. They watched us with uncanny intelligence, their wary gazes all locked upon Ninti's limp body.

What have I done?

I turned at the sound of splashing behind us. Leo lifted her head, sweeping her vast neck to greet us. It took all my resolve to meet her large beady eye.

“Will Ninti be okay?” I asked, clutching the firewolf's fur.

Leo didn't answer—she never did, not to me anyway.

“I'm sorry. We never... I never... She was trying to help me with my magic...” I whispered the final words.

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Zayne shifted, Ninti's body hanging from his arms.

If Leo couldn't help Ninti, if Ninti was too far gone...

I twisted my ruby ring, guilt knotting my stomach.

If Ninti's not okay, I don't know how I'll live with myself.

"Please help," I begged, taking a step closer to Leo's head and forcing myself to hold her monumental gaze. "If there's anything I can do, tell me."

The great turtle blinked. Languid, her eyelid took a full second to close and open again.

And I felt...something.

A slow, steady pulse rose up from the shell, vibrating through my body and relaxing me. Magical threads appeared, tugging the firewolf toward the shell. I didn't understand what this energy was, but I was certain of one thing: Leo would never hurt Ninti.

"Can you set her down?" I asked Zayne.

He nodded, lowering to his knees as he placed the limp firewolf upon Leo's mossy shell. The turtle nodded slowly, seemingly pleased. The pulse grew in intensity and...

Nothing changed.

Ninti remained still.

I settled beside her, petting from scruff to tail, waiting, hoping. Beside me, Zayne reached for my free hand and caressed it with his thumb. In reply, I squeezed his hand, wishing I could hug him, speak to him, but grief welled up in my chest like a wall between us. At least we had the tether, steady and supportive.

We waited. For too many breaths, too many heartbeats the pulse moved from Leo and into Ninti, achieving... nothing.

I glanced forward and confirmed Leo was still watching. Zayne's expression remained dour, and only the tether spoke of his growing concern.

The pulsing energy intensified. It felt desperate.

Tears welled up, blurring my vision. Giving in, I wiped them away.

When my sight cleared, I squinted, questioning what I saw. Ninti's color had shifted from ashen to a dull, dark red. I blinked, afraid I imagined it. Then, all at once, with a great sighing huff, the firewolf exhaled.

Fear became relief.

I patted the shell beneath me. "Thank you, Leo."

The giant turtle squeezed her eye tight. The pulsing settled to a softer rhythm, and the shell buoyed in the sea as though a great weight had been taken from Leo. Finally, the great turtle straightened her neck, pointing it toward the Umbral Star.

She motioned between us and the boat.

“You want us to... leave?” I asked, my voice catching as I grabbed a fistful of Ninti’s ruddy fur.

Leo slowly bobbed her massive head. A nod.

“Oh.”

Ninti was still unconscious, unable to translate, unable to say what she wanted. If I left, would Leo help Ninti find my side again? I’d lost her trust.

I drew my hand into a fist, staring at the ruby. If Ninti wanted to find me, she would—Leo wouldn’t stand in her way. And if Ninti wanted to stay away from me... that was her choice.

Perhaps we weren’t as suited to one another as we believed. Perhaps it was for the best that she stayed where she was safe.

Leo indicated the boat another time.

“Okay, we’ll leave.” I bit back my tears. “Tell... Tell Ninti I’m sorry.”

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Satisfied, Leo lowered her head below the water.

Zayne's lips drew into a line, but he didn't disagree. He stood and took a few steps away, leaving me alone with Ninti.

The firewolf breathed steadily, her coloring now warmed to a dark orange. Still, she remained unconscious.

She would wake, in time. I chose to believe that.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I buried my face against her soft stomach and took a deep breath of fire and ash. Satisfied there was nothing more I could do for her, I stood and joined Zayne. I took his hand in mine.

In our absence, the critters scurried forward, surrounding Ninti with a mixture of reverence and curiosity. It felt good to know she wouldn't be alone.

Still, I didn't want to go.

But before I could change my mind—insisting that I wasn't ready, that I would stay despite Leo's wishes—Zayne jumped, leaving Ninti behind.

Chapter twenty-one

Soliloquy

Zayne

The waves struck against the rocking boat as I released Ayla and returned to the Umbral Star. Shock, relief, and fear pulsed between us as we turned toward Leo. Already, the turtle raced away, bobbing through the waves as she vanished into the horizon.

Ayla hunched over as she sucked in a deep breath.

I looked to the afternoon sky, gritting my teeth against the pain. Our bond made it impossible to discern where my shock began and her grief ended, and despite the emotional onslaught, I would do anything to take this hurt from her.

“Where’s Ninti?” Vanessa asked from the crow’s nest. When neither of us responded, she descended, joining us on the deck, her glow dulling in concern.

“Ninti needs time to heal, and Leo’s shell is the best place for that,” I answered so Ayla wouldn’t have to. “We’re ready to go back to Mer—”

“Buthow?” Vanessa insisted.

Ayla shook.

“Not now,” I urged the sprite.

But Ayla squeezed out a whimper. “We were training” —breath— “Tried something new and... It went wrong.”

Vanessa slowly nodded before retreating to the crow’s nest. “Mer, it is.”

“Come here,” I tugged Ayla closer to me. “You should get some rest.”

“Shouldn’t we talk?”

“Once the shock has worn off,” I promised. Slowly, I led her toward the cabin. For now she needed bed and rest and—

Suddenly, she straightened, her every muscle tensing as she stepped out of my grasp, wiping the tears from her eyes. “Wait, you said you took the shard, right?”

I steadied, eyeing the space between us as I indicated the pocket containing the shards. “Yes.”

“And?”

I’ve accepted a shade army.

I looked away. “You should rest. We’ll talk soon.”

Her lips drew into a thin line, but she didn’t argue, turning around and entering the cabin.

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I followed after, reaching for her hand—

She moved on without me. “I need some time to myself.”

Oh.

I staggered, needing to hold her. If I wrapped her in my arms, I could heal her wounds. Together, we could deepen the bond, so ensconced in one another that it would be as if the events on Dusk had never been.

She hunched her shoulders and lowered her voice. “Is there something I should know?”

The tether bade me to soothe her emotions, aching hot beneath her calm exterior, but I forced myself to focus on what mattered most. “Just tell me if you’re safe. Are we at risk of that happening again, and if so, how can I prepare?”

“I don’t think so. It was something Ninti and I attempted together.”

“Okay.” That was some relief.

She turned back toward the cabin and pushed the door open. I hesitated, unsure whether I could pull her into a final hug, but she wore this coldness like a shield, one she was clinging to.

“I’ll check on you in a couple hours,” I offered.

“Thank you,” she whispered before vanishing behind the cabin’s door.

I turned around, facing the sea, mist spraying my face as Vanessa began our return journey. Forcing myself to leave the aching tether alone, I focused on checking our provisions.

It had been a long day.

I made a meal for myself, and slowly worked through the rote of eating. Was Ayla hungry, did she want food? She had some provisions with her, but should I give her options?

I wished I had asked earlier.

Dusk came and went, but my speaking stone didn’t activate. It meant I should assume Eleanor was fine, but what I would have given for a distraction.

Ayla hadn’t stepped foot from the cabin.

The tether told me she was fine but distant. Tempted as I was to reach across it and find her, I knew better. What had happened to Ninti had shocked her, and she’d struggled to meet my gaze ever since. She needed rest, and she’d only feel like she had to explain herself to me.

Knowing that she was in pain and I was powerless to help was a particularly nasty sort of vexing.

But even if we were talking, I didn’t know how to describe the vault. I could barely process it, my head aching as it adjusted to the magical strain. The shade army remained on the edge of my consciousness, silent and deadly, strands of magic waiting to be picked up. Guardian was there, the entirety of the vault at my disposal.

Everything was now mine; Inarus had seen to it.

I'm not like him. I don't want war.

I poured myself a glass of dark red wine, breathing deep as the waves pounded against the boat. Savoring the somber drink, I tried to calm my thoughts, hoping for sleep.

"Smells delicious," Vanessa purred, coming closer to sniff the drink.

"Can you smell wine?" I asked.

"Kind of. It's mostly water, so I sense it in my way. I loved it when Jasmine had wine."

At the mention of Vanessa's deceased lover, I frowned, a new wave of sadness taking hold as I drew the scarf from its pocket. Vanessa froze.

I swallowed. "I found her. Jasmine's shade was at Dusk."

"Oh." She took the scarf's end and stroked the tassels. "It took me ages to make. Keeping the fabric dry was such a nightmare."

I handed it to her. "It's yours. I wish I could do more. There were thousands of shades. Maybe, next time I'm there, I can release her and..."

Vanessa wasn't listening. The sprite had wrapped the scarf around herself, the fabric dampening where it touched her skin. "I never said goodbye to her. It happened too fast. And this... This means a lot."

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“It’s the least I could do.”

She blinked, taking it all in.

In our shared silence, I took a final sip of wine, and when I set the empty glass down, it clinked against the table.

Vanessa looked up at me, her eyes more watery than normal. “Thank you,” she whispered before sweeping up the mast and vanishing into her nest, glowing the dullest of blues.

Alone again, I looked wistfully back at the ship’s cabin.

Several hours had passed. Through the tether, I suspected Ayla had fallen asleep, her emotions settling into a steady hum.

I should sleep too.

I snuck toward the cabin, using my shadows so I wouldn’t wake her. She was curled up on her side of the bed, making herself so small my heart wrenched at the sight.

Silent, I stripped down to my boxers. I folded my cloak and set it next to my pillow before crawling into the bed, careful not to touch her. But soon, the bed shifted. In sleep, Ayla turned over, stretching out a leg to entwine it with mine.

I smiled, relieved.

We'd figure it out. We always did.

Preparing to sleep, I glanced at my cloak. The pocket glowed an even brighter purple, as if the set of shards were stronger together than any piece had been alone. It was a relief to know my hunch had been right and we were one step closer to our goal. But all the same...

If I could justify the shade army, what else would I be willing to excuse in the name of protecting those I loved?

## Chapter twenty-two

### The Poisoned Tree

Ayla

The trees returned to my dreams. Growing on a hilltop, their branches swayed in the breeze, the one that was mine and the one that was Zayne's.

I studied where our roots joined, relieved to find the sight no longer filled me with alarm. We were stronger together, after all.

My dreamy gaze was drawn down.

The roots reached deeper, descending into the earth, growing wild as they explored soil previously denied.

They soaked up the water and nutrients of this new land. But this food tasted strange, and my tree remained dormant, untrusting of the earth it found itself within.

It longed to flower, but it never bloomed.

It was finally freed of its confines but still struggled to thrive.

How frustrating.

The tree grew desperate. It plunged its roots deeper into the earth, searching for anything it could salvage. Something familiar to the small, limiting mound on which it had grown.

Finding something, the tree sparked with relief, one that was short-lived...

Red liquid filled the roots. Poison or food? The tree didn't know. It was made to grow, to reach for the stars, and this red substance...

It felt right, so the roots soaked it in. Leaves grew healthier, plumper. New branches reached high. The tree had only lived this long because it had fought for its life. Though strange, the red liquid was clearly sustenance. So the roots grew again, thicker, so they might draw up more of this fuel.

Time seemed to accelerate, seasons passing in moments as the tree drank deeply from this new source. The tree grew taller, the leaves plentiful. As spring arrived, it flowered, and by the fall, fruit weighed down its branches.

Fully ripe, one of the fruits fell to the ground, splitting open. And inside...

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The fruit was rotten, filled with red bile and swarming with worms.

I woke in a sweat, my skin drenched and the sheets sticking to me. Behind me, Zayne burned like a furnace. Ignoring the heat, desperate for comfort from the dream, I snuggled further into him, wondering when in the night we had started cuddling.

His breathing was deep, evidence of the same fatigue that wore at my bones. I wiggled against him, and even in sleep, he hugged me close.

Last night I pushed him away, and he still wants me.

My head ached, my cheeks dry where tears had fallen. The nightmare still haunted the fringes of my mind. The fear and grief from the night before still didn't feel that far way.

I hurt Ninti. She barely survived.

Closing my eyes, I willed myself back to sleep. Except the dream—worms and rotten fruit—played out again on the back of my eyelids. As the minutes passed, the damp sheets grew clammy, and I knew there was no more pretending.

Like it or not, I was awake.

Careful not to disturb Zayne, I slipped from the bed, grabbed my cloak, and stepped onto the deck. It was pitch dark, the sea seeming endless. In the distance, Vanessa sang with the waves, a swaying vision of blue light as she propelled the boat. Above, the stars glittered bright, the moons hidden from sight.

The midnight breeze swept through my hair, and I filled my lungs with it, cooling my body down. For a glimmering moment, the world felt beautiful.

And then reality crashed down.

Ninti.

Looking up at the dark sky, I glared at the brightest star, hating how it dared to twinkle, shining like it mattered when it was simply one of many.

My chest tight, I paced to the back of the boat, eyeing the pile of blankets where Ninti had built her den. It was empty. Of course it was. Lips quivering, I twisted my ruby ring.

A disaster like that couldn't happen again, right? It had only happened because I was syphoning power from Ninti, I thought. I wasn't truly dangerous... At least, I'd told Zayne that.

Still, it gave me little comfort, especially in light of Dusk's warning, "For the sake of the Isles, you must learn to control your power."

My temptation to accept the Starlit King's offer grew heavier by the hour. My magic responded positively to his. It was reasonable my power had come from someone in his court, but shy of an ill-timed search for my father, he was the one offering to show me how to wield my magic.

He promised me the control I craved.

I didn't just want a lesson because Dusk had asked me to learn control. It wasn't even entirely because of what had happened to Ninti. I wanted this because I was tired of depending on the powers of others when I had this vast supply at my disposal—if

only I knew how to wield it.

Zayne would be furious when I explained.

The sea crashed against the boat, louder than ever, but it could not drown out the whirring of my mind. It was cold and damp, and all I felt was numb.

Uncertain, I left Ninti's den behind and returned to the front of the boat. Sleep seemed impossible, and the long hours of night still stretched out before me.

I should eat something.

I had just reached for our food supplies when I heard the creak of the cabin's door, the tether heightening with Zayne's nearness.

He stepped from the doorway, unfurling his cloak and shielding his bare chest from the cool, ocean sea breeze. "Time for an early breakfast?"

My mind was crowded with thoughts of him, but now he had joined me, I didn't know what to say.

Swallowing and shaking my head, I set the loaf of bread down on the table and closed the distance between us. "I couldn't sleep."

"I figured." He glanced toward the horizon and then tried to meet my gaze. The tether whispered of his cautious approach. "Breakfast sounds nice, do you want company?"

"Sure."

I busied myself, cutting off slices of bread, uncertain where to begin, the weight of my confession holding my tongue. In silence, Zayne brought forth jam from the cold

box. Through it all, his presence, reinforced through the tether, was calm.

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The easy silence continued as we ate. After taking my last bite and swallowing down the last of my doubt, I cleared my throat, “I do want to talk. It’s just not easy.”

“Fair.” He hesitated. “What happened in the vault won’t be easy to say either.”

My mouth dried. “I see.”

“I met a skeleton in the stairwell, called himself Guardian, and he led me down—”

“A skeleton?” I asked, struggling to imagine it.

“A lost form of necromancy. Unlike shades, they’re sentient and still linked to their living soul, like a timeless echo. I thought they were all gone. But...” He shook his head. “There’s much I’ve misunderstood.”

I leaned closer, caressing the back of his hand with my fingertips. “I could say the same.”

He turned his hand around so our fingers could twine. “The army of shades was made by Inarus. One of them was Vanessa’s former lover, Jasmine.”

I glanced at the water sprite’s blue glow. Squinting, I saw a tail of green fabric caught in the wind.

“I was able to bring back Jasmine’s scarf,” he concluded.

I swallowed, giving him a nod and tight smile. An entire army? It was a lot to take in.

I focused on the facts. “And the shard?” I prompted.

“I found it toward the end, when” —he glanced away— “when I raced to the surface.”

“Ah,” I whispered. The tether must have alerted him to the disaster with Ninti. Cringing at the onslaught of a fresh wave of grief, I focused on the point at hand—Zayne had rushed taking the shard. And he was also rushing over saying something uncomfortable. “What happened when you took the shard?”

How bad is it?

My stomach tightened.

“The quickest way to secure the shard was to accept Inarus’s gift—the shade army. So I did so.”

I stared at him, eyes wide, still trying to understand.

He tapped his forehead. “Even from here, I can feel them all, the undead waiting for my command.”

“Does it... hurt?”

He shrugged. Judging from the ease with which he moved, he’d recover. No, it wasn’t pain that was bothering him. “I’ll adjust,” he said, “unlike the thousands of undead making up my new army.”

“So many dead,” I said carefully. The shades had stolen countless lives. It was heart breaking, and now Zayne carried the weight of that. “This was Inarus’s reserve? Why did he need an army this large?” Concern after concern raced through my mind.

Zayne shook his head. “As soon as we have the shards, we can return to Dusk, and I’ll find a way to release them. Might take a couple days, but it must be done.”

My gut clenched at the idea. The whole time, I’d have to wait, watching over him as he wandered in and out of that vault. The last time he’d dispatched thousands of shades, he’d nearly died.

If he insisted it was the right thing to do, I’d support him. However...

I swallowed, admitting a terrible truth “We might need an army.”

Zayne fidgeted.

When he didn’t respond, I continued. “There’s a lot we don’t know. Even if we know who the shard bearers are, we aren’t sure who has been orchestrating Gloom’s expansion, much less why. As much as I hate to admit it...” I glanced away. “Given what we’ve seen at Mer—this secret weapon trade—it’s possible Eleanor may need access to an army.”

He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. “I know.” It seemed he’d already thought it over.

I sighed, worrying my words weren’t compassionate enough. But this had to be considered tactically. “Do you know what it’s like for Vanessa’s lover, being a shade?

Zayne shook his head. “In theory, Jasmine’s soul isn’t connected to her body. She’s just a shell. Only, I don’t trust theory. Not anymore.”

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“That makes two of us questioning their magic.” I mused, leaning back to look at the sky.

He raised a brow. “So what happened?”

My lips sealed tight. Trembling, I forced myself to speak. “I saw Dusk. Not the land, but the deity herself. She helped me when Ninti...” I took a deep breath. “Ninti was trying to direct my magic as I drew power from her, but once it started, I couldn’t stop the flow, and... I drained her.”

Memories flashed. The dull gray of Ninti’s fur. The breaking of earth. The complete loss of control. And Dusk, disappointed, looking down at me.

Zayne reached for my hand, squeezing it. “It was an accident.”

I struggled to focus on the conversation. “Before she left, Dusk warned me. I need to learn to control my magic.” I swallowed, realizing Zayne needed to hear this next part. “For the sake of the isles, she said.”

His brow tightened with concern.

I glanced away, knowing he wouldn’t like what I had to say. “I want control as soon as possible, and to accomplish that, I plan to accept a lesson with the Starlit King.”

“Absolutely not.” Zayne shook his head. “Lessons are not an option.”

“One lesson,” I insisted. “Just one.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I didn’t expect you to.”

He leaned closer, the tether straining tight, a growl on the tip of his tongue. How he obsessed over me. I felt treasured and trapped, precious and furious, somehow all in the same breath. I stared at him, lost in his gaze and unsure what to say.

Suddenly, Vanessa’s voice resonated through the ship. “Hey, sorry to interrupt.”

Zayne turned and looked up, facing her crow’s nest. “What is it?”

“We’re nearing the outer coves of Mer, should I head for the port?” she asked.

I glanced at the island, the dark coastline now filling most of the horizon. “It’d be suspicious to arrive too early. Let’s anchor near the shore, and lay low in some still water.”

“Yes,” Zayne agreed. “Vanessa, think you can find something like that? Preferably near a deserted beach because we’re going to shore.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Vanessa shifted course, and I braced against the railing as the momentum changed.

“We’re leaving the boat?” I asked once the sprite had been quiet for sometime.

Zayne nodded. “I have an idea to train your powers without asking him for help.”

“Oh?”

“And we’re going to test it out.”

## Chapter twenty-three

### Diverging

#### Zayne

Ayla looked over my shoulder as I loaded up a satchel, shoving in supplies in preparation for our visit to the nearby cove. Vanessa had found the perfect spot to test Ayla's magic, tucked away from prying eyes.

Still, she didn't seem convinced.

Ayla watched me pack, arms crossed and refusing to help. On the other side of the tether, her energy was irritably hot.

I tossed the packed bag over my shoulder and turned to her. "I need you to be safe. You're what matters most." I offered her my hand so I could jump her to shore. "Let's go."

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Frowning, she searched my face.

My hand wavered between us, still empty. “If you accept a lesson with the Starlit King, I don’t know how to keep you safe. Trust me, I have a plan.”

Irritation flashed through the bond. “We need a plan,” she corrected.

“Then why—”

Starlight crackled at her fingertips, the first I’d seen of her light since losing Ninti. “I already told you my plan—I want to accept a lesson. Just one. My magic is like his, I know it. It’s the same like calls to like thing I felt with his starlit box. A box you shadow-stepped us away from before I could even try opening it.”

“I told you, my shadows don’t work—”

“Your shadows,” she corrected. “His starlight might feel wrong to you, but to me it feels...” She squeezed her eyes tight. “It feels like I’ve known it all my life.”

I hesitated, recalling how claiming the vault had felt just as familiar.

She shook her head. “I need to have control over my magic. If there’s a chance a single lesson from someone with experience in starlight might actually help, I want to take it.”

“I can keep you safe.”

“What happens when you’re not there?”

“I’ll always be there—”

“You’re a necromancer who regularly goes into death! I need to understand my magic if I’m to defend myself—defendus.”

My jaw tightened.

She continued on. “Additionally, if I learn more about my magic, it’s possible I’ll be able to open the starlit box with the shards. Ideally, we’ll try right after the lesson. And if everything goes right, we’ll be sailing away before dark! What’s wrong with that?” She stared at me, eyes wide. “Why don’t you like my plan?”

“Everything!”

“Then explainwhy!”

“Do you really think you can outmaneuver the Starlit King after a single lesson?”

She lifted her chin, the growth of her antlers on full display. “Who knows. We didn’t try opening the box.”

I drew my hands into fists, yanking the shadows closer, wishing I could protect us from everything determined to drive us apart. “I have an idea too—a way to minimize your light. It’s not perfect, but please try. We need to exhaust every other option. Ineedyou, Ayla...”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“I do. But I don’t trusthim.”

“And neither do I!”

I shook my head. “He’ll manipulate you.”

“I’m smarter than that!”

“You just said that his magic felt familiar. Are you certain that’s real?”

She took half a step back.

I charged on. “Ayla, I hate to break it to you, but you’re just as susceptible as everyone else.”

Her eyes flashed with hurt.

That went too far.

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Regret filled my chest, and I shook my head. “I’m—”

Cutting off my apology, she surged ahead. “At least I’m not like you, Zayne. I’m not so hesitant of my power that I’m afraid to use it. If you’d accepted yourself as a necromancer earlier, could you have stopped Inarus faster?”

The punch landed exactly as she’d intended.

If I had understood what I was sooner, would I have done anything differently? Would I have ended Inarus sooner or simply sworn off necromancy entirely? I couldn’t be sure.

Ayla’s voice dropped to a whisper. “You say you’re trying to keep me safe, but you won’t always be there to protect me. I need to be able to take care of myself. I need that lesson.”

And we were back to this? “Going to him won’t help.”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

Why doesn’t she get it?

Fury coursed through me. Our argument was becoming circular, and she refused to acknowledge how dangerous this was. Nobody ever acknowledged how dangerous the Starlit King was—not even me, before.

I took a deep breath. “Did you know I couldn’t shadow-step in Karenia? It wasn’t

exactly something I could hide.”

She knitted her brows in surprise. “Someone in my mother’s council might have known, but I...” She shook her head. “I didn’t know.”

My throat tightened. “Wielding shadows is difficult so close to the Starlit Throne, the same way they became difficult around the starlit box. Starlight can dismantle shadows. It was the Starlit King himself who explained it to me.”

“You grew up without your shadows? They’re part of you. That’s... terrible.”

“When he gave us sanctuary, he didn’t just invite two powerful fae into his home to help them. The decision may have been popularized as altruism, but when he brought us closer, he suffocated our power.”

She opened her mouth and closed it again. After a time, she asked, “Why didn’t the two of you leave earlier?”

“We tried, but there was nowhere to go. By the time we realized our mistake, no one else would host us. I’ve always assumed that he made deals with other isles, ensuring that would be the case. Our only other option was to escape to our homeland. Which we did, eventually.”

Ayla searched my face at a loss for words.

“I can’t trust him. Never again,” I concluded. “Even in something as seemingly simple as this. I know you’re capable—Teyr, you’re right, maybe I’m misconstruing everything—but if I’m forced to watch from the shadows as he reveals some hidden agenda, I’m not sure what I would do next, myfearof necromancy be damned.”

She glanced at the shore and back to me. Her voice lowered. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too.”

Though I didn’t think either of us were quite sure what we were apologizing for anymore. Resigned, I set my pack on the table. If she didn’t want to go to shore, I couldn’t force her.

To my surprise, she shouldered the bag. “If you have an idea, I’m willing to try.”

Relief flooded me. “Thank you.”

“It might not change my mind about accepting the lesson.”

I stilled.

“But you’re right, I can’t trust him an inch. We should be prepared.” She stepped closer, extending her hand. “I want to hear your plan.”

Relieved, I readied to shadow-step.

Perhaps I could never convince her that a lesson was a bad idea. Perhaps she was right, and it was a valid path forward. But at the very least, I could ensure she was prepared with every tool I could think of.

Chapter twenty-four

Of Shadow and Light

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Zayne

My heart raced as we steadied on the small sandy beach with bluffs rising to either side. Ayla's hand, trapped in mine, tempted me. How I longed to hide her away forever—only she'd never forgive me if I did that.

“What's your plan?” she asked.

I shook my head, pushing the thoughts aside and looking about. This place was almost perfect. I shadow-stepped us one more time.

Now we stood next to a lagoon, a fine sandy beach at our feet. The crystal clear pool was surrounded by vibrant plants and tall lush trees. Tucked between bluffs, we were secluded, completely out of sight.

It'd be the perfect place to hide Ayla away, if she'd allow it.

Taking her hand, I turned her around so that her back was flush to my front. In the space before us, I brought forward a dense shadow, darker than pitch.

“By working together, we could temper your magic,” I explained. “Your starlight and my shadows.”

She leaned into me, causing my heart to pound against the pressure of her body. The echo of our disagreement lingered between us, and by Teyr, I was thankful she allowed me to hold her now. I just breathed her in, cherry and spice and entirely Ayla.

She lifted her chin, nuzzling her cheek against my chest where she could reach. “So let me get this straight, your big plan is that, when I have too much starlight, I’ll just throw it into your shadows, and they’ll annihilate each other?”

“Pretty much.”

She chuckled, the sound like music until it died in her throat a moment later. “The last time I tried to mix my magic with someone else’s, Ninti...”

“This is different,” I insisted. “Ninti’s power entered your magic, right? My shadows are made to consume, and I’m offering you a place to discharge power. Starlight and shadows, it makes sense.”

“Sure,” she answered, still unconvinced. “But I still don’t know how to create starlight on purpose.”

I nodded toward the dark shadow before us. “You’re always emitting starlight around me. Give it a try. And if this goes badly, we don’t have to do it ever again, I promise.”

Still, she hesitated. “Even if this works, it’s just a cover-up. This won’t give me control.”

My chest tightened; she was right. She asked for control, but I didn’t know how to give it to her. “Control is what the lesson is for,” I finally admitted.

“And you’re okay with that?”

“Begrudgingly accepting,” I corrected.

“I’ll take it.”

“But first” —I pointed to the shadow— “Princess, please make me some starlight.”

The scent of her arousal bloomed at my words. If I’d learned anything about her magic, it was that her starlight responded to me. And this lagoon was beautiful. When we were done here, the things we could do...

Through the tether, I promised her sweet kisses if she’d do this one thing for me.

She pointed her palm toward my shadow. Hesitant, she inhaled, and then a thin light appeared just beyond her reach. It wavered and shimmered and finally grew. Gradually, the speck of starlight expanded into an orb.

She wiggled excitably in my arms. “I couldn’t do that before.” She hesitated and blushed. “So uh, the us-thing, I suppose it helps. In a pinch.”

Relief radiated through the tether as her tension gave way to release, and with the easy flick of her fingers, she sent the starlight toward the shadow.

My shadow consumed it whole, and her magic flashed within me, vanishing completely. It had been one thing to guard her starlight with my shadows last night aboard the Umbral Star, but this... directly absorbing her starlight was entirely different.

A greedy rush of pleasure shocked through me. Startled, I gasped.

“Oh!” Ayla cried out too.

My lips parted as I fought the urge to groan. “That felt very good.” Making my point clear, I rubbed my hardened cock against her back. “You?”

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“It, well, it felt good to me too.” Her skin heated with the most delicious flush. “Again?”

“I suppose we should practice.”

I lifted a new shadow as she brought forth her light, and with mutual extinction, they both vanished.

Her power sparked with a bite of pleasure. Blood rushed to my loins as I clutched her closer, sneaking a hand under her shirt. After everything we’d said earlier, I had to know if she would still let me have her.

“Damn it, Ayla. It works. Only I didn’t expect it to be so” —I growled, searching for a word to possibly explain how she’d unraveled me— “dynamic.”

She chuckled, the sound rolling from her body and into mine, the tether vibrating in synch, the lingering aches of our fight easing away. Despite everything falling apart, the world felt so right when she was in my arms.

She turned around, kissing my neck as she wiggled against my cock.

“We have several hours until dawn, and I can name countless things we can do with them,” I whispered.

“Show me,” she begged.

Her light fresh in my blood, I would not deny her a single thing. I would make her

scream, moan, and beg for more, anything to delight my princess.

## Chapter twenty-five

### The Starlit Pool

Ayla

Zayne's arousal was evident from his starstruck face and his hardened cock. From the waves of provocation that flooded the tether.

And he wasn't the only one.

Giving him my starlight had felt good. The fact shook me to the core. If shadows could swallow starlight, he could destroy me and I'd delight in it.

But if there was one thing I knew for certain about Zayne, it was that he was good, through and through. Even his misguided attempts to protect me were rooted in good intentions.

Despite it all, I trusted him.

A deep, dangerous trust that made me crave him unlike ever before. My body was his instrument, and I needed to be played. I'd had a mere taste of our powers combined.

And I needed more.

I want all of him.

I needed this. To feel him inside me in every single way. I pounced, my lips claiming his as I ran my hands through his hair, drawing him closer.

Furious, fast, and desperate, we kissed. Our tongues tangled, becoming more demanding with each accelerating moment. My hand trailed down his back, reaching for his ass and pushing his pelvis against mine. His cock pressed into me.

“I can’t wait much longer,” I whispered.

“Neither can I.”

I gasped for breath, stripping off my top as his hands worked up my stomach. He clutched my breasts, squeezing them tight, his neck thrown back in longing. I grabbed his shirt and pushed it up, pressing my face into his sculpted chest.

Cedar and amber. The scent of this male.

I melted, kissing him, licking him. Tasting him.

Hands under waistbands, our trousers were gone as quick as our shirts. Boots kicked off, socks tossed aside. Dressed only in my panties, I stepped back and breathed in the sight of him, naked but for his boxers, his hipbones framing his bulge.

Sensations prickled along my spine. My nipples tightened.

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His gaze darkened as he tugged at his waistband and shoved his underwear down his thighs. His cock sprung forth, and my jaw loosened.

Unhinged, I rushed to him, kissing him wildly, savoring the heat of his arousal against my exposed stomach. The tether ignited, his cravings flooding my mind. This was our time, a space where we could be together, and an infinity could live within this moment.

We paused for a breath, and I licked my lips, eyeing the length of him, the precum glistening on my belly. Drawn to his long cock, I found myself entirely too empty.

Panting, I teased my thumbs beneath the hips of my panties, pushing them down as I lifted one leg and then the other, stepping out of them entirely. Balling them up, tossing the last of my clothes aside, I looked up at him, completely naked. There was nothing about this body I wanted to hide, not from him.

His eyes widened as he drank me in.

Then he was upon me.

Lips crushed to mine, and his hand massaged my ass. He crushed me closer to him and my breasts roared with sensation, squeezed against his chest. Through the tether, I felt his building desire as if it were my own. It was beautiful, distracting, and soon, I lost track of where he ended and I began. Sensation roared through my mind, my sex, all of it a demand for more more more.

Reaching down, I wrapped his cock in my fist. I stroked him once and was rewarded

with the jerk of his hips. Grinning, I pumped again.

He replied by reaching down to cup my folds. I squirmed, grinding against his palm until one of his fingers slipped through my seam to streak along my wet center. He found my clit and began to circle it.

Overcome with pleasure, I moaned, releasing his cock before I squeezed too tight. He toyed with me, inserting a finger into my opening and then another. He curved them, pressing my inner wall, and all at once, it became too much.

My knees buckled, and I only stayed standing because he held my quivering body.

Back and forth, in and out, his fingers urged me onward. Needing him, I reached down to his cock, squeezing, stroking. He moaned, and I echoed it.

Starlight burned in my chest, brimming with the rest of me, and I stepped back, breathless and moaning and entirely lost. My vision wavered, but Zayne was still there.

“Let go, I can handle it,” he urged me.

I searched for breath, for sanity, for anything. “Not yet.”

“Ayla...”

I pointed to the narrow beach beside the lagoon. “Lie down.”

“What do you want? I need to hear you say it.”

“I want you inside me, Zayne. Fuck, I think I’ve wanted you inside me since the night we met, when I had no idea who you were or the way our paths would cross. I need to

feel every part of you inside me. Now.”

He growled, the rumble shaking me to the core. Cock bobbing with each step, he reached into his pack, brought forth a large blanket, and laid it out.

He settled on his back, propped up on his elbows as he looked up at me. His gaze searched my body, centering on my face and flooding me with a fresh wave of arousal. “I have waited so long to hear you say that.”

His erection rose above his stomach, so long and beautiful that I wrestled the urge to worship him with my mouth. Awe and desire melded in me as I stepped closer.

He lifted an eyebrow and motioned toward his throbbing cock. “Ready?”

Transfixed, I lowered to my knees, spreading my thighs around him until his cock was a hand’s width from my entrance. His stomach rippled with his next tortured inhale as I took his length in my hands and slid the tip through my outer lips.

His cock grazed my clit. “Teyr!” I burst.

His gaze darkened. “Don’t call upon Teyr. Not when I’m the one giving you pleasure.”

I tilted my hips, pleasure rolling up my spine. How could this feel so good when he still wasn’t inside me? “Zayne,” I gasped his name. “Zayne, you do things to me I didn’t think possible.”

Under me, he strained, his pelvis tilting as he lifted himself closer to me. “And it’s only the beginning,” he groaned.

I slid my lower lips over his cock, making him slick with my desire. Thighs

trembling, need rising, I lifted myself higher, wrapping his cock in one hand as I used the other to seat his tip against my opening.

The heat of him alone was more than I could bear. Beneath me, Zayne tensed, straining as he waited for my next move, his gaze trapped by the place where we almost joined.

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“Zayne,” I whispered. “Look at me.”

He did, his dark eyes flashing with a ferocity to match my own. I nodded, and he lifted his hips, sliding his cock partway into me.

Despite the preparation, the fullness still surprised me. “Oh,” I gasped

He clutched at the blanket beneath him. “I could come already.”

“Don’t!” I gasped. “Not yet!” I lowered myself further upon him, paused, and then continued, adjusting myself until I had taken him to the hilt. So full. I steadied over him, every muscle tight. My vision darkened as a rush of sensations rode through me.

“Good?” Zayne groaned.

“Amazing.” I wiggled my hips.

He squeezed his eyes shut. “You’re consuming me.”

I glanced to the place where his cock jutted into me and groaned at the erotic sight. He filled me so completely, pushing against me on all sides so forcefully that it seemed I would burst from this pressure.

His fingers wandered up my thighs, my hips, my stomach, finding my breasts. He pinched a nipple between his fingers, and I tightened around his length as another mewl escaped my lips.

This was pleasure. It was agony.

I needed more.

Experimentally, I lifted my hips, easing him out of me, and then lowered, filling myself again. In answer, his fingertips roamed down my stomach to the place where we met. Pinpricks ran up my spine as he found my clit. Urged higher, I continued experimenting, up and down, circling this way and that, until the next time I lowered onto him, he tilted his hips, his cock striking my inner wall.

Starlight consumed my body. I squeezed my eyes closed, allowing the moment to pass. My crux tightened, squeezing around him.

He groaned beneath me.

The sound did terrible things to me, and I rose again, repeating the motion. His cock filled me, shocking me with thrill. Pleasure became everything as I found a rhythm, rising faster.

Zayne's eyes closed tight, overcome by bliss of his own.

I did that to him.

Gaining confidence, I rocked again. Higher. Harder.

"Ayla," he grunted my name. "Kiss me."

Our lips met with renewed recklessness. He grabbed my hair, holding me against him, our hips writhing as we fell in and out of synch, lost to our warring tongues. Every inch of my skin was on fire as my mind latched to the tether, another source of rapture, one that didn't fully belong to me.

He broke the kiss, holding his brow against mine. His cock twitched within me. “You feel so good.”

“So good.” I echoed his praise even when it was difficult to breathe.

Tension built within us, crescendoing with each mindless thrust. So good, so right. I moaned as my starlight grew in intensity to the edge of overwhelming. Desperate to make sense of the chaos, I sat taller, taking him in and out with renewed steadiness. He matched my tempo with his hips, striking me with each thrust. We slid together, up and down, in and out.

He filled me in so many ways, and soon light would burst from my seams. I gasped, allowing the starlight from my chest to fill the space between us. In response, his shadows spewed forth, consuming my light.

A new sort of pleasure sparked between us, one that was entirely our own. When the light cleared and the shadows faded, I looked down to find Zayne as destroyed as I felt.

You’re mine.

Mine.

MINE.

The word echoed, and we clenched, the orgasm seizing us. It rattled up my spine, spilling out through the tether. I gripped as he twitched within me, his cum striking my inner wall. Pulse by pulse, we rode the orgasm together, nurtured by our pleasure.

We drifted, floating.

And steadily, we landed, gazes locked. Unbidden, tears came to me, and Zayne sat up to kiss me on the brow, my cheek, and finally, my lips.

Thighs trembling, I leaned forward. His cock slid out from me as liquids gushed out to pool on his belly, tinted red with my virgin blood. The salty scent of us loomed in the air, and I sucked it in, committing it to memory.

I wanted Zayne. All of him. Always.

I love him.

The thought startled me. This beautiful thing between us had destroyed me in so many ways. I trusted him with my body. My power. There was no turning back.

I shifted to his side, my thighs suddenly burning from the effort as warm fluids dripped down their length. Zayne sighed, throwing his head back as he looked to the sky, all of his limbs growing heavy at once. Together, we caught our breath.

Eventually, he stood and retrieved his shirt. I watched with keen interest, studying every shift in his muscles as he dipped the cloth into the lagoon.

He wrung the shirt. "Let me clean you."

Still lost for words, I nodded.

He settled between my outstretched legs, and leaning over me, he wiped the sweat from my brow and the back of my neck. He ran the cloth down my chest before eyeing my thighs. “The blood. Did it hurt?”

I followed his gaze to the red-tinged juices spread there. “There was so much pleasure I barely noticed the pain.”

He cleaned my thighs next. “Good.” He retreated to the pool and rinsed the cloth anew. Gently, he wiped my lower lips, clearing the last of our liquids.

“Tell me to stop if this is too much, too soon” he said, leaning down to give my opening a long, sweeping kiss.

Shocked, I shuddered, a whimper escaping me. “Don’t. Stop.”

My words urged him onward. Suckle and swirl, he brought me higher. I flung my head back, and shoved my core to his lips. Rapture consumed me as I begged for more, uncertain how I could possibly handle it.

“Zayne, I—I...”

He worked me harder, and I grabbed his horns, bracing for impact. Like an expert, he pushed me over the edge, and my climax struck with a scream from my throat.

Heart racing, I released him, hands trembling.

“You’re beautiful when you come,” he whispered into me, smirking and pleased with himself.

Absolutely spent, I fell back on the ground.

Zayne chuckled, and I watched lazily as he returned to the lagoon and stepped into the water. He rinsed the shirt and submerged himself. When he rose, water streamed down his stomach, and I allowed myself to stare, admiring every inch.

He extended a hand in invitation. “The water’s warm.”

After a few more breaths, I followed him into the pool, the reflection of starlight rippling around my feet. The warm water soothed my tired muscles, and sighing, I submerged.

Zayne reached for my waist, holding me close, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, buoyant and supported. I rested in his embrace, sated and spent. For another stolen moment, I surrendered to the miracle of this hidden oasis.

For a moment, I had commanded my starlight. Zayne’s shadows could absorb it. The whole experience was so arousing that I questioned how it would help us at Mer, but for the first time in days, I felt like I had the semblance of control. A weight had been taken from me, and I breathed a little deeper.

We floated, flowing in time that wasn’t.

Skin wrinkling, we wandered back to the beach. Waist-high in the water, I saw his cock, already hard. My mouth dried at the sight. My core felt so achingly empty.

I want him again. Already.

I would need him, again and again, trapped inside me for the rest of my life.

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He felt my desire and looked my way. “Again?” he asked.

“Please,” I managed.

He gathered me in his arms and set me upon the blanket. He reached for the pack, grabbing a towel to dry me off. Hungrily, I watched his cock.

Impatient, I reached for his skin.

“I don’t want gentle, not anymore.”

He stared at me like a ravenous animal. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Grinning wickedly, he pinched my skin and spread my thighs. Impatient, we surrendered to the wild fae within.

Time grew short. Time became expansive.

We fucked until the sky became a predawn maroon, the stars few and far between.

“How do you feel?” Zayne asked as we finished another round, the stream of them blurring into a hedonistic haze.

“Amazing.” In truth, I was increasingly sore, but it was hard to care. “You?”

“Absolutely ravished.”

He didn’t look ravished. He radiated fresh confidence. It was sexy as hell.

I glanced at the rising light with irritation. “It’s nearly dawn. We have...”

Responsibilities. Friends. Families.

He nodded. “I know.”

We dressed in silence, only our gazes touching, as if making skin contact would unleash whatever self-control remained. If only we could take the Umbral Star and sail into the horizon without a care in the world, everyone else be damned.

But that wasn’t who we were.

As Zayne offered me his hand, a signal he was preparing to shadow-step, the tether ignited across our minds. What I had once denied now held both of us tight.

We’d come so far. We had so much further to go.

Ninti was still absent, and Zayne’s trick didn’t exactly solve my desire for control. There were still shards to take and an army of shades to resolve.

All the same, I accepted Zayne’s outstretched hand. Whatever we faced, we wouldn’t confront it alone.

Chapter twenty-six

The New Stowaway

Zayne

I smirked from the shadows as Ayla told half-lies about the most delightful cove she had discovered with her friend.

The Umbral Star bounced in the waves outside the closed gates while Ayla met with the guards on the small island with the gatehouse.

The guard's gaze raked over her, approving of her more than I would have wished. "Glad you could enjoy Mer. With the trade assembly, it's been too quiet here. Lucky you."

"Lucky indeed," she answered kindly.

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Confident she had the situation under control, I spared a glance for the clifftop palace, searching for any changes, and finding that aside from being cast in a morning glow, the palace remained the same.

We were what had changed.

Every inch of me that Ayla had touched was still warm, and when her scent caught on the wind, it almost brought me to my knees.

I'd had her. She'd taken me.

And by Teyr, I'd be ruined forever.

When the guard handed the paperwork back to her with a flirty smile on his face, it took all my control not to smack his grin right off.

Promptly, the gate opened, and Vanessa steered the Umbral Star into the port. As we entered the still, silent waters, I stepped to Ayla's side, shadows coming between us.

This illusion, this false role of Aida, would break me.

Ayla didn't look at me, but with a tilt to her hips, she leaned closer. Our bond was calm and focused, her presence sharper than before. Now the tether hinted at something more than her emotions, an intangible I was eager to explore.

To think, when we'd first arrived at Mer, she had been unable to even acknowledge our connection.

And, try as I might to ignore it, we weren't the only thing that had shifted. So had my magic, the lens of death brighter than before, the remaining shards glowing a deathly purple hue only I could see.

Soon, we'd have them all. We would escape these walls.

It couldn't happen quickly enough.

As if sensing my mood, she leaned against the railing. "We'll be out of here tonight."

"Easily," I agreed, widening my shadows enough so she could hear.

Her gaze flitted to the palace. "I'm still planning to accept the lesson."

"I know," I whispered. She wanted control—Dusk had asked it of her. Moreover, she had every right to choose, and I wouldn't deny her this. "But we'll be cautious."

"Agreed."

Through the shadows, I reached for her hand. In response, she held me tight, our palms flushed against each other in a tightsqueeze. The warmth of her skin tempted me to wrap her in my shadows for one last kiss.

The boat reached the dock before I dared.

With a final clasp, Ayla released my hand, shouldered her bag, and faced the palace. This early, the nearby beach was mostly empty, primarily used by mer for a morning swim. We journeyed on. The watery routes were emptier than before, and we easily secured a gondola. Looking about, the market was hardly open, but as we flowed up the hill, the city stirred in our wake.

Soon, Ayla faced our suite's door. At her side, I glanced to the corner apartment where the three diamond shards beckoned to me. My cloak shifted, the pocket with the shards drawn to the side as if drawn in that direction.

After a deep breath, she knocked, announced "Rhett, it's Aida," and pushed the door open.

Not only Rhett, but Iona too, lounged on the living room couch beyond. They had been cuddling, with her wrapped under his arms, their hands held, and while both stiffened when we entered, neither loosened their grip on the other.

Ayla glanced at them with a smirk. "I should've known."

In Iona's presence, I stayed to the shadows as I entered the room. Ayla closed the door just as Rimu raced forward.

The big black dog sniffed about, searching with increased desperation until he looked up at Ayla and whimpered.

Rhett frowned. "Where's Ninti?"

Ayla knelt to scratch the big dog. "Ninti's staying with my friend, the one I visited," she lied, pretending for Iona's sake, making my chest ache as her grief trekked through the tether.

Rhett frowned, clearly not fooled, but he didn't ask anything further. Instead, he glanced at Iona, squeezing her hand reassuringly. "There's been a development here."

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“Did the assembly reach an agreement?” Ayla asked, setting her bag just inside our bedroom.

Rhett shrugged. “They’re still arguing over how much the Starlit King wants to charge in port fees. In response, the Dragon Queen is offering Wisp as a secondary port, but it’s far too small to support the demand. Calindra was up all night writing a new proposal that she plans to share today.”

As he explained, I studied Iona, still uncertain if she could detect my presence or not. She was pointedly not looking at me, and I couldn’t decide if that was a good or bad sign.

“So then, what’s the development?” Ayla asked after a pause.

Rhett took a deep breath. “Iona and I are staying together, and if that means heading out on our own, we understand.”

Ayla crossed her arms. “You’re... leaving?”

Rhett stood, stepping between Ayla and Iona. “I’d prefer it if we could both go with you. If you’ll allow it.”

Ayla stared at him.

Then Iona stood too, her posture bent, a little desperate. “Please. I’ve suspected the worst of my mother, but over the last few days, the more I’ve learned... I won’t be a part of this.”

Ayla squinted at her. “So whatishappening?”

“The weapons.” Iona swallowed. “I don’t know who they’re for, but I’ve seen the lists my mother sent to the artisans. She already has stockpiles of weapons, but they’re making even more and her team is still designing new kinds.”

Ayla searched the mer’s face in silence.

Iona stood a little taller. “I’ll find my way out, one way or another. And as for Rhett... He’s choosing this.” She reached for his hand. “We’ll never know ifwework if we’re never together.”

Finally, Ayla shook her head. “I understand—I don’t like this either. But you don’t want to come with us, not really... It’s complicated.”

“I know that.” Iona glared at her. “Your backstory is too suspicious.”

Ayla stared daggers at Rhett, who shook his head, mouth agape, clearly just as surprised by Iona’s accusation.

Iona shook her head. “Don’t blame Rhett—he didn’t spill your secret. And I don’t think anyone else suspects. ButIknow Rhett doesn't have a cousin on Valterra. For him to maintain such a lie means your secret must be important, and while I don’t intend to pry, treat me with respect. Whatever it is, I can handle a littlecomplication.”

Ayla pinned her with her gaze. “All that, and you’re still not afraid to leave with us?”

Iona shrugged. “Whatever you and Rhett are up to is a far better bet than my mother. Maybe not safer. But better.”

“Well,” Ayla breathed, curiously probing the tether as if asking for my thoughts.

I weighed the options, frustrated with how little I knew of Iona beyond her infatuation with Rhett and frustrations with her mother.

“Let me speak with Rhett,” Ayla finally answered. “Alone.”

Iona nodded. “I understand.”

Simultaneously, Rhett growled. “But—”

Ayla put up her hand. “We’ll need to leave soon, and there won’t be much notice. If you’re coming with us, I need you to prepare now.”

“Of course,” Iona rushed to say.

“That soon?” Rhett’s voice rose.

“We have a few more tasks to complete, and we’re leaving as soon as they’re done.”

Rhett frowned.

Taking the hint, Iona kissed his cheek, stepping away before he could react. “I’ll pack and let you two chat.” Her gaze strayed to where I was standing, her lips drawn tight.

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Does she know where I am?

Ayla frowned, noticing the direction of Iona's gaze too.

In a final, determined farewell, Iona straightened her shoulders and faced Ayla. "I know you have no reason to trust me, but I will keep your secrets regardless of whether or not you help me."

She left, closing the door behind her.

I dropped the shadows and glared at Rhett. "You've told her nothing? Really?"

"I promise! I didn't even know she was suspicious of Ayla."

"But the way she looked at Zayne..." Ayla glanced at me, and I nodded in agreement.

"What look?" Rhett frowned.

"It's like she knew where he was. She's suspected I wasn't your cousin this whole time, and really, she never mentioned it to you?"

"Why would she bring it up?" Rhett snapped. "She knew I had secrets—Teyr knows she has them too—we just agree not to talk about them unless they're essential. And is there really a problem with that?"

Ayla stepped back, her expression crestfallen. "What secrets did you keep from me? I thought... we told each other everything."

“We do, until we don’t,” Rhett pleaded. “Ayla, we first met under pretense. Of course we both have secrets. Everyone does.”

She backed down, clearly still hurt by his words. “You’ll really stay with her, won’t you?”

Rhett glanced at me before meeting Ayla’s eyes. “Not all of us have the luxury of falling in love with someone we can’t keep secrets from.”

Ayla blinked at him. “You’re jealous of... us?”

Rhett went on. “Sometimes, when I watch the two of you—this connection you share. Maybe Iona and I have to keep secrets now, but there could be a future where that isn’t true. And the only way I’m going to find out is by taking a leap of faith and staying by her side.”

Ayla’s shoulder’s softened.

Rhett looked to the ground, his voice lowering. “Has it occurred to you that I’m fighting for Iona because I’m jealous of you? I want a mate. A real one.”

“We’re not... mates.” Ayla breathed, her heart racing so fast I could feel it from here.

Yes, some fae partners would call themselves mates, celebrating their bond through ceremony like human marriage. But mates were also a thing from legends, those with bonds that connected to the soul.

We couldn’t be mates, at least in that later sense... Right?

“I don’t know,” Rhett concluded. “But since your bond is so blatantly obvious.... why not?”

At his words, the tether throbbed, an ache in my chest. I stepped to Ayla's side, an instinctive need to stand closer.

I want to keep her forever.

And that meant keeping her safe from harm, even from those who would cause it incidentally.

Finally, I spoke up. "So in this jealous mood, you've potentially offered Iona passage with us—the thieves of her mother's shard?"

He looked up at me with a careless shrug. "Call me a fool, but at least, I'll admit I'm in love."

I flickered with the shadows in my hand. "You told me to keep Ayla safe, and now you're the one making it difficult."

Rhett met my gaze, playfulness still dancing in his eyes. "I like you more and more, Zayne. Keep it up. You're good for her." He glanced away. "I was thinking, if you were open to it, we could stop by the Shadow Court and lay low for a time. Let all this blow over."

I met Ayla's gaze, searching for her thoughts.

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“I want this. For Rhett’s sake,” she admitted. “But Zayne, it’s your mission, your rules. I’m not the one who would be taking a stowaway to their sister’s court.”

Rhett peered hopefully up at me.

A heartbeat passed. “I’ll think on it.”

He closed his eyes with relief. “Thank you.”

I waved it off. “So what would be the plan when her mother notices she’s missing?”

“Run like thieves?” Ayla offered.

I chuckled. Indeed, we were thieves. First of shards and potentially a mer lady.

“So what’s the plan?” Rhett asked.

“Your plan,” I corrected, “is to stay alert when Ayla accepts a lesson with the Starlit King. We’ll take care of the rest.”

Chapter twenty-seven

Asking for Help

Ayla

We joined the stream of attendees just as the group meandered toward the throne

room. The mood was jovial on the surface, and yet everyone spoke in low whispers, wandering from one group to another.

Rhett and I fell into step, Rimu at our side. My long skirt flounced at my ankles, giving me false bravado. It had felt nice to shower and dress, and while it did nothing to hide how small our group felt without Ninti, I became the fae I pretended to be.

I was someone who was lucky enough to mingle with royalty, ignorant to the deception surrounding me. And now, after a day of venturing on the far side of Mer, I was filled with admiration for this beautiful isle and unable to stop smiling.

I was young and mesmerized and certainly not terrified to be playing a game entirely out of my league. With my arm wrapped around Rhett's, I babbled on meaninglessly about my day on the coast.

Zayne stayed near as we weaved toward the ballroom, the tether showing him to me like a dark aura. His emotions were as steady as my own, growing into a presence that felt more and more distinct.

We crossed the palace yards, his dark being, like a comforting pressure, following me.

So close. So far away.

Is Zayne my mate?

Rhett was such a romantic. Of course he wanted to believe in the word tossed about into music and shaped by myths. Mates forged by fire, destiny of desire had a nice beat, but it was nonsense. Fae committed to one another the same way humans did, without any special bond between them.

But nothing's normal with Zayne.

Just thinking of him was more than I could bear.

My mind still raced with memories of our time on the beach. Him over me. Him under me. The beach—

It took all my self-control not to reach for him, to caress my skin in search of his remnants. We'd been touching ever since we returned from the lagoon, if only a stray finger or lingering caress. In the suite, he'd helped me prepare, cleaning me in the shower and dressing me.

Only a few feet from me, his emotions wrapped in my head, he felt so very far away. I walked with Rhett, speaking about a beautiful beach I'd never forget and an emptiness grew inside me, every inch of my skin haunted by the feel of Zayne.

This was a new hunger, and I was ravenous.

I glanced at his shadows, and my core clenched around nothing. A blush warmed my cheeks. In response, humor, like a chuckle, echoed through the connection. Zayne was amused and...

I forced myself not to study his shadows.

Oh.

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He was turned on, his memories as lustful as mine.

I tightened my grip on Rhett's arm, forcing myself to walk straight when I'd rather vanish into Zayne's shadows and fuck him.

Rhett turned to me with an obnoxiously knowing smile and sparkling eyes. "Must have been a real good time. I'm so glad you went to the beach."

The throne room was set up as the morning before, though perhaps a little more disheveled, as if the partying had gone late into the night. The marble looked in need of a shine, and looking closer, the attendees were similarly worn, their eyes and clothes a little less bright. Only the coral ceiling remained vibrant.

The tether stretched as Rhett steered me toward the same table as before while Zayne lingered at the perimeter of the room.

Animatedly, Rhett spoke to his fellow merchants, all of them seemingly eager to see me again. I smiled kindly, played the role, and then glanced across the room, confirming the Starlit King was in a deep conversation with his secretary.

All I needed was the opportunity to ask about that lesson. I'd set it up so we met in a public place, somewhere Zayne and Rhett could follow.

When he glanced my way, the warm daylight did nothing to quiet my nerves as I met his gaze. The Starlit King set down his papers and studied me.

I felt like prey.

My body tightened, trapped under his gaze. I tightened my resolve. I needed control, and I was convinced he knew how to teach it.

The corners of the Starlit King's lips turned upward in a smile, and in reply, I managed a demure nod of my head. He stood, the ring of courtiers parting to give him space as he approached.

Heart pounding, I stepped closer too.

"Aida," he began, drawing out my false name. "I'm glad to see you've returned."

My fingertips glowed, and I couldn't quite decide if the ebbing light was intentional or not. Either way, I grimaced at the sight, acting displeased.

The Starlit King followed my gaze. "I hope your magic didn't misbehave while you were out."

My grip tightened as I tried not to think of Ninti. "No new issues. Just the old ones."

He cleared his throat. "I came over to apologize. I'm sorry if I frightened you with the promise of lessons, I only meant to help."

Shyly, caught off guard, I looked down at my still-glowing hands. "I understand..." I swallowed. "I'm sorry I ran without explaining—I was so embarrassed, to gain your attention, to be so powerless. But it's time I swallow my pride and accept. I'd appreciate the lesson, if you're still offering."

A smile slowly spread across his lips. "Fortunately for you, I am a king who looks out for his own."

"Would it be possible to meet in the visitor wing's courtyard at the break?" I

prompted. The others could easily follow me there.

“Gladly.”

I stomached a new wave of doubt. “You’re very generous.”

He turned toward his secretary, leaving me. In his stead, merchants around me filed in, each prepared to pepper me with yet another probing question.

Heart racing, I framed my face into the perfect expression of a starstruck girl who would be taught by royalty.

Chapter twenty-eight

Being Seen

Zayne

Ayla would have her lesson.

It would be easy to sulk in the shadows, frustrated by the way she smiled at him and he doted on her, but that wouldn’t help. She was sure this was her best way forward, and her confidence was something I was eager to nurture.

Presumably this was still a manipulation—the Starlit King did nothing for altruism—but whatever it was, we could handle it. She could handle it. And for the first session of the trade assembly, I would have to trust her implicitly while I focused on my immediate mission: steal Lord Tallus’s shard.

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The mer fae had still not made an appearance in the throne room, but Rhett had assured me that Tallus was reliably late. So I waited, watching from the shadows.

Iona entered the room, her arms filled with a stack of parchment. Upon seeing her daughter, Calindra stood and raised her voice. “We have copies of the first proposal, please take a seat, and we’ll begin shortly.”

Promptly, Iona wandered the tables, delivering parchments to each group. In response, the attendees quieted, each settling at their respective tables, and I wandered to a nearby table where Reina, the dragon fae queen of Wisp, spread the document on the table. When she, her mate, and their trusted advisors hunched over it, I leaned closer and listened.

“It’s a better deal than we expected,” Reina said.

One of her councilors nodded their agreement, the dragon scales that graced their collarbones flashing in the light. “Wisp, a center of commerce, once more. How times have changed.”

Except her mate whispered warily. “It’s too good. I suspect they want to resolve this assembly quickly.”

Reina looked up at him and held his gaze for several long seconds. “Agreed.” She didn’t say another word, but I could have sworn they were having an entire silent conversation.

Cautiously, I approached the Starlit King next. He reviewed the document with his

secretary, nodding along with each line. Nothing about the parchment seemed to catch them by surprise.

Finally, I returned to Ayla, where she leaned close to Rhett, brow furrowed as she reviewed the proposal as well. It was endearing, the way she was thinking so loudly I could hear the gears turning in her head.

I love her.

I couldn't wait until this was over.

She glanced nervously at Iona, who was still passing out the last few copies when Tallus entered. Just as Rhett had promised, the lord arrived at the last minute.

Iona handed him the final copy, and Calindra looked up at her daughter. "That will be all, Iona, you may go."

Despite the embarrassingly public dismissal, Iona's smile didn't drop as she stepped away. Many in the pavilion tittered and whispered at her exit, some glancing not-so-subtly at Rhett.

But at least, everyone was distracted and Lord Tallus had finally arrived.

I used the tether to assure Ayla I'd soon return, and shadow-stepped from the throne room. The tether thinned as the distance grew between us, and I winced at the ache of our separation.

Eager to return to her side, I focused on my destination. The eerie glow of Lord Tallus's shard drew me closer to the royal wing.

Quickly, I reached the courtyard, the splash of fountains from the central pool the

only sound as I jumped closer to the door to Lord Tallus's suite. I prepared to shadow-step again but hesitated at the patter of footsteps behind me.

I turned, expecting to see guards, but it was only Iona.

My stomach tightened, debating her allegiances. Rhett might be trustworthy, but his former lover was Calindra's daughter. Was it all an act? And even if Iona had the purest of motivations, we had enough problems without inviting Calindra's wrath by way of her daughter.

Iona searched the courtyard, eyes squinting, and then her shoulders relaxed. Her gaze locked on me.

I checked my shadows, confident I was hidden.

Except her stare didn't leave my position. Soon I could not pretend otherwise; she was looking right at me. Her lips drew taut like she was making up her mind.

I braced, preparing to shadow-step.

"Don't go," she whispered, stepping closer. "We should talk, whoever you are."

Glancing around, confirming we were alone, I allowed my voice to rise above the shadows. "You can see me?"

"In a way." She tilted her head. "It's more like I can sense the connection you have to Aida. You were in the suite with us this morning, weren't you?"

I paused.

"I sense magical bonds."

“I’ve never heard of that ability.”

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She shrugged. “Neither have I, but my father is a siren and perhaps that’s why. Regardless, you should be honored I told you. I’ve never told another, and not even Rhett knows.”

My skin tightened. “And why are you telling me?” It could be a desperate ploy to win my approval.

She pointed toward the lower corner of my cape, where the black diamond shards were hidden. “My mother doesn’t tell me much—I’m too softhearted for her taste—but I know she had hidden something in our home, something that you took. It’s bound to...more. I’m not sure what, but it’s big, whatever it is. And I know there’s a similar object in Lord Tallus’s rooms, which is why, I presume, you’re here.”

If she spoke the truth, she didn’t even know what the black diamond shards were.

I hesitated.

She continued, “Lord Tallus is a far more capable mer than my mother, and his protections will be stronger. Fortunately for you, I’m quite proficient in mer magic. I’ll help, if you’ll allow it.”

“Why should I trust you?”

Her gaze shifted uncomfortably as she searched for a way to make eye contact with a shadow. “I owe my mother and her schemes nothing, but Rhett regards you enough that he hasn’t spoken a word about you to me. I meant what I said earlier: Whatever scheme Rhett has caught himself in, I trust that it’s better than my mother’s.”

“If things with her are as bad as you say, why haven’t you ran away before?”

The question made her pause, and I waited, searching her expression for the truth and only finding embarrassment. Finally, she looked away. “Maybe you’ll think I’m a coward, but I didn’t know where to go. I’ve lived my whole life in the palace and...” She shook her head. “I wasn’t brave enough.”

Throat constricting, I remembered a time when Eleanor and I hadn’t run away from the Starlit Isle either.

Regardless, she risked being a complication in our plan.

The thumping of boots from beyond the courtyard matched the pounding of my heart. A guard approached, and I had to make a decision. Now.

“Fine.” Rudely, I grabbed her shoulder and shadow-stepped us into Lord Tallus’s rooms together.

She flinched at my sudden movement, and once we reached the other side, she staggered, bending over from the shock of the jump. “Quite a way of getting around,” she gasped.

I shrugged unapologetically. “The sooner I have what we want and leave, the better.”

Quickly, I snuck deeper into the apartment, confirming it was empty before dropping my shadows slightly, just enough that she could see me as a figure while obscuring the details of my appearance.

Still, Iona stared at me. “You’re a shadow fae, aren’t you?”

I nodded, hating how much this still gave away. Even if I wasn’t the Shadow Prince,

there weren't many shadow fae remaining.

"But I thought the wards would stop shadow-stepping—"

"Most would be stopped, yes, but not me," I answered, reluctant to expose more than necessary.

She didn't question me further, but her lips pursed as if deep in thought. Her gaze flickered over me before homing in on the pocket with the shards.

Wary, I watched her closely as we walked to the back of the suite and neared the writing desk concealing Tallus's shard. The desk itself was an overwrought design with carved whirls, embedded mirrors, and countless drawers. Sinking into the Underworld, I confirmed that the black diamond shard remained on the left side of the desk.

I lowered, opening the drawer in question.

"You can see it too?" she asked.

"It's shadow magic, in a way," I explained.

I pulled the drawer wide, but the shard didn't move with it, so I opened the one above, only to have the same result. Annoyed, I stared at the mirror panel fastened between the drawers.

"It's in the desk itself," Iona observed.

"Agreed. A false wall, perhaps."

"No, it's more than that."

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I didn't understand what she meant, but before I could pry further, my attention was snagged by the parchment upon the desk. The ink still glistened as if it had just been written. Appendix A: Port Fees for Mer at the Starlit Isle.

Odd.

"Special fees for Mer weren't in this morning's proposal," Iona muttered from behind me. "Everyone has the same rates."

I stepped back, giving her easier access to the document. "What do you make of it?"

She looked it over, scanning lines that broke down port fees for specific types of goods. "These numbers are just a little lower than the public ones, except..." She frowned, pointing to a line at the bottom. "Weapons weren't mentioned at all."

And if I read this right, weapons from Mer would travel for free. A shudder coursed through me. "Let's find what we came here for and leave."

Still unsure what I was looking for, I reached into the drawer beneath the shard and tapped the top of the inside panel. It resounded like solid wood. I frowned.

"I can help," Iona reminded me.

"Some sort of mer magic?"

"Yes." She crouched before the drawer and reached for the front of the desk, where the mirror panel filled the space between the two drawers.

Her fingers met the looking glass and slid through as if the surface was liquid. It rippled around her hand as she slowly drove it further within.

“Mirror magic,” she explained as sweat gathered on her brow. “And don’t you dare try it. This can slice your hand right off.”

I frowned, certain Rhett wouldn’t be pleased when he learned of the risk she had taken. But there was no stopping her now. Her hand extended deeper, and I watched as the shard shifted, and gradually, slowly, her hand eased back out of the mirror’s depths. Soon, the shard was halfway out, her fingers remaining within.

There was the sound of someone at the door. It opened with a creak

“Quickly,” I urged.

“Nearly there.”

My ears strained, gauging the weight of footsteps that now crossed the entry threshold. They were in a rush.

“Got it,” she whispered, the black diamond shard secured in her grasp.

“Let’s go.” Following the shadows, I jumped us to the nearby apartment Iona shared with her mother. Despite the distance of our journey, the countless wards that had to be crossed, the shadows obeyed my lightest touch.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She shoved the shard into my hands. “Give me a moment.”

Nodding, I accepted, my fingers aching as I tucked the shard into the pocket with the

others. It wasn't just this shard buzzing with energy—they all were. I swallowed, understanding how much easier the shadows were to manipulate in their presence.

Three more to go.

Straightening, I eyed Iona, relieved to see her breathing had settled. "Thank you."

She glanced away. "I assume you'll be leaving as soon as you take the ones from the Starlit King?"

Her question was loaded. Of course, she knew about the Starlit King's shards, and moreover, the pleading look in her eyes made it clear that despite everything she'd just seen, she still wanted to leave with us.

Pausing, I weighed my options, realizing how I would have struggled to retrieve this shard without her help. After all this, I'd be hard-pressed to leave her behind, and while I couldn't be sure, I didn't think hers was an act. At some point, I had to take a leap of faith.

"Yes, that's the plan," I replied, making up my mind. "We're leaving as soon as we have them all. You and Rhett may come with us, if you want."

She sagged with relief. "Thank Teyr."

"Be discreet. Draw no attention to yourself."

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She nodded. “I’ll pack light and say I’m spending the day at the beach. No one will notice.”

“Good. Find the Umbral Star, and when you board, if Vanessa asks any questions, tell her Zayne invited you.”

“Zayne,” she echoed my name. “The Shadow Prince?”

“Indeed.”

She didn’t quite meet my gaze. “The necromancer?”

“Perhaps.”

She stilled, taking that in, and then all at once, she shot to her feet. “I’ll meet you there.” She didn’t waste another moment, vanishing into her bedroom.

Satisfied all was secure, I turned my attention toward the tether.

Ayla...

The once-taut bond had relaxed, growing comfortable with the space between us. Still, she echoed of apprehension and excitement.

Maybe a twinge of fear.

Eager to return to her side, I shadow-stepped to the throne room, taking it as one

flowing run, barely stopping between the steps as I weaved through the palace's shadows, silent and speedy.

The throne room was bustling, and judging from the way Calindra was huddled with another merchant, they were taking a break. As I watched, Lord Tallus returned from the royal wing, a familiar parchment in his hands. Out of breath, he brought it to Calindra.

Meanwhile, Ayla stayed near Rhett, glancing nervously at the Starlit King, who was wrapping up a conversation with his secretary.

Had anyone noticed the theft of the shard? Judging from Tallus's relaxed posture, relieved he had just finished a sprint back to his rooms, it seemed not. He was laughing, muttering to another mer who shared his table.

Ayla glanced in my direction, a genuine smile on her lips as tension eased from her shoulders. She probed my mind, almost like a question, and I assured her.

Everything's going according to plan.

Iona was a surprise, but one I hoped Ayla would appreciate. For Rhett's sake.

We both held our breath in anticipation as the Starlit King said a few more words to his secretary. Finally, he stood up and approached Ayla. She smiled bravely and stepped to his side.

Together, they left the hall. The Starlit King dismissed the courtiers who idly followed him, but when Rhett stayed by Ayla's elbow, making it clear he wouldn't leave, the king didn't object. He even smiled at Rimu, trailing at Rhett's heel.

Together, they left.

And cloaked by darkness, I followed.

## Chapter twenty-nine

### The Unprepared Princess

Ayla

The Starlit King and I walked in silence, treading from Mer's great hall to the visitor's courtyard. With his broad cloak billowing behind him, I was forced into a quick clip to stay ahead of its embrace.

My heart raced, though not from the excursion.

Rhett and Zayne were not that far behind, and whatever happened, I was secure in their backup.

One lesson.

One opportunity to learn how to control my powers. A single chance to discover how to break into the box that held his shards.

It has to be enough.

And if it wasn't, we'd flee.

"I hope you enjoyed your time away," he offered, giving me the chance to small talk.

I'd been giving the same story all morning, and it was easy to respond. "There's a beautiful cove to the western edge of the isle. I spent most of my time there."

"All by yourself?" he asked.

"I was visiting a friend."

"And your dog, too, I am sure she enjoyed the trip."

"She did." My throat tightened, and it cost me more than I wanted to admit to keep smiling. "She loved the beach. So much more comfortable than a palace for a dog, so she'll be staying with my friend while I'm here."

"What a kind friend you must have."

"Indeed."

He chuckled, his expression turning serious. "Please forgive me for prying, but assure me because I worry. No one has been hurt by your magic, have they?"

I swallowed nervously. "Unfortunately, my magic has been more of a hindrance than

anything of merit.”

“I see.”

As we reached the visitor courtyard, I tentatively allowed my power to buzz at my fingers, light sputtering at random. Some of it was intentional, some of it not. Regardless, the Starlit King led me to the center of the courtyard as Rhett settled on a bench a respectable distance away.

The king looked at Rhett with a smirk. “Your cousin might be a pompous pain, but I don’t wish him any harm. Not at your hand.”

“Thanks again for your time. I’m sure you have plenty in your court who would be able—”

He shook his head. “There are none who could manage a situation like yours. Instruction in starlight is best given in childhood, when the power is still developing. You’ll need someone who can moderate your fully developed power in addition to their own.”

Fear rose in my glowing fingertips, and the Starlit King glanced down, the light shadowing his face.

My throat dried. “I don’t know how to control it. It glows when I tell it to stop, and vice versa. What am I supposed to do differently?”

“Palm up,” he instructed.

Power throbbing, I flipped my hand over and the starlight collected in my palm.

He extended his hand, placing it over mine and closing the distance until my light

filled the space between. “Let me show you.”

There wasn't a chance to stop him. To tell him I wasn't ready. That no matter how kind and suave he seemed, I knew better than to trust him.

At his command, my starlight was shoved back into my body. My hand heated and my arm burned as the power wound its way into my spine. My body prepared to melt. My heart raced as panic rose in my chest.

Maybe this had been a terrible idea. Maybe he would kill me, making it look like a training accident for reasons I'd never understand.

And then, just as fast, the pain passed.

The starlight raced upward, through the crown of my head and became a pillar of magic, connecting me to the heavens. Through this link, the starlight ebbed from my body.

“There,” he whispered, stepping back. “I apologize if that was... intense.”

I exhaled. “Intense doesn't begin to cover it.”

Rhett had closed half the distance between us. Zayne was barely containing the urge to leap from the shadows.

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Even the Starlit King looked down at me with concern.

“I’m all right,” I said, assuring everyone as I looked at the king. I shook out my arms and rolled out my neck. “What did you do?”

“Your magic was stuck, and I cleared the pathways. Your power stream should be far more reliable now.”

“W-what...” I gasped, unsure what I was even asking.

“I directed the power on your behalf and showed your mind what needed to be done. You’ll now be able to moderate the starlight better, especially if you practice.”

I gaped at him, still stunned. That had been unexpected. Dramatic. And he should have warned me. But there was no denying what he’d done had immediately changed me. Energy flowed with new ease. His description matched how it felt, as if the flow of my magic finally had an easy path.

I examined my palm and reached for the light. It came at my softest command, slowly growing brighter as I asked it. No flickering, no chaos. Simple, easy, and under my control.

“It works.” I whispered.

He waved his hands awkwardly toward a the bench. “Why don’t you take a few minutes to settle.”

Still a little lightheaded, I complied. Rhett neared, and when the Starlit King didn't rebuff him, he lingered a few feet from me, as if braced for me to collapse at any moment.

I didn't look that bad, did I?

Zayne's worriedly probing mind told me otherwise.

Vision swimming, I turned my palms up in front of me. "You made it easy."

"It would have been easy for you too, if you'd been allowed to develop your powers as a child." He huffed, sitting beside me. "I disapprove of the practice of part-fae being raised south of the Rift. It's too dangerous when their magic inevitably breaks through."

I drew my lips tight, uncomfortably aware that in addition to the normal barrier, my mother had also gone through the effort of blocking my magic.

"It is fortunate I found you," he continued, his voice lowering. He looked meaningfully, first to Rhett and then me. "Most wouldn't have been able to help wield the power of my daughter."

I stilled, my brain repeating what he'd just said.

His daughter.

I must have misunderstood. I squinted up at him, searching his face, but where I sought differences, I saw his antlers and the shape of his face, both mirroring mine.

"You're kidding," Rhett leaned forward. "My cousin isn't—"

The Starlit King lifted a hand. “I know.”

Rhett sputtered, “You must have her confused with someone else—”

“I myself ensured Aida’s forgeries were approved.”

Rhett stammered, and in the shadows, Zayne crept closer.

My mind struggled to work. The Starlit King was my father, and he knew who I was.

Does he also know where I’ve been?

“I mean no disrespect—” Rhett finally managed.

The king waved him off. “I’m not angry, merchant prince. If anything, thank you. It was a relief to discover you’ve been caring for Ayla this whole time.”

He didn’t know. Or at least, he was pretending as much. I forced myself not to look at Zayne for support, relying on the tether instead.

The Starlit King—my father—leaned closer. “I wanted to tell you earlier, but the time was never right, and you...” He searched my face. “Some part of me had hoped your mother would find the decency to tell you herself.”

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My lips parted. I managed to shake my head no.

“I told your mother I wanted to claim you as mine, but when she asked me not to, I honored her wish.”

He’d always known. That stung. And my mother had gone to such lengths to bind my magic. Anything to keep me from him.

He sighed. “And your mother, Teyr bless her, she tried to make you a general in the Valterran army, didn’t she? She wanted to give you a position as far south from the isles as possible. I always wondered if I should have ignored her wishes and reached out to you myself, but...”

I needed to speak up, but what could possibly be worth saying? I was furious—at countless things. I could deny him, storm off, and pretend this wasn’t real...

But deep down, I suspected he told the truth.

It explained the way my magic felt around his.

“So you knew who I was from the moment I gave my false name?” I finally managed to ask.

“No, it was earlier than that.” He tilted his head thoughtfully. “I recognized you the moment we sailed into Mer and I saw you on your boat. It wasn’t your eyes or antlers that gave it away, but your magic called out to me, the magic of the throne. And from that moment, I knew you were Ayla, firstborn daughter of Queen Avaline of Valterra

and King Glaucous of the Starlit Isle.”

He named me, not as the bastard princess, but as his. The recognition struck me to the core. It felt right. A terrible truth that I couldn’t shake...

My stomach lurched with realization. My head began to spin. He wasn’t lying. I felt it. The threads binding us ran deeper than those of father and daughter.

We were connected, as he said, by the magic of the throne.

“I’m the Starlit Heir,” I gasped out. Not a question.

A second bond, dormant but always there, opened to me. Brighter than the sun, it illuminated my mind, piercing me with sudden and complete connection.

The Starlit Throne.

My heart picked up its pace as the second bond expanded into my mind. Pressure grew behind my eyes, my temples aching. I’d felt this before, and queasy, I leaned forward.

Deep breaths.

“Ayla!” Rhett rushed closer, grabbing my elbow. I watched from far away as he glared up at the Starlit King. “You’ve overwhelmed her.”

“She’ll be okay. Her bond to the throne is settling.” Hesitant, the Starlet King pressed his hand to my back. “It’ll pass.”

With his touch, I felt it again, the way his magic matched the frequency of mine. And by Teyr, his comfort helped. I closed my eyes, struggling to organize my mind.

He's my father. My starlight is like his. I'm the heir.

Piece by piece, desperately, I reassembled the rubble of my mind. Slowly, everything began to solidify.

Zayne...

Our bond was still there. Damaged, but resilient. I flung myself into it. He was waiting on the other side, catching me. Reaching out for his shadows, I wrapped them around my soul like a blanket. His energy settled beside me, holding me.

Breath by breath.

Zayne was with me. Whatever happened next, he believed I would find the best way forward. Even if my mind had splintered...

Rhett cleared his throat. "I'll take her back to our rooms. She can rest there."

"I'll walk her over," the Starlit King replied. "But first..." He kneeled before the bench, angling his face so he could examine mine.

I have to be strong. Assure him that I'm okay. Give him reason to leave.

I straightened my spine, relieved when my vision didn't swim. Determined, I met my father's gaze.

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His eyes are the same green as mine.

“It’s passing,” I explained, finding my mouth was dry. “Rest will be good.” Proving my point, I rose to my feet, leaning against the bench as I oriented myself. Satisfied, I took my first step.

The Starlit King took my arm, insisting on giving me the extra support. Meanwhile, Rhett directed him toward our rooms.

As we walked, the Starlit King cleared his throat. “Once the agreement is signed, will you consider returning to Karenia with me? I’ve made countless mistakes, but now that we’ve found one another, please give me this chance.”

I blinked at him. I wanted to deny him now, cut off my ties before we became entangled any further. But telling him no wouldn’t be strategic. Until I could come up with something better, he needed to think I was interested.

“Let me think on it,” I said instead. “Karenia would be lovely.”

Chapter thirty

Bound

Zayne

Daughter.

His words echoed in my ears, choking all else out as I fisted the shadows around me. Forced to the darkness, I watched as the Starlit King helped Ayla back to our suite, Rhett and Rimu trailing behind them.

She was his daughter.

By Teyr, it couldn't be true. Except...

My gaze trailed the length of her growing antlers. They'd been such short nubs when we'd first met that I'd refused to see the truth: Once they reached their full size, her antlers would be as majestic as her father's. And her magic... I had tasted her starlight, drank it to my core.

I should have recognized it.

There were countless signs I'd refused to see, and now that I forced myself to look, it was obvious: Ayla was her father's daughter, through and through.

Not just his daughter.

She was his heir.

Her role was undeniable. I'd felt it when the throne's bond pierced her mind, razing our tether in the process. Everything had shifted so suddenly, so forcefully that I feared my chest would be ripped open and we'd lose the connection entirely. In the aftermath, our tether wasn't the same.

It was a small relief to watch the color returned to Ayla's cheeks as she neared the suite door, her strength growing with each step. Rhett opened the door for her.

At the threshold, the Starlit King turned to leave, catching Ayla's gaze one last time.

“Please consider what I said. The Starlit Isle could be your new home, if you wanted it.”

She nodded without answering.

All the same, fear raced through me. Regardless of what Ayla wanted, the call of the throne could only be ignored for so long before she was compelled.

I shadow-stepped into the suite, following the others inside. Rhett closed the door, and I barred it in place. “Help Ayla to the couch,” I instructed. “I’ll bring over water.”

Ayla shook off Rhett’s grip. “I can do it myself.” But she didn’t hide her exhausted plop onto the cushion.

Rimu paced about the room, responding to everyone’s nervous energy, as Rhett settled next to Ayla. I set a bowl of dried fruit and glass of water on the table before her.

“Stop acting so concerned.” Ayla took the water glass and threw half of it back in a single gulp. “I’ll be fine.”

I bristled under her assurances. She’d had two bombshells dropped on her. Her mind was now restructuring.

“Though when this is over, I think I’ll sleep for days,” she admitted.

I shook my head. “Forget the shards. We’re going now. I want you safe, I need you safe.”

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Anything to get the hell away from the Starlit King—her father.

Rhett leaned closer. “He’s right.”

She slammed the cup on the table, startling Rimu. “Now that we know what I’m capable of, stealing those final shards should be easy. And if we don’t, what was the point of...” her words slowed “...the point of all that?”

I frowned. “The point was to give you more control over your power, to understand why the Starlit King wanted to help you. And we accomplished that.”

She rubbed her temple. “We certainly did.”

My heart pounded, recalling how the Shadow Throne had consumed Eleanor for her ascension rite. Would the Starlit Throne do the same to Ayla when it was time for her to become queen? If my shadows didn’t work around the throne, how would our bond fair? The ramifications of all of this...

Ayla scratched Rimu’s ear, and he leaned closer as she found the spot that he loved. She turned to me. “Can I abdicate the throne?”

I frowned. “Doing so requires sitting on the throne so you can connect to it directly. Thrones don’t like being told they chose the wrong heir, and very few have succeeded.”

“And if we just... run away?”

“It’ll work, for a time. Possibly, years or even decades.” I looked away. “But when the throne summoned Eleanor, she was compelled. The bond between heir and throne is a frightfully powerful thing.”

Perhaps even more powerful than our tether.

I leaned back with a long sigh. “I hate how much it explains. Including the day we met.”

Ayla turned to me, eyebrows furrowed with curiosity.

I explained, “My plan to lure the shades to me failed that day because they simply pursue the fae with the highest power. I had assumed that because I was a fae prince, they would want me. But they went after you—anheir.”

Ayla let that settle, taking a tentative sip of water. Putting the glass down, she held my gaze, her lips pursed with determination. “I want to steal those shards. They’re why we came here, and if we take them, it ensures nobody can control Gloom. We’re so close now, and we might never have another chance.”

She paused to breathe, and a pleading anger pulsed through the tether, as if accomplishing this one thing would fix the rest. She was determined. And as much as I hated the prospect, I saw the merit. What if she was right? Since she was his heir, opening the starlight box could be trivial.

“We can take a look,” I slowly agreed. “I still don’t understand why he has the shards in the first place, so any clues would also be useful. But if a solution isn’t forthcoming, we leave. Deal?”

“Deal,” she agreed.

Rhett sighed, glancing from her to me. “If there’s no convincing you...”

“There’s not.” I leveled with Rhett. “We’ll meet you on the Umbral Star. Iona should already be on her way.”

“She... is?” Hope glinted in his eyes.

“She’ll explain.”

He looked confused, but it only lasted a moment before he snapped to action, clasping Ayla’s hands between his, making me curb the urge to come between them. “If I can’t talk you out of this, come back safe,” he urged her.

“I always do,” she promised.

He slapped his thigh for Rimu’s attention and stood, addressing me. “Teyr knows I’m not cut out for the type of trouble that follows Ayla, but I’m glad she now has someone who can keep up with her.” He shouldered his packed bag. “Take care of her, Zayne.”

“I will.”

He approached the door, and I faded into the shadows as I sealed the door firmly in his wake. He and Rimu couldn’t leave fast enough, my bond to Ayla achingly frail.

At long last, I was alone with her. Unable to wait a second longer, I shadow-stepped to her side, unveiling myself.

Her gaze flicked over me, searching from head to toe.

I cupped her chin. “Ayla, whatever happens—”

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She leaned closer. “Help me forget.” Her meaning streamed down the bond.

I hesitated, the raging need to claim her at war with my urge to leave as soon as possible.

“Rhett needs time to reach the boat,” she justified. “Remind me of everything we are, together.”

My lips parted.

“I need you.”

We would never be the same, not after this. Her mind was no longer entirely mine, and before we took another step, I needed to cement myself so firmly inside her that I could never be replaced.

Without delay, I jumped us to the suite’s bedroom. Desperate, I needed to taste her, know her, discover everything before time ran out.

My lips snagged hers, finding she was as hungry as me. Her fingers dug into my skin. She found my waistband as I hitched up her skirt.

We only had moments.

Moments we had to stretch into a lifetime.

Ayla moaned into my mouth as she tugged down my pants. I palmed the outside of

her panties and was rewarded with another beautiful groan. She pressed her hips into my hand and grinded against it.

Urgent, our energy snapped through the tether, spurring us onward.

Give me everything.

I shoved her panties aside just as she freed my cock, wrapping her hand around it, squeezing me tight. She cried out as I thumbed her clit, wiggling her hips closer to me.

I have to have you.

I picked her up, my hands under her butt as I laid her on the bed.

Quickly.

I dropped my head under her skirt, using my tongue to prepare her sweet opening. Kiss and suck, kiss and suck. When I stopped, her thighs tightened around my head, but I raised myself over her, regretting there was no more time. Looking down at her, locking eye contact, I positioned my cock.

Now.

The tether sparked as I plunged, thrusting into her and filling her in one swift blow. Pleasure raced along my cock. It bellowed across our bond.

Keep going.

I lifted away and shoved myself back in, careful to tilt my hips so my cock struck her inner wall. With every thrust, the onslaught of pleasure rose higher. Groaning, I

reached down and found her clit, pressing it as she was fully sheathed. She moaned and squirmed. I withdrew and thrust again.

Just like that.

We danced and writhed. The bed squeaked and our skin slapped as we bid ourselves higher and higher.

Faster.

I pummeled into her and her walls clenched around me as her face tightened in her orgasm. Her lips parted with a silent moan, and at the sight, a spasm seized my cock. I spent myself into her.

Perfect.

Everything about us was absolutely right.

We coasted down, her body seizing around me several more times before loosening around my spent cock. The bond swelled between us, swirling with shadow and light. The air grew charged with our connection, our scent salty and delicious. I savored my relief. Despite every obstacle, every trial, Ayla and I were still bound.

She fell back with a sigh and a flourish. Her lips parted as she looked up at me. “I love you.”

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It was the last thing I expected to hear, and my heart skipped a beat.

She held my gaze. “I’m sorry I couldn’t say it earlier. You’re the one person who can see all of me, that I allow to see all of me. Zayne, you have planted yourself far deeper in my soul than any bond. And that terrifies me.”

I smiled at her confession. “I’ve been wanting to hear that for a long time. To know you feel this too. That our bond isn’t something you regret, that despite our strange circumstances, you chose us. Me. I am a shadow prince and necromancer, and still, you want me.” Unable to contain myself another moment, I surged forward and kissed her. “I love you too.”

She grinned against me, kissing me back.

For a few final moments, time held still.

We were together. We were bound.

And that was enough.

It had to be.

Chapter thirty-one

The Trade Agreement

Ayla

“Do you think we’re mates?” I asked, clinging to the time that remained.

We were dressed, for the most part, and just finishing touches remained. My flowing skirt made it easy to hide countless daggers, and I tested each one, ensuring they were easy to grab. Zayne adjusted his cloak, probing where the shards were secured. The pocket now bulged, the contents forcing it to hang heavily.

Through our preparations, we didn’t dare touch.

Our skin burned and the bond ached, everything throbbing for us to touch again. But if our skin so much as brushed, we’d tumble right back into that bed.

“Mates?” Zayne asked, his heated gaze sweeping over me. “Do you want to be?”

Despite Zayne filling me, claiming my mind, the throne remained. It throbbed in my consciousness, ever present, but it wasn’t where I put my attention. I studied Zayne, fixated by the way he stood, breathtaking and tall and absolutely, deliciously mine. “I want to be yours.”

“Good,” he growled. “Then that’s what we are, mates.”

My heart swelled, and I reached for him before I could stop myself. He lifted me into his arms and pressed his lips to mine. I wrapped my legs around his waist.

For three heartbeats, we kissed, and I counted each one, hanging to them like a promise.

I won’t lose Zayne, not for the throne.

We were mates. Bound. There would be a way.

Zayne deepened the kiss before straightening, setting me down, and standing tall. He offered me his hand, this time to shadow-step. “We should hurry.”

“I know.” I wrapped my fingers in his.

Darkness swirled around me. Determined, I melted into it, and for a final moment, Zayne’s shadows held me, supporting me as we entered the Starlit King’s rooms.

I exhaled, steadying myself on the other side of the jump. Bouncing on my toes, I looked around.

Get in, get out.

The Starlit King’s study was empty, the room as I remembered it, with the large desk taking up most of the space. Except now, golden daylight scattered on the windows. It caught in the glass where sea mist gathered on their panes, causing the light to shatter like gems, illuminating the ornate box that held the shards.

Like before, the starlit box called to me, and my magic swelled up in reply as like called to like. Except now, I understood. It was simply another reminder of how similar the Starlit King’s magic was to my own, both of us bound to the throne. My chest ached with the desire to step closer, but this time, I braced.

“Ready?” Zayne asked.

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I nodded, and hand in hand, we approached the desk, my magic swelling with each step as Zayne's shadows faded away.

Except as we neared the box, my gaze landed on the parchment strewn beside it, worn and folded like it had traveled a long way. My stomach twisted with a new wave of doubt.

"I know that handwriting," I whispered, leaning closer. "It's my stepfather's."

Salutations Glaucous, King of Starlight

It's with great relief that I learned of the fall of the shades. Congratulations on the success of your mission. At long last, we're ready to act.

The rate you have requested is steep, but we will accept your offer, with a few modifications, of course.

The letter continued, detailing specifications for various fae goods. All of them weapons. The requests started with enough hand-to-hand weapons to outfit several elite troops. And it went on, asking for specialized equipment from siege craft to poisons and ways to rot enemy food supplies. It listed everything a southern kingdom, like Grayson's homeland, would need to expand. I scanned the items over, my eyes narrowing on the final paragraph.

For reasons previously discussed, we are willing to pay an extra fee for discretion.

Regards,

Grayson, King Consort of Valterra

Fifth born prince of Herita

I stilled. “He’s going behind my mother’s back to order weapons. I’d bet anything they’re so his brothers can wage war on their neighbors.” The southern kingdoms were nothing like Valterra, where natural formations isolated the kingdom.

Zayne frowned. “Weapon dealing would give the Starlit King influence over the southern kingdoms.”

My mind raced, recalling all that the Starlit King had told me the first day. “My mother’s illness. Is it related?”

“I don’t know.”

Suspicion pitted in my stomach. If Grayson would go behind my mother’s back to order weapons, how far was he willing to go?

Furious, I stepped closer to the starlit box—

Zayne grabbed my arm, forcing me to look at him and pinning me under his wild gaze. Too many emotions raced through me. Alarm and rage fought against fear and frustration, each demanding more space.

Zayne probed the bond, trying to understand them all. “We can still leave,” he whispered.

The promise of his words should have stung, at complete odds with what I saw. The Starlit Throne, this letter, and the shards. We had responsibilities.

Except, the way Zayne said it, his hopes filling the bond, I remembered a lagoon where the stars shined bright overhead, and he held me as dawn threatened the horizon. It was beautiful. And I wanted that with him.

“But if we stop now, what sort of future could we have?” I asked.

He didn’t answer. His silence said enough.

No matter where we hid, biding our time until the throne compelled me, our friends and families would remain threatened. The lives of countless civilians from several kingdoms were at risk.

I searched Zayne’s gaze and sought out his hand. “I want to try.” Now, more than ever, I needed to seize power from the Starlit King. “But if you really think we should just leave, I’ll go with you.”

He wrapped his fingers around mine and squeezed. He glanced at the box. “I really think you’re able to do this.” Confidence flooded the bond.

“Me too.”

“Good.” He indicated the wall beside us. “I’ll watch from where the shadows are thicker, ready to step in if necessary.”

“Okay.”

It’s time.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:49 am*

Heart pounding, all in a rush, I kissed him. “I love you.” Teyr, those words felt nice to say.

“I love you too.”

And they felt good to hear too.

Brow tight with determination, I turned to face the starlit box and took my first step. Zayne squeezed my hand, the length of our arms now hanging between us. When I looked back, he nodded, his gaze steady as his trust, and let go.

By my next step, Zayne had faded halfway into the shadows, and by now, I was drawn forward, closer to the box. It felt natural to reach out, and light pooled in my hands, flowing smoothly at my summons.

“Stay alert,” Zayne warned.

I nodded. “Be ready to run.”

My hand glowed brighter as it neared the diamond pommel. Power coursed through me, streaming from the heavens with newfound ease. My bond to the Starlit Throne tugged at my soul, as uncertain of me as I was of it. It didn’t resist as I took command of my power.

Before doubt could creep in, I seized the lid of the box and heaved it aside. Starlight flooded the room, and I reached within.

The bite of scorching heat could be felt just beyond the safe bubble protecting my hands. This light couldn't hurt me. But like the molten core of a star, it would burn any other fae who tried.

The light was so bright I could no longer see my hand, the power so overwhelming I could barely feel my fingers. Despite this, searching in the light felt natural, and I could sense the shards easier than feel them. Carefully, I mentally scanned the bottom of the box, reaching out...

There.

A rough edge.

I grabbed, relying on energy to guide me. Something clinked in my grasp, and satisfied, I lifted my hand free.

I took a step back and then several more, admiring my prize.

The three shards were eerily black compared to the light still dissipating in my hand. I stared at them and, my eyes watering, offered them to Zayne. "They're yours."

Before he could accept, the shards jumped from my grip and levitated in the air between us. There was a ripping sound, and the other shards tore themselves free of Zayne's pocket.

The seven shards—one nothing but slivers—swirled around one another, arranging themselves. They spun about, glinting as each broken facet caught the light, time both unnaturally fast and uncomfortably slow.

Finally, the pieces steadied into position. Surging toward their center, the shards collided together, slinking into their places with the sound of a desperate inhale. The

edges darkened, healed, and scarred into place. Once shattered, the shards became whole.

Shock mixed with my relief. No one warned us the black diamond would recombine, but did it matter?

It's done.

My jaw relaxed as the black diamond settled in Zayne's outstretched hand. Success. We could go home. Whatever home meant to us, especially now, I didn't know. But as long as we were together, I didn't care.

I braced for Zayne's shadows to wrap me tight and take me away.

The darkness never came.

His expression grew distant, as if he were descending into the Underworld. Shadows slipped away.

"Oh, no no no," I whispered.

He collapsed, falling into me, and I slowly lowered him to the floor. Throat tightening, I brushed the hair from his face.

"Zayne, what happened?" I asked.

He didn't even open his eyes.

Zayne

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:49 am*

“You’ve returned,” Gloom said, her voice still carrying an ancient weight.

Once again, the detachment of this place weighed on me. I became not-quite-Zayne, a mortal soul forced to find its place in the Divine Realm, and there was no questioning the power tugging at the threads of my being.

The black diamond. Gloom’s divine artifact. As the ruby ring was to Ninti, the black diamond was to Gloom.

And it was mine.

“Brother,” another entity said. I felt my sister’s presence, and I rose from darkness and into fog.

Gloom’s mists surrounded us, my twin sitting upon the Shadow Throne, connected to our homeland and grounded in a way I wasn’t. At this very moment, she maintained the meditation she’d endured for the last month.

Her spirit was in even worse condition than I expected, withering away in her attempt to keep Gloom from expanding. I wish it surprised me more, how well she could hide her pain with what little strength remained.

Now I could end this—I could save her.

Nobody could manipulate Gloom.

Except me.

“We’ve gathered the shards,” I told her.

I turned about, trying to take in Gloom, the deity surrounding me, but I was unsure where to look. Despite the unification of the diamond, the deity remained fractioned and distant. Regardless, I opened my mouth to speak.

Gloom answered in a giant gust, seizing my intentions before I had time to voice them. With a rush, the fog darkened and took to the wind. We left the Isle of Shadow behind.

I was forced away from Eleanor before I could say goodbye.

But it was done.

At long last, Gloom drifted away from my homeland, freeing it from stagnation. The isle could live again.

But there was no time to celebrate. Racing like the wind, I was whisked away with the stagnant mists, taken northward and away from my home.

“You have the diamond now,” Gloom observed, her tone a depressed monotone. “It has been so long since I was shattered. I forgot how it felt to be whole.”

Her words shook around me, and the divine mists grew deeper and thicker, surrounding me. Becoming me. I began to lose track of who I was.

“So long, so long...” she repeated.

I have to go.

But where? There was nothing but the darkness that swallowed me. I called out, but

my voice was consumed by Gloom's mists.

"So long," she repeated.

The last of me reached for the deity's help.

And the fog consumed me before she took note.

Chapter thirty-two

Black Diamond

Ayla

The tether told me nothing. There was only a dark fog where Zayne was supposed to be. He wouldn't leave me like this, not without warning, not on purpose...

"By Teyr," I cursed.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:49 am*

The black diamond sparkled in his clenched hand. He'd collapsed right after the shards had combined. If Gloom had summoned his spirit, how long would he be gone?

My senses heightened with alarm.

Whatever was happening, we had to wait it out. Without his shadow-steps, my only alternative was to carry him out.

Straining to hear past my pounding heart, I determined that nobody moved in the rooms beyond. The door was still closed, hiding us from the hallway, but if Zayne's shadows had been intermittent before, they were entirely gone now. I had to find a new hiding place, and the desk filled most of the room.

A dull, determined light ebbed from my hands as I got to work, shifting Zayne's body until he was hidden from the view of the hallway behind the large desk. Satisfied, I settled beside him.

He would return to the Living Realm soon. He had to. I needed him. But as the seconds passed, he didn't rise.

Again, I tugged at our bond.

Nothing.

Searching deeper, I gained the vague sense he was somewhere on the other side, so far away that our connection sagged like a loose thread. Where I'd once been afraid

to acknowledge what had grown between us, I clung to what remained of our tether as my stomach hollowed out with fear.

“Zayne,” I whispered, rearranging so his head lay in my lap. Unbidden, my memory snapped to the last time it’d been like this—when he’d fallen so far into death I’d awoken my magic to help him rise. When we’d first created the tether.

I clung to him, running my fingers through his long black hair, determination tightening my throat.

If I’d done it once, I could do it again.

Except last time, Ninti had been at my side, sharing her power. I glanced at my ruby ring. “Ninti, if you’re there, please help,” I pleaded and closed my eyes.

I settled my body and focused my mind.

I was torn asunder, in ways I hadn’t had time to process. The Starlit King was still that to me—aking, one who negotiated with my stepfather. The knowledge of our relationship strained my being with dissonance. My jaw tightened as I acknowledged the confusing, conflicting ache.

I dug deeper.

My bond with the Starlit Throne was fresh and newly made, undeniable all the same. The isle’s deity persisted on the fringe of my awareness, as hesitant of me as I was of them.

Even deeper. Even darker.

There.

My bond with Zayne lay beneath it all. I trailed after it, tugging on the tether's thread as I followed it further into the spacebetween us. Finally, a labyrinth formed in my mind, the path edged by thorny roses.

Guided by the string that bound us, I journeyed into the maze's abyss. Left, right, left. I began to run, and when I rounded a corner too tight, my shoulder caught on thorns. Ignoring the pain, the blood, I ran faster, but with each step my feet grew heavier with doubt. The string between us seemed infinite, hanging limply in my hands.

Where is he?

I took off at a race again, but too soon, I was desperate and overwhelmed. The tether had grown so thin I could barely hold it.

At the next juncture, I fell to my knees, uncertain where to turn. Over the beat of my racing heart, I almost missed it.

A howl.

I spun on my toes and found myself eye to eye with Ninti's astral form, translucent and barely present in this place that wasn't one.

I swelled with relief as her expressive green eyes bloomed with life, fighting the urge to wrap my arms around a shape that wouldn't hold. She bowed her head as if she would nuzzle my shoulder.

Words choked in my throat. Hope billowed in my chest.

She looked to the sky and howled anew. The sound rattled in my chest, leading me to follow her gaze.

The stars.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:49 am*

They shone overhead, bright even in this confusing place.

Now that I'd been taught how to listen, it was easy to hear the stars sing. Their voices wrapped together, ethereal with elongated tones, their chorus an invitation to draw down my strength. Power streamed into me, collecting in the center of my heart, a malleable silver light.

At my chest, I grew a little star of my own. I gripped the tether tight, flooding it with all that I knew of my shadow prince. Every detail of his past, every moment we shared, and every imprint on my skin. I filled the star with his being.

“Zayne.”

The light collected and grew, and finally satisfied, I sent it above the labyrinth hedges. The starlight shifted and bounced. The hedges around me changed, the path growing wider as the light led the way.

Renewed, I hurried after, Ninti racing at my heels.

Zayne

The darkness was complete, and it swallowed me whole.

Whoever Zayne was, he wasn't me, wasn't this.

This. A shell, a spirit without a soul.

Time lost all meaning as I drifted again.

Gloom was stagnation, the end of vitality.

She was a darkness more complete than death.

Her mind too stunned by its mending to notice me.

My purpose to her spent. There was no more.

Her mists became my entire world.

Everything became nothing.

Drifting.

Lost.

Gone.

A light.

I knew that star.

The mists thinned.

The star invited me closer.

It tugged at my chest.

It told me who I was.

“Zayne.”

That name.

I tried to reply.

I swallowed fog.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:49 am*

Yet the star shone.

Brighter than before.

Words failing, I acted.

I wound my essence tight.

And then, I followed the light.

Ayla

Abruptly, the labyrinth ended in nothing.

I scrambled for footing, nearly falling off a ledge.

A vast, thick black fog filled everything beyond.

In the distance, my dim star shone.

I focused upon it.

I fueled it as Ninti fueled me.

Like when we failed on the beach.

We powered it, and light grew again.

“Zayne!” Stars sang through my voice.

Ninti’s howl echoed across the chasm.

The power felt right, our souls aligned.

But this time, we did not burn out.

Attuned, we burned brighter still.

A figure formed from the mists.

Our star shed it with light.

Texture gathered next.

And then color.

Becoming...

“Zayne.”

Zayne

We slammed back into our bodies, and I claimed myself. Air, free from mists, filled my lungs. The sweet evidence of life brought water to my eyes, and I rushed to clear it, desperate to see the world I had almost lost.

Ayla loomed over me, looking down, her chest heaving, a curtain of her red hair tickling my chin. Her green eyes glinted with relief.

Wasting no time, I sat up and kissed her.

“My mate,” I declared, my tongue entering her mouth and hungry for more.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:49 am*

Ayla hesitated, leaning back. “What is that?”

I frowned, certain I had heard her voice in my head.

She shook her head. “I imagined it.”

I sat up straighter, shock coursing through my veins, and I intentionally directed my next thought through the tether. “I don’t think you imagined it.”

She pinned me with her eyes. “That’s really you?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“The tether—it’s...”

“Changed again,” I agreed. The threads binding us had thickened anew. We were mates, undeniably so.

I needed to celebrate, to kiss her and claim her again, but...

I gripped the black diamond in my fist, reminded that responsibility over Gloom was now in my hand. The deity’s negligence may have almost killed me, but I’d never let the Starlit King have this sort of power. “We need to get out of here.”

“Quickly,” she agreed.

Pinching the shadows, I wrapped my arms around her and—

The darkness didn't obey.

The door to the study clicked. It creaked.

"Stop right there!" he called.

I tightened my grip on Ayla. There was only one voice that could make my skin crawl that way.

The Starlit King had arrived.

Chapter thirty-three

Of Kings and Thrones

Ayla

I tensed, leaning into Zayne's embrace.

He isn't shadow-stepping.

I turned to him, but on this side of the desk, we were close to the starlit box, and I watched in horror as shadows slipped through his fingers.

My own magic twinged, drawn not only to the box, but now the Starlit King. I couldn't see my father, standing on the other side of the desk, but light flooded from him. I made myself smaller, hoping he couldn't see us, huddled under the desk and hidden by the remnants of shadow.

"I can't shadow-step this close to the box. I might be able to harness the black diamond, only..."Zayne said, thinking fast. He may have left the thought unfinished,

but I understood.

He didn't know if it would work. He didn't know if he could take us both.

The Starlit King neared, his boots stomping closer, and my stomach knotted. There were so many dangerous factors at play—my role and Zayne's, the agreement to send weapons south, and now, the repaired black diamond.

We would only remain hidden for a few more moments.

“I should have searched for you earlier, Shadow Prince.” the Starlit King boomed.  
“But you cannot withstand my starlight.”

My heart pinched with split-second decisions as I met Zayne's gaze. “Do you trust me?”

“Completely.”

“Pin me,” I ordered, yanking him closer and crying out. “Help!”

Understanding glinted in Zayne’s eyes, pained and calculating. With a grunt, Zayne obeyed, pressing my back to the ground as he straddled me. His hands seized my wrists, pinning me in place. “Tell me if I’m hurting you.”

Everything hurt from the knowledge of what I was about to do. For half a breath, I memorized the force of him over me and his presence in my mind. I squeezed my eyes shut. “Just pretend you forced me here to take the shards.”

Zayne summoned an angry scowl.

I squirmed beneath him as if fighting his embrace.

My father’s footsteps raced closer, and by the time I dared to look up, the Starlit King was overhead. “Don’t you dare harm her,” he growled.

Gritting his teeth ferociously, he seized Zayne’s shoulder.

Zayne spun around and punched the Starlit King, knocking the wind out of him. The king bent over as Zayne jumped to his feet, backing toward the door.

My stomach sickened as Zayne slipped further away. I stood, spinning about to ensure the desk didn’t block my view of him for a single moment. He smirked devilishly, lifting his hand and rolling his wrist so the repaired diamond glinted.

The Starlit King's gaze narrowed on the stone. His hands filled with light, sudden and bright. "You used my daughter to steal the shards! You will pay!"

Zayne shuffled to the door, his shadows billowing with the distance. He glanced at me urgently, and I struggled not to lose myself in him. Teyr, I loved my handsome rogue, and I didn't want an inch more space between us.

"Run to me, and we'll escape together," he begged.

"That's not the solution."

"I don't care. I won't leave you."

As he delayed, the Starlit King stepped closer. He raised his brilliantly lit hands, causing Zayne's growing shadows to thin. "There's nowhere to run. Your tricks might have hidden you so far, but they cannot withstand the light of a king. Be warned, my guards are just outside."

"Go!" I begged.

"I said, I won't leave without you!"

Drawn to him, my feet shuffled forward, but something more slowed me down. I glanced from my ruby ring to the black diamond in Zayne's hand, and my mind flashed with the memory of Ninti, barely alive on Leo's shell.

"He'll take the black diamond. Go!"

I needed him to run because I needed him safe. And the safest place for him was as far from my scheming father as possible.

I glanced at the letter on the desk, a reminder of a trade deal that had to be stopped, and resolve tightened in my stomach. “I have to stay and find a way to stop this.”

Finally, Zayne nodded, trust and understanding firm in his brow. “I will do whatever I must to ensure our future together. For you, Ayla, I’ll become the villain.”

I prayed he would forgive me for asking this of him.

Zayne lifted the black diamond to his chest and locked my gaze. My eyes traced his devilish face, my knees weakening with the urge to call this off.

I need him.

But I needed our future more. Vision blurring, resolve growing, I nodded.

Zayne held my gaze as he gave the Starlit King a mock bow. “Until next time.” He vanished. His darkness overpowering the light, his shadows shaded with Gloom’s fog.

My chest burned, our bond tensing under the sudden distance.

“Damn him,” the Starlit King cursed before turning to me. “Are you okay?”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:49 am*

I blinked at him, gasping and shocked, forcing myself to become the Ayla who wasn't me. The one who had masqueraded as Aida just so she could party with Rhett. Someone who had just learned her father's identity in time for the devious Shadow Prince to take advantage. Someone who wasn't desperately trying to check if their mate was okay.

"I never should have left you alone," my father continued as he casually picked up the letter from Grayson and pocketed it. "It never occurred to me that he would have used you." He glanced at the glowing box.

I stumbled forward, forcing myself to speak. "I had to. He threatened to hurt me if I didn't help him." I hated every word.

"I know. I felt your power being used through the throne."

He had felt that?

This new bond went alarmingly deep, and I studied the ground, masking my concern. "Thanks for saving me."

"I shouldn't have left your side for a moment." He shook his head and sighed. "Fortunately, the shards have served their purpose, and as much as I hate to think what he'll do with them, what matters more is that we're united now, father and daughter. Together, we'll keep the isles safe."

It was a lot to process. He was speaking so fast, giving away so many things without thought that shivers went down my spine. He said the shards had already

accomplished his purpose, but what did that mean?

Trembling, I grounded my walls into place. Already, my new reality threatened to bring me to my knees. Through it all, my father watched, his expression hungry.

“Come with me and stay close.” He walked toward the hallway door. “After such an ordeal, you need rest, and there is room for you here. I’ll keep you safe through the remainder of the assembly.”

Swallowing the wave of grief that filled me, I feigned a relieved smile and trailed after him.

When we left the room, he turned to the guards standing outside. “Search for the Shadow Prince. He couldn’t have gone far.”

## Chapter thirty-four

### His Lost Love

#### Zayne

Pain coursed through me as I landed in the suite that had been ours. Quickly, I looked about, ensuring all evidence of my stay had been erased.

I can’t really leave her, can I?

My heart burned, the tether taut. I was only a few rooms away, and already, our connection was mostly reduced to emotion and intention.

She was steady. She was sure. She had made her choice, and even if I hated it, I would honor it.

Because she was right.

The black diamond had to go. And to escape, I had to leave now. My last shadow-step had been easy with the help of the diamond, Gloom's power flowing from the united crystal and into me, my connection to shadows and decay stronger than ever. The deity may be absentminded, but she was mighty all the same. Hers was a power too easy to abuse.

I had to go.

Like a distant shout, barely audible over the distance, I heard Ayla. "They're searching for you."

"I'm about to leave." I tried to breathe. "I love you."

"I love you too."

For one final heartbeat, I allowed her to fill me, all of me. Cherry and spice. Her essence became part of mine.

Love would have to be enough.

Shouldering my bag, I braced to shadow-step again. Vanishing into the shadows, I joined the darkness. There was no time to think, to feel, to acknowledge the fury that burned behind my eyes.

Ayla is mine.

And I was leaving her behind.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:49 am*

Should I have fought harder? I could have asked, What did Valterra ever do for you? Reminded her that the humans didn't deserve her. But even now, I couldn't send the words across the tether. I admired her for the same reasons she now wrecked my heart.

We would be reunited.

We had to be.

And when the time came, I needed to be ready. No matter what precautions the Starlit King took against me, I would claim my princess.

To keep her safe, I would embrace my powers.

All of them.

Securing the black diamond with both hands, I walked from one shadow to the next, shadow-walking in a way I thought impossible. Quickly, with leaps and bounds, I followed the darkness to the docks of Mer, weaving the shadows into a cloak of invisibility.

There.

Rhett and Iona strode near the Umbral Star, hand in hand, Rimu at their side. Rushing forward, I fell into stride. "We need to leave, now."

Rhett startled, and Iona gripped his arm.

“Where’s Ayla?” he growled.

“She’s staying,” I gritted.

From the strain of Rhett’s throat, it seemed to cost all his self-control not to turn and face me. “What happened?”

“It was her choice,” I scathed. “And if her risk is going to be worth it, we need to leave. Now.”

Playing casual, he turned toward the palace. Following his gaze, I saw a distant figure on a corner balcony.

Ayla. Her red hair caught in the wind.

She pretended not to see us. Inside, I felt a renewed urgency to our bond.

Rhett drew his lips tight and nodded. “Fine. I’ll play along.” Playing the part of an escaping romantic, he turned to Iona and swept her off her feet, her skirt swishing around them. Laughing, he held her to his chest and ran with her. Rimu jumped after them, excited by this new game.

Moving ahead of them, I shadow-stepped to the roof of the cabin and grabbed the post of the crow’s nest. “Vanessa,” I called out. “It’s time to go!”

The water sprite looked over the crow’s nest, already alert. “You’ve got it.” Water shifted beneath us, the boat rising in the port as she prepared for our escape.

I jumped to Rhett’s side and subtly helped him untie the ropes. “You have the signed note with you, right?” I asked him. “The gates won’t be an issue?”

“Yes, and worst case, I can sweet talk my way through anything.”

“Good.” I heaved the last of the rope into the boat and jumped to the roof of the cabin. Rhett and Iona settled on the dock, and she poured a celebratory glass of champagne, still playing the part of escaping lovers.

Ayla still stood on the balcony, watching in the distance. The bond between us was painfully thin, and I focused my mind upon it, determined to keep her with me as long as possible.

“I love you. You can do this. I’m still here.” I repeated, unsure if she could hear me. “I love you.”

We were halfway to the gates when the bells tolled.

The shouts began at the gatehouse, but soon more rose from the docks where guards loaded onto dinghies and raced to reinforce the wall.

They shouted to Rhett. “Return to your berth!”

But their whispers were brought to me by darkness. “The Shadow Prince, he’s here.” “The Starlit King wants him.” “I heard he’s a necromancer.” “I hope he’s captured soon.”

“Under no condition is anyone to leave,” they commanded Rhett.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:49 am*

That wouldn't do.

I clutched the black diamond, and made up my mind. Looking up at Ayla, I braced for the consequences, straining for the echo of our tether.

The guards shouted at us a third time. I had to act.

Unmasking my shadows, I jumped down to the deck. I stood before Rhett, a sneer on my face as I claimed my role.

Whoever saw me, let them.

I would become their villain.

"I have a plan," I hissed to Rhett. "I'll beat you in a fight so I can steal 'your' boat."

In response, he stood taller, rolling out his shoulders. "You're stealing my boat?" he taunted, raising his voice so our audience could hear.

I grinned. "I believe it's my boat."

In truth, it was Vanessa's.

Rhett attacked.

He lunged, his hand wound in a fist. I vanished into the shadows, and he missed. I appeared from the darkness, landing a softened blow, and when he next attacked, I

allowed the strike to land, punching me squarely in the jaw.

He didn't hold back.

My jaw cracked.

And the pain felt good.

The taste of copper trickled into my mouth, stemming from my split lip. Surprised, I stood straighter, wiping my face with the back of my hand and glared at him.

“Did Ayla have to stay behind?” Rhett hissed angrily.

“She’s the Starlit Heir,” I reminded Rhett. “And like it or not, she’s got a noble heart.”

Rhett’s fists tightened, and I urged him to hit me again. Teyr, I wanted to feel something, anything other than... this.

“I hate it too,” I whispered when he didn’t strike.

Grunting, he fell back a step, playacting at fatigue before launching his next attack. He glanced at the gatehouse, now brimming with guards, and concern tightened his brow. Iona clutched her hands to her face as she looked from Rhett to me.

“Trust me,” I grunted.

Finally, Rhett nodded in silent agreement. When he ran forward, I wasted no time, giving the illusion I had punched the wind out of him as he fell to the floor, pretending to pass out.

Glaring past Iona and Rimu, I reclaimed my post atop the cabin and shouted orders to Vanessa. “Don’t stop!”

Pausing for breath, I glanced at the palace. By now, Ayla was joined by others, including the Starlit King at her back. Onlookers crowded the balconies, but even from this far away, my eye was drawn only to my mate.

“I won’t let him trap you,” I promised her.

If she replied, I couldn’t hear it.

We were upon the gate.

But there was no more time.

I reached out for the shadows, drawing upon the black diamond to command multitudes. Dismantled and fragmented as she was, Gloom remained frighteningly powerful.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:49 am*

I wrapped the darkness tight, weaving it around the Umbral Star. Fueling the depths with my fury, I brought them into order, gathering them under my control, seizing the entire boat in my shadows—

With awoosh, an arrow sank on the mast, sinking in not far from my head. The guards at the gatehouse shot again, and I rushed to cloak myself in the shadows.

“Zayne!” Vanessa screeched.

We were about to ram into the gate—

I grabbed the black diamond, and seizing all the power I could, I shadow-stepped the Umbral Star past the gates. I led us through the shadows.

Moments later, we rocked in the wide, open sea.

Turning about, I forced myself to stand on wobbling knees to face the stunned guards, just now turning around and realizing what had happened.

With the gates closed, there were no boats to pursue us, and while they rushed into action, we would be long gone by the time they could give chase.

“Where to?” Iona asked.

Looking to the clifftop palace, I searched for Ayla, but we were so far away I could no longer discern which figure was hers. My stomach tightened with nerves as a wave rose, the crest blocking the city from view.

The tether lengthened and thinned, becoming a mere heartbeat.

But it didn't break.

It would never break.

Ayla had saved my soul, twice.

We were bound; she was my mate.

And I'd do anything to keep her safe.

Determined, I gave Vanessa my order. "Take us to Dusk. I have an army to prepare."

Chapter thirty-five

Her Crowded Court

Ayla

Dawn was not that far away, and still, the party continued, music streaming to every corner of the pavilion.

The trade agreement was signed, the lost princess found.

There was every reason to celebrate, even if no party was complete without scandal. After all, the merchant prince had stolen Lady Iona away, only for the Shadow Prince to commandeer their boat. The exact same boat I was supposed to be on if my father hadn't first rescued me from Zayne's clutches.

Or so the story went.

In the hours since their escape, the tether had faded, becoming a mere thread, one so thin I feared it would slip through my fingers. I couldn't feel Zayne's emotions, let alone his thoughts. Only a distant heartbeat proved he was still alive.

"We'll find them soon," my father assured me, joining me on the outskirts of the pavilion. The party was finally reaching its final stretch, the exhausted guests slowly drifting away.

Tomorrow, I'd leave with the Starlit Court, traveling on their yacht on a journey 'home.'

Like everyone else, my father assumed my brooding was over Rhett's capture, and it was a guise I was eager to claim. After their escape, dull sunlight had filled my long day with vapid pretense, a day that concluded with a signed trade agreement. Everyone was eager to go home.

But first. A celebration.

All night I'd danced, playing the part of a spoiled princess eager for escape after a difficult day. I convinced myself it was an act, even as grief tightened throat.

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“I understand that, after everything, you’ll need rest,” my father continued. “But I hope we can continue your training once you’re settled in the palace. I’ll feel better knowing you could take care of yourself in future attacks.”

“Of course,” I agreed. Of course I wanted to harness my powers and learn exactly what he could and couldn’t feel through the Starlit Throne. “It’ll help me feel better too.”

“In the meantime,” he continued, “take it easy.”

I nodded, knowing I needed all the rest I could get. There was a war to stop and plans to make. Despite needing to be at my best, exhaustion and grief plagued my mind. “I’m just glad the assembly reached an agreement,” I added.

He smiled. “This is only the beginning. Now that we’re united, father and daughter, the future is bright. I know we barely know one another, but I’ve listened carefully for word of you. They say you were too wild for the humans, a fae at heart, and I look forward to having you at my side.”

The comment ignited my internal conflict. He’d always known I was his, known I was at odds with my home, but he had never reached out. It stung, even as I questioned if I’d really wanted his recognition. When my plastered smile failed me, I opted for a yawn. “I’m glad.”

He beamed, as if my sleepiness was endearing. “Go to bed. Tomorrow will be a long travel day.”

It was a relief to be dismissed.

Slumping a little too much, I stumbled stepping down from the pavilion. My father caught my elbow. “Are you all right?”

“Just tired,” I mumbled.

He motioned for my nearby guard. “Escort Princess Ayla, ensure she reaches her rooms.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“Goodnight Ayla—” my father paused, his gaze snagged by my hand “—Have you always worn that?”

My mouth dried. He was staring at Ninti’s ruby ring. “It was my mother’s.”

He gawked at it for another long moment. “It may be more valuable than she told you.”

I masked my fear into surprise as I brought the ring closer, admiring the stone as if for the first time. “I’ll keep it safe,” I promised him.

“See that you do.” He nodded to the guard. “Goodnight.”

Weaving slightly, I wandered to the guest wing. The guard followed me all the way, taking a post just outside the door of my new room in the corner suite.

Quietly, finally alone, I untied the bindings to my dress, eager to put aside the bespelled sequins that reflected the intensity of my light. My worn mind working past exhaustion, I crawled into bed.

Except I couldn't sleep.

Not with what the Starlit King had said.

On some level, he recognized Ninti's ring.

And I had no clue how to keep everyone safe.

I drew the blankets close, glancing around the ornate room. My gaze caught on the phonograph on the dresser, the only detail that felt like mine. Moonlight glinted against the sparkly dresses already strewn across the room, the first of many my father had promised me.

Once again, I would live in a palace, the daughter of royalty. Except now, I was the celebrated heir. I'd hated how my mother's court barely tolerated me, but the blind adoration of the Starlit Court was somehow worse.

No one knew what my throne had cost me. Surrounded by strangers, I'd never been more alone.

The first tears were unbidden, but I allowed the rest, curling up and pressing my face into my hands. Soon the tears turned into heaving sobs, a grief I could only honor in the shadows.

Was staying behind a mistake?

I couldn't be sure.

If I hadn't insisted on a lesson, would I have left with Zayne?

I would never know.

But I did know I needed sleep. Somehow. I forced myself to breathe, just breathe. And if I couldn't sleep, the least I could do was rest.

Rest is good.

My tears had dried to my cheeks when I next stirred, something warm against my side. Inhaling, I caught the scent of something familiar, like a bonfire...

"Ninti!" I gasped, sitting up in bed.

Even curled up tight, the firewolf in her true form filled my bed. Unable to stop myself, I tried to wrap my arms around her. My hands fell right through, finding no fur. Only heat. Understanding tightened in my chest.

This was her astral projection, the same way she'd appeared to me as a child. Swallowing back my disappointment, I marveled that she was even here.

The firewolf glowed, ruby red and far healthier than the last time I'd seen her. Where she'd been tired and dull, she was vibrant and orange, more than recovered. There was even a sparkle to her eyes.

She inched her nose to my hand, and I adjusted to face her better, wishing I could scratch her. "Thank you for helping me save Zayne from Gloom," I whispered.

She lifted her chin without answering.

“You can’t speak?” I asked. “Still recovering?”

She nodded, offering only a dull, apologetic woof.

I had so many questions, and my chest tightened with their weight. Even if Ninti wanted to join me, Leo could slow her down. I struggled, searching for a way to ask, Will I ever see you again?

Before I found the words, she leaned closer, our foreheads touching if she were really there. Steadily, her warmth settled my worries.

Now wasn’t the time for questions.

We were together. That had to be enough.

Relaxing, I lay back down as Ninti curled behind my back, filling most of the bed. Her heat pressed against me even if she had no weight, and with her reassurance, sleep drifted closer.

As my dreams settled on my horizon, I reached through the tether, seeking out Zayne’s heartbeat.

Ba-bump.

Dawn neared and music streamed from not that far away, but the rhythm filled me, reminding me that even if I was the Starlit Princess, alone in a sea of fears, that wasn’t quite true.

Ba-bump.

Ninti’s warmth shifted at my back.

I'd never be alone again.

Epilogue: The Mother

Nintithefirewolf

Ayla's breathing deepened as she succumbed to sleep, and I lingered a little longer, thankful to have found the strength to appear in my astral form. She'd been relieved to see me, and I was desperate to reassure her.

Still, exhaustion clung to my every waking moment, everything so much harder than it used to be. It had been nothing short of a miracle that I found the strength to help Ayla reach Zayne.

It was one of several miracles I'd seen lately.

And we'd need even more in the time to come.

Ayla was now tethered to both Zayne and the Starlit Throne. Both bonds were jealous and neither would be inclined to share her fragile mind. For Ayla to safely ascend to the throne, the Starlit Isle herself needed to evolve.

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Ayla needed support, and for the foreseeable future, I wouldn't have much strength to share. My presence would have to be enough.

Behind me on the bed, she leaned closer, and I ensured my warmth kept her company, my gigantic firewolf body filling most of the bed.

I curled around my belly, noting how the subtle changes already appeared in my astral form. They wouldn't remain subtle for long, and even if I couldn't find the strength to speak, Ayla would soon understand.

My puppies were growing bigger by the day.

The knowledge filled me with pride. It filled me with fear. It made me furious that Rimu wasn't here. I longed to show him what we'd accidentally made.

Another miracle.

My astral form slipped away as fatigue claimed me. Sleep took me under, and when I woke, I found myself exactly where I had settled upon the shoulder of Leo's shell. Blinking my eyes open, I glanced down as my sister lifted her turtle head.

"How was the journey?" she asked. Somewhere between doting and fussy, she had kept a close eye on me since my return.

"Everything seemed normal," I answered.

"There may still be risk."

She was right. We had never heard of a deity becoming pregnant and had no idea what to expect. Already, my belly bulged far sooner than seemed typical.

“No more shifting,” I promised my sister. “That does feel wrong.” I’d remain in my firewolf form through the entirety of the pregnancy.

Not for the first time, I scanned the forest on Leo’s back, wondering where I wanted to birth my pups. My babies would be tiny and fragile and born into a world driven toward war. I had to find somewhere safe.

I rested my chin on my paws. “I’m not exactly a dog, so what will my puppies be? Will they take after me, their father, or somewhere in between? And what will Rimu think?”

“All things to be resolved in time.”

I squeezed my eyes tight. “What if I’m not a good mother?” I took a deep breath.

“What makes you think that?”

“I couldn’t teach Ayla.” And the attempt had nearly killed me.

Leo shrugged and waves splashed up the sides of her shell. “You will learn to be a mother. We can all change, even millennia old deities.”

I shifted my hips to make room for my growing belly. Obviously, my body had changed, but my personality was cemented by the centuries.

Still, I hoped Leo was right.