



Shadow and Smite

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: “I need to save my sister.” —Zayne A necromancer holds the strings to my sister’s soul. By rescuing her, I’ll save the Shadow Court. I have a plan. It’s a longshot, but it is the best I have. I’ll draw the attention of undead Shades. The Shades, however, pursue someone else: Ayla, a beautiful fae I dismissed too quickly. Turns out, there’s something special about her—I just don’t know what it is. “Soon, I’ll be a stowaway.” —Ayla I’m on the run, fleeing to the Isles of Fae. As a part-fae bastard, I want to escape my past. Maybe I’ll learn the truth of my heritage or find the Firewolf I see in my visions. I’m going. And nothing can derail me—at least until Zayne ruins everything. Because of him, I am branded by Shades. Now a gray blemish grows on my chest. With time, it will bind my soul, kill me, and raise me as an undead. I didn’t escape just to be slain. Zayne has a remedy, one he will share—if we save his sister from a necromancer. My options are limited, and I join his quest. Only I have secrets, and I don’t trust him. Yet every time he heals my brand, he touches my bare skin. With his palm pressed to my heart, I’m drawn closer to him. There’s no denying the fire between us. Or the obstacles. As my brand and feelings grow, I realize escape was a terrible plan.

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1 | Their Distractions

Ayla

Soon I'd be a stowaway.

Technically, that wasn't true. I had my travel papers and permit. Even if the name on the forgeries wasn't mine, they looked legitimate. Tomorrow, I would board the merchant's ship and leave this continent. Finally, I would visit...My home? My roots? Whatever the Isles of Fae were to me.

The Isles were as mysterious as my fae father, hidden behind mists and forbidden by my human mother. While I had papers and a permit, I certainly didn't have permission to cross the Rift. So I traveled under a false name. Allegedly, I was a merchant's distant cousin. Not technically a stowaway.

What if I'm caught? The thought had haunted me ever since Mariana's coronation ball.

I tossed in my bed. Couldn't sleep. I turned to my other side. Nothing. I needed a distraction.

With a sigh, I pulled on my clothes. Wrapping my red hair into a scarf, I hid my recognizable features: nubby antlers and arched ears. The vestiges of my fae heritage. I wore the disguise like an old habit, a camouflage developed for nighttime escapades to fae fiddle bars.

The daggers at my thighs were just as familiar. Never hurt to be too cautious.

I swept my cloak over my shoulders and wandered to the tavern's pub. Despite the late hour, we were near the harbor, and it would still be open. Here, there was always somebody coming or going. The perfect place to shake off my sleeplessness.

Only, I couldn't be caught. This ploy had taken months of preparation. It had taken a night from hell for me to find the courage to embark. There wouldn't be a second chance.

To reach the Isles of Fae, I needed to stay invisible, unrecognized.

The bar was just busy enough to enter without warranting attention. A minstrel strummed a lute, nodding off as he worked. Merchant crews claimed a few of the tables, likely late-night arrivals from the Isles of Fae.

A fae with impressive horns sat at the bar. Unlike my stubby antlers, his horns expanded, dramatically framing his face, regal and demanding attention. Fae possessed appendages, from antlers and horns to wings and tails, but I had never seen horns like his—dark as night, long and sharp. They drove a hard line, dragging down to his cheekbones, his chin. His firm lips.

By Teyr, he was handsome.

My heart rushed to my throat, and I wasn't sure if it raced from intimidation, excitement, or awe. Most likely, all three.

On a different night, I would have sat beside him. I'd flirt, subtly asking questions about his world, his magic.

And the flirting... That would be fun. We could find a lively fiddle bar. We could

dance, and if I was lucky, he'd be a good kisser...

Not now. I couldn't pursue those things. With a breath, I forced my heart to a steady calm.

He drew attention—not just from me, but from everyone in the tavern. Nobody dared approached him, but I saw the darting looks.

Maybe his presence was my lucky break. Anybody who was paying attention would be watching him, not me. I slipped into a seat, sliding in the background of his opulent presence.

“Whiskey?” the bartender asked.

I nodded, dropping a coin. “Just the one.”

“Not sleeping?”

I shrugged my yes. Not in the mood for conversation.

But she continued speaking as she handed me the drink. “Are you crossing the Rift?”

Was it that obvious? Fortunately for someone in my situation, sleeplessness was expected. I leaned into the role written on my travel documents and replied truthfully, “It'll be my first crossing.”

“Nobody will blame you for nerves. The Isles are breathtaking, but first comes the crossing.”

I nodded. “Everyone seems to say that.”

“Because it’s true. The Shade attacks have changed everything.” She sighed. “A damn shame. Attacks are rare, but they’ve happened enough that too many merchants have moved to different routes. Fae goods might be valuable, but with each attack, fewer are willing to take the risk.”

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I grunted my agreement. Everyone in the human kingdom of Valterra felt the impact of Shade attacks. When fae goods crossed the Rift, their spells stayed intact, and it made them invaluable on the human continent. Fae goods improved everything, from light and medicine to livestock and luxury.

Even before the Collapse, they were expensive. Since Gloom had descended and the risk of travel had increased, they were valued even higher.

I was nine when I first heard of Shades, creatures straight from my childhood nightmares swarming upon the Nearbright Sea.

Back then, my mother explained to my younger sisters and me, “See our fae lights? How clean, safe, and stable they are, especially compared to flickering flame? This is a luxury good—one that Valterra now depends on.”

Exactly how the Shades struck was unknown—few survived their raids, and their stories were wild.

“The Shades wouldn’t attack my boat,” the fae with the horns boasted, butting into our conversation.

Startled, I swallowed too much whiskey and coughed. I looked at him and stared. Nobody made claims like that.

Except...

Well, he clearly wasn’t a normal male. Not even a normal fae, not with horns like

that.

Aside from the fact that he was drunk—wobbly posture, crooked grin—he looked to be fine in a fight. Muscular but trim. A well-maintained sword hung on his belt. I couldn't even appraise his magical skills.

Even if magic or weapons weren't enough, maybe he could frighten the Shades with his handsome dark looks. His black hair was long, sweeping over his broad shoulders. His eyes were nearly the same shade, beckoning me to look deeper, to look longer, and learn his secrets.

Even on this side of the Rift, he reeked of fae power.

I fought the impulse to lick my lips, and instead, took a timid sip of my drink. I let it burn.

After such a bold claim, everyone was staring at us. I hunched my shoulders and tilted my face downward, letting the scarf shadow my face. Hopefully, they would focus on him.

The male smiled at the attention. Like this was exactly what he wanted.

Who could he be? I began reviewing the Isles in my mind, wondering which was his. The Starlit Isle, the Skylands, Dawn Court...

I'd just made it to Merwhen he winked at me.

Winked. As if he knew I was repressing my urge to flirt. Or maybe he saw how badly I wanted to stay hidden.

It was time to go. I swallowed the last of my drink—

“A favor! For the pretty lady!” the horned male shouted. He crammed his hand into his cloak and found a handkerchief. Fumbling, he waved it, letting the fabric flutter. “May my sigil protect you on your first crossing!”

I had no choice but to play along.

The handkerchief was a fae good. Dark, ruddy red with a black sigil stitched into it. Dusk Court? Scholar’s Island? I couldn’t quite remember, but the stitching flashed a clear message for those who knew.

To anybody else in the tavern, it would have been a wonder to behold. A small fortune.

It was a gift I’d be a fool to reject, and I masked myself, preparing to accept the gift with enacted awe.

“For you,” he insisted. “May it keep you safe.”

Pretending my hesitation rose from intimidation, I extended my palm, offering a shy smile. “You honor me.”

He pressed the cloth into my hand, his fingers brushing the inside of my wrist as he pulled away.

I shivered at his touch. There was something...gravitational about him. Like threads, more than cloth, connected our hands—

He was a distraction.

I yanked my hand away, acting as an embarrassed flirt who had overplayed. I ran my fingers against the fabric like I had never touched a fae good before. The cloth moved

like water, softer than my sisters' scarves.

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To have a possession like this... I smiled.

He grinned cockily in reply. My thighs clenched.

That was definitely my cue to leave.

“Thank you,” I breathed. Shy and startled, I retreated down the darkened hall. In the light of his authority, a little nobody like me would be forgotten.

In my departure, the minstrel picked up a proper tune. The beat tempted me. To dance. To live.

I forced myself to return to my room instead. Only once I was secure did I examine the sigil in more detail.

A pomegranate and a crow. The fruit’s flesh was torn, its arils scattered across the seal. The crow’s eyes glinted, seeing far, knowing deep. It guarded the fruit.

The Shadow Court.

But how?

Their isle was gone, consumed by Gloom when the Shades first appeared. Its residents had scattered, becoming refugees. Only two members of the original Shadow Court remained, twins, a brother and sister.

That man... Was he the exiled prince?

Zayne

Everything went according to plan. Everyone in the tavern saw the sigil emblazoned on my handkerchief.

If Teyr spoke true, the barkeep was a spy. Even if he was wrong, word of a drunk, arrogant princeling would soon get around.

The female was an unexpected surprise. I had been looking for someone like her—an alluring first-timer who a drunk princeling might give the handkerchief to—but I had never expected her to captivate me.

She was pretty, in a covert way. Her beauty radiated past the scarf hiding her. Her posture was unsure, but her essence, cherry and spice, was evidence of depth. Despite her attempts to hide it, she had strength.

When our hands touched? I didn't think magic was possible here, but she made me think otherwise. For a moment, something weaved between us. She was more than I expected, more than I was prepared for.

Already, memories of her bright green eyes sent shivers down my spine. If I didn't have something important to do, I would have hurried after her, offering her another drink. Unlike the true me, this persona could be romantically brave, pursuing a stranger when I normally wouldn't.

Maybe it was for the best that she'd left so hurriedly. She would be a distraction.

I dragged my thoughts from her and focused on the barkeep. Given the glint in her eyes, she knew who I was. My work here was done.

With a dramatic flourish, I finished my drink and smiled at the other patrons. By now,

the minstrel was awake, playing a proper tune.

I weaved toward the door, moving far more drunkenly than I truly felt. Nobody could suspect that I'd revealed myself on purpose—that would only make a dangerous situation worse.

Tomorrow, I would cross the Rift, finally leaving the human continent to begin my journey home. Myrealhome, the Isle of Shadow.

Now that my identity was known, the Shades were sure to attack. Inarus was looking for me, and I wanted to be found.

Let the Shades cast their Brand on my flesh. May the Brand guide my journey north. It was all part of my plan.

Honestly, it was a lousy plan. One likely to cost my life.

Only, I would do anything to save my sister.

2 | Their Second Sighting

Ayla

A dense fog filled the horizon as we approached the Rift. I watched from the bow of the merchant's ship.

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Not that there was anything to see. The Rift was invisible, a division in the middle of the Nearbright Sea.

Yet the ship steered into it, and from the mutterings of the magically inclined passengers, we were about to make our crossing.

Finally, I would live with magic.

Dozens of us, mostly merchants and their mercenaries, crowded above deck, armed and waiting for the crossing. The ship's crew worked around us.

By providing extra security, our crossing fee was reduced. Truthfully, I didn't need the coin, but I couldn't imagine staying below deck, blind to the crossing.

I'd made my decision hours earlier, back when the day was clear, my mood bright, and Vila Port lively. Now this fog filled the horizon, a darkness swallowing the distance.

It was possible I'd made a mistake.

At first the company had been jovial. They were friendly to me, the "distant cousin" of a favored merchant. It was only when we neared the Rift, when the fog condensed, that the mood turned somber.

The others muttered. It was rarely foggy like this. As we approached the Rift, our jokes quieted, and we looked beyond, preparing for the possibility of Shades.

Don't panic. That would be embarrassing. But I was still nervous. Steeling myself, I waited through another breath.

I had trained with soldiers since adolescence—sword, bow, and dagger. Mother hadn't approved of my hobby, but she had eventually found a way to make it useful.

Despite my background, this fog was new. I'd been a fool to think this would be easy. Too many heroic daydreams perhaps, making me believe that I'd be impervious to pressure, that nerves wouldn't make my knees wobble.

Deep down, I knew it wasn't only the fog that kept me on edge. The fear that my magic wouldn't manifest worried me too.

Fae magic rose from the Isles, and upon crossing the Rift, my magic should surface.

It was an exciting possibility. For so many years, I was a curiosity—the part-fae bastard of my mother. Nowhere to go, no way to fit in. I had nothing to become, so I became myself.

By day, I trained with soldiers. At night, I found fae fiddle bars and danced, learning the songs of my distant heritage. That same drive made me thirst for magic.

Magic was supposed to be impossible in Valterra. Some leaked over, particularly near the volcano Teyr. Yet even far from the volcano's vents, my Firewolf made her strange appearances—a silent apparition that would warn me of danger.

In childhood, the Firewolf had saved me from Mariana's cruel prank. Not long ago, she led me to Mariana's room to find an assassin inside; she'd helped me save my sister's life. I told nobody of the visions. If Mariana had seen the Firewolf, we hadn't spoken of it.

I stretched out my fingers and considered the ruby ring I'd stolen from my mother. I suspected it linked to my Firewolf, and I hoped it would lead me to her.

The chit-chat of my companions stopped. In the lull, the pounding of my heart seemed louder. Discomfort growing, I reached into a pocket of my leather armor.

My body relaxed as I touched the handkerchief, my finger brushing the silky surface.

I had already traced the stitching several times, becoming familiar with its intricate details. The sewing was perfect—not a stitch out of place, the texture soothing. If holding it helped me to stay calm...

Maybe it really was enchanted for protection.

That wasn't a complete fantasy. If this was a gift from the exiled Prince of the Shadow Court, it could be stitched with special magic. It didn't hurt to hope.

He'd been bold and haughty, everything I expected from courtiers—both fae and human. He had those long, pointed horns, darkened with shadow. I was becoming convinced it had been him, not a deception.

Too bad we'd met on a night when I preferred to hide. It would have been fun to flirt with a princeling, to kiss someone so handsome. How would his lips feel? Would the kisses be hard and furious—

"Fifteen minutes until crossing!" the captain shouted. "Prepare yourselves."

The crowd stirred as I blinked my way back to reality. When I opened my eyes, he was there.

Him. The prince. He was here. Not a daydream.

I shoved the handkerchief back into my pocket. A blush crept up my neck, and I swallowed it back down.

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Had he been below deck this entire journey? I couldn't have missed him.

Now he stood near the stairs, though not quite like I remembered. Oh, he was still dark and devilish and handsome, but his swagger was gone. His cockiness replaced by focus, his dark gaze turned cold.

Today, he was a man of action, prepared for whatever lay on the other side of the fog. He dressed as finely as the day before, but today he wore leathered armor—stamped and sewn with design. His sword swung from a belt, but now I wondered at his true weapon, shadow magic.

When his gaze flicked my way, I knew he recognized me. He glanced at my armor and weapons, my confident posture. He smirked.

He knew I had been bluffing. I felt naked, caught pretending. Too soon, moving with fae speed, he stood at my side.

“You're not exactly the demure, pretty lady I met last night... Are you?”

I shrugged, rolling my shoulders, working the sudden fear from my body. Just because he recognized me didn't mean he knew who I was.

“Not now,” I scoffed. I checked my weapons, acting busy. Sword at my waist, daggers at my thighs, quiver at my back, bow in my hand... and fae prince still at my side.

“Why are you still here?” I snapped. “Isn't there better company for you?”

Calm, calm, calm...I sighed. I'd been on edge for days.

His grin faded as his playfulness vanished. "Don't worry, I'll leave as soon as we cross the Rift. I have other means of transportation." He pointed to a small boat stored against the side of our much larger vessel. It was a fae boat, operated by magic and not suited for travel south of the Rift. "Do you really want me to go away?"

My stomach pitched, a wave of nervousness giving way to intrigue. The night before, he had been acting too, and I wanted to get closer. Entertaining him for a few minutes couldn't be that dangerous.

"You can stay," I replied.

Zayne

I felt guilty.

Nobody deserved to be near the Shades. I should know; I had lost far too many to their forces: my parents, my nursemaid Sandra at the shore, and now my sister, Eleanor.

This female didn't deserve to be here, to witness what would happen to me. She'd helped me with the handkerchief, and the sight of her on this boat twisted my stomach with guilt.

At least Eleanor had shadow-stitched protective magic into the handkerchief. I didn't know how her shadow-stitching worked, but it was powerful. I had already given this female the best I had.

If everything went according to plan, the fight would follow me. Once I boarded my boat, the Umbral Star, and crossed on my own, everyone on the merchant's ship

would be safe. I would face the fight alone.

Threads of my magic leaked past the Rift, creating a low current of power. The hum came as a relief.

With my magic, I could sense the Shades—their empty existence, the scent of death and rot ruining my other senses.

They lurked underwater, hiding their sensitive bodies from the light. There were more of them than I expected, and their bodies pressed against each other, becoming a dense mass of moving dead.

This would be different from last time.

It had to be.

This time, the fight was far from Inarus, their master. Since then, I'd studied necromancy, practicing my descent into the Underworld. It would be easier to overpower the necromancer controlling them.

And this time, I wanted their Brand, a gray blemish that would overtake my soul. Once I had their Brand, I would banish them.

Simple. I had everything planned. I was prepared.

But seeing her, catching her scent of cherries, spicy and tart and sweet... She sparked with life, and I was on a deadly quest.

Finally, she answered, "You can stay."

She shrugged and considered the foggy horizon with a frown. The other mercenaries

shifted as we approached. Mirroring the others, she removed her cloak, revealing the leather armor beneath, the material creased and worn but oiled and well-made.

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She was armed to the teeth. Good weapons too. Not fancy or bejeweled, but quality. Cared for.

“Who are you?” I whispered, low enough no one else could hear.

She smirked. “I said you could stay. I didn’t say you could ask questions, Your Majesty.”

Your Majesty. The way she said it, with disdain, made me shiver. She had no love for royalty, no fear.

“So you figured it out?” I scrunched my face in mock embarrassment. “Erm, Guess I drank a bit too much. Got carried away. How’s the handkerchief?”

“Beautiful workmanship.”

“My sister’s.”

“Is it spelled?”

“Shadow-stitched for protection.”

She shrugged. “Then it’s a good gift.”

I almost regretted the loss of Eleanor’s handiwork, but knowing this female had accepted my protection calmed my nerves. It bolstered me.

“Ugh, I can’t fight like this,” she murmured, tugging off her headscarf. Strands of silky red hair tumbled over her shoulders.

My gaze went to her fae features: arched ears and antlers. Her antlers were small, like a youth’s. But she was clearly my age...

“I have some fae heritage,” she explained. “My mother is human, but she never told me about my sire. I don’t even know if he was full-fae.”

She stepped to the side, storing her scarf and cloak before facing the denser fog. The mists swallowed our ship. Visibility decreased with each moment, and while a hopeful sun glowed in the distance, we journeyed into darkness.

“I’m curious,” she mused. “I assume you have shadow magic.”

“I do.”

She grinned, so different from the timid woman I’d met the night before. When she removed her cloak and scarf, she had shed the last of her illusions. With this encroaching fog, there was no longer space for pretense.

She stood strong and tall, her head reaching my chin. She wasn’t rigid, but aware and poised, prepared to wield her weapons. It was a posture I understood, a readiness learned under the watch of vultures, those ready to strike the weak.

There was fuel to her fire. Would she warm me or burn me? Either way, I wanted to get closer. “Well, can you at least tell me your name?” I asked.

“You’re Zayne, aren’t you?” she replied. “Prince of the Shadow Court.”

“I asked for your name, not mine.”

She smirked, glancing around. She seemed to be hiding from someone... I could respect that.

“In the possibility of an attack, my shadow magic will be useful against the Shades,” I answered.

“Do you know much about the Shades?”

“Some.” Most necromantic knowledge was taboo and lost. Luckily, I’d discovered a few abandoned texts on my last trip into Gloom.

“What are the Shades?”

“If I tell you, will you give me your name?”

After a moment, she answered, her voice low so nobody could overhear, “It’s Ayla.”

I had expected her to lie, but it sounded true.

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She seemed almost familiar—Ayla, a part-fae with red hair and green eyes—but I couldn't quite place her. Ayla was a common name in both the human and fae lands, so maybe there was nothing to recall.

"Ayla... what? No surname?" I asked.

"No surname." She shrugged like it meant nothing. "I gave you my name, so tell me about the Shades." She tilted her chin and widened her eyes. The green of her gaze was wild. She was a daring female, flirting with me, knowing who I was. It was bold, refreshing, and I liked it.

I chuckled—I couldn't help it. It was the first I had laughed in...ages. Since losing Eleanor? The ache of release tumbled through my tired body.

"The Shades are the dead, brought back to life by a necromancer," I explained.

She blanched. "I thought necromancers only existed in stories."

"I thought so too. Once." Just as I had once believed Inarus was a strict but kind tutor. "In an attack, the horde of Shades will hold down their victims. Their leader, the Gray General, will curse their victims with a Brand. They place it over the heart, and those who have been cursed..."

Eleanor said the Brand began as a coin-sized mark—ashy and gray, like death placed over her heart. Later that evening, it had grown, consuming her neck and shoulders.

I continued, "Once cursed, it doesn't matter if a victim lives through the attack. The

Brand binds their soul and forces them deeper into Gloom. I don't know where they go, but I believe they are killed so they can be turned into undead Shades..."

I remembered when Eleanor had left me. Willpower was not enough to overcome the Brand. Even her icy focus wasn't enough. Only Teyr's promise convinced me she was alive—that my sister needed me.

Ayla frowned. "You lost someone this way." It wasn't a question. If she knew who I was, maybe she realized it was Eleanor.

I gave a brisk nod, and Ayla had the grace not to press me further.

Ayla. She impressed me in so many ways. Nobody treated me like an equal. I was a princeling to take advantage of, an exiled prince to pity, or Prince of the Shadow Court, to be feared.

Her casual attitude, bordering on disdain, flirty yet noncommittal, was a relief. I had so many questions. I wanted to know her better.

There was no time.

We neared the Rift. I felt shadows lurking in the marrow of my bones. My sense of death grew, and I glanced to where the Shades were waiting.

They were ready. And so was I.

"Well, Ayla." Somehow, I found a wild, careless grin. This might have been the last conversation of my life. "Chatting with you, it's been fun. Honestly, the most fun I've had in weeks."

I might have kissed her—to feel the heat of her lips, to inhale her scent of cherry and

spice—but I didn't dare.

If she kissed me back, I might lose the courage to face my fate. She tempted me to choose the safer route, to live.

Only, it was my duty to save Eleanor, stop Gloom, and forge a future for the Shadow Court. I had to claim my Brand.

3 | Learnings and Loss

Zayne

Since I last faced the Shades, I had learned several things.

First, they acted as a simpleminded horde under the leadership of a general. The Gray General was still undead, but smarter, directly connected to their necromancer. Generals directed their horde, and they administered the Brand.

The Shades had held Eleanor down while their general branded her. They pursued her first, the Heir to the Shadow Court.

That was the next thing I learned. In their simplemindedness, Shades pursue the victim with the strongest connection to the Isles. They were called to snuff the brightest magic.

Unless someone on the merchant's ship was an heir—which wasn't possible, I knew all of them—they would pursue me. That knowledge formed the core of my plan: lure them to me.

My newly acquired boat was ready. The Umbral Starhung from the side of the merchant ship, held by pulleys over the sea. It was a small fae boat, designed to be

captained by a water sprite. It had no power without magic.

Vanessa, the water sprite, waited for me on the boat. I had commissioned her for this trip, giving an oath that she could keep the boat once my quest was finished.

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Examining the fog, I frowned. I had expected more time than this. Ideally, the Shades wouldn't have been so close to the Rift. Luck wasn't running in my favor.

"Quickly," I urged the crew members assigned to lower the boat. "I want to take sail as soon as I can."

I boarded the Umbral Star, climbing awkwardly from one ship to the other, wishing I could shadow-step. Soon, I'd have my magic back. With it, the Shades would target me.

Keeping my dread at bay, I examined the ropes lowering us down. Confident that the system was working, I approached the crow's nest.

"Vanessa?" I asked, looking up. The crow's nest rose high above the ship. It was small, sprite-sized, giving her both privacy and the vantage point she needed to control the boat.

"About time," she moaned, looking over the edge.

I still didn't exactly understand how she'd ended up south of the Rift. Sprites couldn't thrive away from the Isles.

Usually, a water's sprite skin bore the texture of living water, churning waves or rolling streams. Vanessa's skin was a dull blue that had patchy white spots at her elbows and knees, like water gone stagnant.

"I'm fine." She rolled her eyes and stumbled. "Fine enough. Whatever. I'll keep my

end of our oath. I want the boat.”

I met Vanessa in Vila Port, a sprite seeking fair passage. I’d outlined my plans as she’d vaguely explained her circumstances. Our goals were aligned, at least enough for us to make a bargain.

“The Shades aren’t far from the Rift,” I added. “The attack will be sooner than I hoped.”

“Great. Let’s get this fight over with. I’m ready to move on.”

The ship jerked, the pulleys reaching the end of their rope. The Umbral Stars skimmed the water, pulled along by the larger ship.

The Rift, while invisible, was becoming evident. It was a tidal wall of magic compared to the trickle of power I could access.

“Almost there!” I shouted to the crew members above. Vanessa pouted, bracing herself.

I inhaled, welcoming the return to my world. Power crashed into me. Harsher than I imagined.

My magic, scented with cedar and amber and rain, washed over me. It consumed me, circulating through veins of power. It flooded my body, a shudder convulsing through the spine.

It grew hot, burning.

Flashing. And fading.

Ahh...

This was wholeness.

For weeks, my existence had been incomplete. Now the shadows swayed to my orders, the undercurrents of reality available to me.

It was weighty. Especially with the added pressure of the Shades.

And there were so many Shades.

The horde was uncountable, a disconcerting mass of minds that weren't minds, bodies that moved without life. They sickened me.

The Shades werewrong. Once, they had been alive, beings driven by individual desires. Now those unique souls were gone, descended to final death, while their bodies remained, bound to Inarus's will.

Despite my lurching stomach, I sought the mob. They congregated under the sea. Unlike the living, granting space to each individual, they were joined, becoming a dense mass of organic matter.

How many had Inarus killed? How many had he resurrected, forcing movement into soulless bodies? Teyr help me if Inarus had more hordes this large. I steeled myself, preparing my mind to command theirs.

That was the next thing I'd learned about the Shades: I could control them.

I was a necromancer.

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I had learned of my “talents” under duress.

The night Eleanor had been branded, the ability rose within me. When the Shades held me down, their Gray General approaching, ready with his Brand... My power awakened.

I shivered, swallowing down the recollection.

Since that awful night, I'd taught myself everything I could, digging through Inarus's old books, those he had abandoned in Issa Neu. He had been our Court Sorcerer. His duties included guarding the texts, not studying them. He had used the knowledge to cause the Collapse, destroying the Shadow Court.

Necromancy was a magic not meant to be practiced. But it was my power. Under the circumstances, I had honed it, making it a weapon. A tool for survival.

Slowing my breath, I sank into the Underworld, the realm where souls slipped downward to final death. In the realm of the dead, the waves and sea spray faded from awareness. Descending, I surrendered to a different, slower tide. My body grew cold, becoming vulnerable.

It was a meditation I had practiced, learning to slip my soul from my body. Night after night, I had prepared myself for this moment, learning the art of opening my living soul to the dead.

My magic still burned, slowing to an ache, as I reached for the still minds of the Shades.

My first goal was to bring them to me, to let them hold me down. I needed the Gray General to brand me. Then I would destroy the General. With their leader gone, the horde would become headless. The attack would end, and the Shades would stumble away.

With the Brand on my body and the Gray General gone, I could use another thing I'd learned: ashflower.

Small star-shaped flowers, red as blood and grown from obsidian. Blessed by Teyr.

They were a gift from my pilgrimage to Teyr, my whole reason for visiting the human continent. There, at his volcano, I had entered the Divine Realm and spoken with the god. I told Teyr of the Collapse, and he asked about Gloom.

I convinced him to give me the ashflower. He gave it to me, exactly enough, he said. He warned that there would be none to spare.

Water sprayed across my face, and I blinked, returning to the living.

"Are you ready?" I asked Vanessa. The sprite now glowed, an electric blue light radiating from her body. The whole crew's nest shone under her power.

Vanessa spun, the glow of blue magic twirling with her. "The Umbral Star is now under my control. Release the pulleys!" Her voice boomed throughout the ship.

The crew above obeyed.

"And off we go!" she cackled. The boat tore off, breaking from the wake of the merchant's ship. Vanessa preened, glowing even brighter. "By Teyr, it feels good to be back!"

“That way!” I pointed. “The Shades are on the port side.”

She hesitated, the boat slowing. “So let me check, one final time... You’re sure you want to do this? This boat is a beauty, fast as she damn well pleases, and you don’t want me to outrun the blasted things?”

“I’m sure.”

She shrugged. “For the record, you’re the only weirdo I know who wants to meet them. My last client certainly didn’t intend to have a run-in with the Shades.”

I raised an eyebrow. It was the first I’d heard of her former client and their untimely end. At least it explained why she was so fearless.

“Just do me one favor,” she added.

“What?”

“Keep the boat in one piece. It’d be a shame to lose her.”

“When this quest is over—either from success or my death—the Umbral Star is yours. I’ve given my oath.”

“Excellent,” she purred, and the boat began accelerating.

Into the darkest depths of the fog, we rushed toward the horde. I braced myself for the fight.

Without thinking, I reached for my handkerchief, finding it gone. I didn’t mind the absence, not when it was a reminder that it guarded Ayla.

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May she stay safe.

I sent the wish to the merchant ship, vanishing on the horizon. I took the moment to daydream, to wonder what could have been if we had met under different circumstances. If I weren't me, and this quest weren't mine.

May she stay safe, I wished one final time.

Then I gritted my teeth and faced my fight.

4 | No One

Ayla

Nothing happened when we passed the Rift. No magic flowed through my body. I was unchanged.

Nearby, other fae tested their magics. A fae with a long tail ran fingers down his sword, igniting it with flame. Another with wings cast a gusty wind, pushing fog away from the ship.

Meanwhile, I remained as humanlike as I had always been. What an uninspiring sensation. Why had I dared to hope? It was childish to dream.

I toyed with my ruby ring, the one I'd taken from my mother's jewelry box the night of my escape. The design had filigree and archaic details, set with a large ruby.

On my birthday, my mother would summon me to her rooms and hand me this ring. She watched, curious about how I would respond to it—or maybe how it would respond to me. I never quite understood, and she never explained, only hinting that the ring had belonged to my father.

Every year the ritual repeated, Mother pretending the outcome could be different. Nothing changed. Nothing obvious. I'd dream about the Firewolf those nights. But I never told her about my visions—I couldn't predict what she would do with that information.

I looked upon the vast foggy sea with no magic thrumming through my veins, and my skin tightened with goosebumps. My plans to find my mysterious Firewolf felt so small.

At least I escaped. Rhett would be waiting for me at a fae fiddle bar. That was enough.

I palmed my blade, coming to grips with the renewed emptiness. I was part-fae, granted arched ears and dwarfed antlers but no magic.

At least I had my mind and carefully honed skills. It would have to be enough. I would be enough.

Watching the sea, I tracked Zayne's boat as he sped away, both disappointed and relieved he was gone. He would have been a distraction, an enjoyable one, a dangerous one.

I rested my hand over my chest, the handkerchief beneath, wondering if I'd ever see him again...

Only, something was wrong with the sea.

Staring after Zayne's boat, I was one of the first to see it. Them.

The Shades.

They formed a pillar, rising from the sea. Dense bodies mangled together, individuals becoming a golem. They became a tower built from the sea floor.

Zayne had said the Shades were undead, and these bodies looked it. Where they had skin, it was spread too tightly. They were not bloody, but desiccated, half-skeletal. The pillar grew thicker and taller, rising as one body climbed over another. One by one, individual Shades added thickness and height, the horde forming a new life form. A malleable golem.

The shouting began. The captain gave orders to turn around, to travel south of the Rift.

Suddenly, in a rush, the pillar of undead began moving, racing toward us, shifting with preternatural speed.

Action whirled around me, but all I could see was Zayne's boat, already far away.

Was this why Zayne left? Had he fled, sensing them and leaving us? I can't trust him. The realization struck like cold water, and all my flirty impressions soured.

I can't trust anybody. I should have known that.

Regardless, he was sailing toward the horizon, abandoning us while the Shades pursued us.

Grounding myself, I dug my feet into the deck and pulled an arrow from my quiver. I didn't know if arrows would matter. Regardless, I wouldn't hide below deck—I

would fight.

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I hadn't come this far to balk at the first sign of danger. After what I had done, I couldn't go back to Valterra.

The pillar shifted toward the ship. Several bodies stretched from it, extending like tentacles. For now, they couldn't reach the ship.

Yet more Shades rose from the depths. They chained themselves, hands and ankles, growing the tentacles. They braced, chest to chest, thickening the tentacles and building stability. They climbed each other like ladders.

Like a sea beast or kraken, the tentacles spread from the central pillar, its arms reaching for the deck.

I loosed my first arrow, striking a Shade. My aim was true, and my arrow ran deep into their chest. The Shade slowed, becoming idle—but rather than stopping the golem, the single Shade grew rigid, becoming a support.

Another Shade crawled over the one I hit. The tentacle grew longer.

Others shot their arrows, and it happened again. Again and again. All we did was strengthen the undead infrastructure. The horde was too large.

Maybe I needed my sword...

Before I could move, there was a blast of heat, a flare of light, as one of the fae mercenaries directed fire toward the Shades. It was a short-ranged attack, and the fire died out before reaching them.

“Don’t!” one of the ship’s crew shouted. “You’ll set the ship on fire!”

But it gave me an idea, and I shoved one of my arrows toward the fire-wielding fae. “Ignite it,” I commanded.

The fae touched my arrow, and the tip glowed. “It’ll catch fire upon impact,” they explained.

I nocked the arrow and shot, striking another Shade.

This time, my attack had impact. My target caught fire, flaring for a single bright moment. The Shade charred, cremated. Becoming ash.

My stomach lurched, and I swallowed bile, wondering if they had felt pain.

Separating myself from the horror, I nocked another bespelled arrow. I shot again. Again and again. The other archers followed suit while fae enchanted our weapons.

We slowed the kraken, but we couldn’t stop it.

There weren’t enough arrows. There weren’t enough archers. The golem was too big.

One tentacle snaked forward, reaching over our ship. The pillar shifted, coming closer. The first Shade dropped.

They boarded our ship.

Once the first Shade reached us, it wasn’t long until the second and third joined them. A fourth and fifth. The kraken arm connected with the ship. They boarded us with ease.

Those with swords and daggers joined the fight. Those wielding steel depended on those with magic.

I struck as many as I could. Soon I'd be out of arrows. Then I would draw my sword and join the fray.

Ashes from the fallen Shades whirled around us, fading until they disappeared.

It was battle. It was chaos.

No matter how many Shades we destroyed, new ones descended to take their place. The horde seemed to have no end.

This wasn't a winning strategy. We had to retreat.

Already, the Rift seemed far away. The ship's water sprites were busy, and the crew had angled the sails, keeping them full. We slowly shifted south... It was our only option.

Another tentacle reached for us. I shot it with my last arrow, slowing it, but the tentacle still made contact. More Shades boarded as a third arm reached for us...

Soon, we would be overcome. The crew needed time. I drew my sword and continued the fight.

5 | His Risk

Zayne

Together, they shifted. The Shades moved. The horde attacked the wrong ship.

This wasn't right. They were supposed to want me. My plan depended on that.

Ignoring me, the pillar shifted, expanding with arms that moved toward the merchant's ship. Shades dropped onto the deck. The crew and mercenaries fought, but that horde...

Searching for a reason, I slipped into the surface of the Underworld, bringing forth the lens of death. I reached for deadened minds. I sought the Gray General.

It was dark in the Underworld. I floated in the void, a subtle current pulling me downward, deeper toward final death. A light, distant like a moon, cast a gray gradient from life above.

While I lost perspective of the Living Realm, the Shades became easier to see. They formed a mass, dark phantoms overlapping and condensing, a web of control linking the individuals to the single Gray General. Threads bound them tight.

A stronger connection rose from the Gray General, disappearing into the distance. It was like a rope, woven from weaker threads. Presumably, it connected Inarus to the Gray General, but since the necromancer was far away, the cord would have limited impact. The Gray General would rely more on old commands than direct control.

They simply pursued the being with the most magic first. Which should have been me.

Except... there was something or someone brighter, bolder. They were like a star, pulsating with the power of their light, outshining me.

The Shades weren't pursuing me because I wasn't the best target. There was someone else, and they lured the Shades to the merchant's vessel.

My heart raced. Good people were aboard that ship, and too many had already died at Inarus's hand.

And Ayla.

She had made me laugh.

At least she had the handkerchief. She seemed strong and clever. Would it be enough? I couldn't afford to take the chance.

I rose to join the living and pointed to the ship. The Shades. "Pursue them."

"Looks pretty monstrous to me," Vanessa replied dryly, obeying all the same. "For the record, I think you're insane."

"It's possible."

We stared at the kraken formed from Shades. I had only seen the Shades on land, while in Gloom. I'd failed to imagine how terrifying they would be at sea.

Vanessa's eyes were wide. She had seen this before and had tried to describe it, to warn me. "Different day, same tricks," she mumbled.

“Looks like an effective tactic.”

“Unfortunately. So what’s your plan?”

“Move us as close as you safely can. Watch my body. I’ll be away, commanding them from the... the...”

“The Underworld?” she asked.

I nodded. It was still hard to say. To acknowledge what I was.

“I’ll take care of the ship,” she replied with uncharacteristic seriousness.

I sank into the Underworld, committing myself to the vision, and the details sharpened. Dark tentacles flowed, the undead moving in unnatural synchrony, tugging the ship into the kraken’s embrace.

I located the Gray General. They were easy to spot in the center of the web. They shifted from the base of the pillar, riding upward. Soon, they would board the ship.

I sought the bright light again, scanning for the source that drew the Shades to the merchant’s ship. It belonged to one of the archers—

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Ayla.

From this perspective, she was more light than form, her essence recognizable. Spicy, her signature.

She gave off such light, bursting with power. It was eager to escape her being. It illuminated the dark Underworld. Who is she? To glow like that.

The General reached the peak of the pillar. Soon they would slide down the tentacle, to Ayla.

“Come here,” I commanded, speaking to the undead. “Come to me.” It wasn’t a request. I filled my words with my will, directing the Shades, already confident that they would obey me.

I added a new cord, another thread in the web, and connected myself to the Gray General. “Brand me,” I ordered.

Ayla

Something changed. The battlefield shifted.

The Shades turned around, leaving the deck. They climbed back up the tentacles, rejoining the central body. The arms of the beast lifted, releasing the ship.

We met the sudden transition with stunned silence. Only when the last lingering Shade was struck down did anyone cheer. Even then, the sound was muted and

doubtful.

This didn't feel like victory.

Back in control, the ship sped up, running south to escape the influence of magic.

Walking to the stern of the ship, I watched the Shades. The kraken rode the surface, making its way to a smaller boat...

Zayne's boat.

He sat on the deck, eyes closed like he was meditating, giving no mind to his body. Aside from a water sprite, bright blue in her crow's nest, he was completely vulnerable.

Had he stopped the attack? Was this his magic? Now the golem sped toward him.

A new tentacle grew underwater, expanding from the central pillar. This new arm was thin, built from a single line of Shades. It was spindly and growing fast.

On the surface, the arm carried a different type of Shade. They were still humanoid but with flesh made from an ashy gray.

The water sprite didn't steer away. And Zayne did nothing. He was in danger.

My chest grew hot where his handkerchief lay under my armor. I couldn't tell if the swatch of fabric had done anything to protect me, but it certainly wanted me to protect him...

His sister embroidered it. The enchantment was as endearing as it was irritating; my sisters would never be protective of me.

“I can’t do anything,” I whispered to the enchanted fabric. With every moment, our ship raced farther from his. Others watched at the stern, but nobody intervened.

There was nothing to do but watch. It made my stomach twist, but I couldn’t turn away.

The handkerchief found a life of its own, twisting until it freed itself from my pocket. It rose, wiggling until it was touching my neck, pushing against my flesh, begging for action.

“Help him,” I heard, the voice firm and feminine. The command of a princess. A sister.

My heart thudded. With every moment, the skinny kraken arm grew closer to Zayne, approaching his ship. The strange gray Shade was at the lead.

Zayne did not open his eyes.

The handkerchief wiggled until it perched at my shoulder, folding itself into the form of a bird. It flapped its wings, going nowhere.

“I can’t help. I don’t have magic.”

“But I do,” the feminine voice replied.

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The fabric fluttered one final time, its silky surface brushing my cheek. A burst of lilac scented the air. I blinked—

The fabric faded, its magic spent. “Save my brother.”

I found myself standing on the deck of Zayne’s boat.

6 | Her Reward

Zayne

The Gray General was on their way to the Umbral Star. I waited, maintaining my necromantic command. They would brand me. I maintained a vague connection to the Living Realm and waited.

Suddenly, the light shifted, a new power nearing.

“Zayne?” someone asked. A voice I barely knew... Someone who was standing far too close.

I snapped my eyes open. “Ayla.”

She stumbled, the smaller boat rockier than the ship, and she looked at me, mouth gaping. “You’ve got to get out of here. Fast! There’s another tentacle, and it’s sneaking up on us. A creepy gray Shade is coming closer.” She turned to Vanessa. “Go!”

The sprite bit her lip and addressed me. “Is this part of your plan?”

“The gray Shade, yes. That’s my plan.” My gaze darted from Vanessa to Ayla. I recalled how brightly she had shone in the Underworld, how she had called the Shades. “Ayla, you shouldn’t be here.”

Ayla scrunched her face. “Well, I never asked to come here! It was your stupid handkerchief. It shadow-stepped me here. Or something.”

She seemed genuinely confused, her balance off and not just from sea legs. Her green eyes pierced through me.

This wasn’t safe for her.

“I’m sorry to be such an inconvenience,” she snapped. “But to be clear, I think this is your fault.”

“The handkerchief...”

“Bespelled. And not to protect the wearer, but to protect you. And because nobody thought to tell the handkerchief about your plan to... I don’t know, be eaten by Shades, it decided to send me here. To keep you safe.”

Eleanor must have done that. Overprotective to the last. “Nobody needs to save me,” I hissed. “I have this under control... So stay out of the way.”

“With pleasure.” Her gaze darkened as she stomped her feet. “I wish I had thrown that handkerchief into the sea,” she muttered.

“I’ve got work to do.”

She huffed.

Everything was already difficult, and I had no time for a female so shiny she attracted my prey.

I grunted, hoping it would release some tension, but I found little relief. I turned from her, looking at the sea. The Gray General would be near, and I needed focus.

I drifted to the Underworld. “Come here,” I reinforced my command.

Too late. The Gray General slipped from my grasp. Left untethered, they pursued a brighter target.

Ayla

I can't trust him. Not after this. Of course he deceived me—he's royal. I should have known better.

There I was, worrying about his safety. I was shadow-stepped by a damn handkerchief. And he wasn't even in danger?

“You should grab something,” the sprite said. The ship amplified her voice, reaching me despite the distance. She looked down from the crow's nest and motioned to a rope anchored to the central cabin. “It could get a little bumpy.”

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Bumpy? Could my situation be any bumpier?

“I’m Vanessa, by the way.”

“Ayla,” I gritted.

“Ayla...” Her gaze wandered to my ears and antlers. “Ohhh! Are you—”

“Shh. Your princeling hasn’t figured it out yet.”

“He’s not my princeling,” she snickered. “Still though, that’s going to be quite a surprise—”

—Stomp—

Something grabbed my waist. Air was forced from my lungs. I twisted, failing to turn. A Shade held me.

“Zayne!” the sprite cried, shrill and desperate. “Wake up!”

He obeyed, stirring on the far side of the boat. There was no time to wait for help. I grabbed a dagger and stabbed the Shade. Its grasp weakened, and I wiggled away.

Another Shade stepped into place. I kicked their chest. Grabbing my second dagger, I prepared my next attacks, plunging each dagger into the nearest two Shades. The attacks slowed them down, but without magical weapons, the Shades did not turn to ash.

They rebounded. Four Shades became six. More. I lost count. I kicked and slashed.

“Go. Away!” Vanessa cried. Water splashed across my face as a watery blast pushed another Shade off the boat. Yet the sprite’s attacks were elemental and unable to destroy the Shades. We needed a magical attack.

More rose, and the throng grew, crowding the boat.

Zayne fought from the stern of the ship. He swung an enchanted sword, turning Shades to ash. Realizing his weapon, the Shades directed excess members of their horde to him.

I misstepped, stumbled, a mistake amongst the chaos. My knee buckled—

The Shades sprung, unified in their unnatural synchrony. As one immobilized my arm, another grabbed me. More secured my legs.

Quickly, the Shades pinned me down. My throat constricted—the fear of being trapped. I squirmed and bit and clawed. Like hell would I be stopped now.

Yet their binding held. My breathing hastened.

If I couldn’t move, what did I have left? The handkerchief was gone. There was the ruby ring...

If only the Firewolf hadn’t forsaken me, absent ever since the night everything went to hell. She might have warned me of this danger.

I bucked again, using all my force. I freed my foot and kicked the nearest Shade, forcing them to fall into the sea. Two more rose to take its place, trapping me again. Holding me firmer.

They were going to brand me. Zayne had tried to explain. I hadn't quite grasped it then, but I did now. Once I had their Brand, I'd be forced into Gloom... to become one of them.

No, no, no, my heart pounded.

I fought. Without progress.

A new sound rose, piercing my panic. "Brand me."

Was that... Zayne? Shades filled my view, filling my nose with rot. I couldn't sense anything but the undead.

It sounded like him, but different, enhanced. This voice was ethereal, rising above the noise, sounding larger than the Living Realm. A regal command.

The sound of his authority... He calmed me.

I noticed the pressure at my hand. My fist clenched around my ring. It seemed warm. It was a small sensation, the pressure of the ring. Yet, I concentrated on it, inviting something to ground me.

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The focus kept me from screaming when the gray Shade approached.

Unlike the skeletal appearance of the other undead, this Shade had reformed skin, giving their body a smooth silhouette. The gray skin covered their eyes and mouth, leaving no orifices. It curved over every joint, softening the body's angles.

Worst of all, the way this one studied me, cocking its head... This Shade was smart.

“Brand me,” Zayne commanded again.

The Gray General loomed over me, the concave shape of his skull giving only the illusion of eyes. I clenched my fist, clutching the ring.

Nothing saved me. I drowned in the oblivion of those nonexistent eyes.

7 | Salvation

Zayne

Once again, I failed. Shades trapped me, forcing me into the role of an unwilling audience.

My entire body clenched as the Gray General approached Ayla. Trauma ricocheted through my bones. The pain echoed with Eleanor's capture. It shook with the worst of my childhood memories: the Collapse.

We were only ten when it happened. Eleanor and I had escaped together, saved by

our nursemaid. Sandra had been branded and slain in our escape.

Now Ayla faced the Brand.

I swallowed. Shook my head. I wouldn't sink to despair. My power remained.

Collecting calm, I descended into the Underworld, surrendering my physical body to the Shades holding me down.

"Come to me," I commanded the Gray General. They flinched, considering. They disobeyed.

And no wonder. Ayla's brilliance was like a star to my flame. This close to such a light, the Gray General focused on her.

"Come," I tried again.

This time, not even a flinch. He reached a hand toward her, hovering it over her heart, and her body grew slack. The branding was about to begin.

"Stop! I command you. You will not brand her."

Another flinch. She was spared for a moment.

"You will listen to me."

I nearly had it. Maybe.

Once more. "You want me instead."

A ruby red light joined with the sound of a crackling flame. The scent of bonfire and

cinnamon. Power surged from Ayla's hand.

Too much. Too late.

The surge of power was brilliant, and the Gray General lunged, drawn to this even brighter prize.

In the Underworld, the Brand looked like a lump of coal. It left the General's chest and raced down their arm. Out of their palm—the coal entered Ayla's heart.

“No!” I screamed. “Hear my order, Gray General.” My next command would end my attempt to be branded. I'd have to try this again. So be it. “I command you to turn to ash.”

As I spoke, something burst from the ruby light.

I couldn't see it, but I could sense it. Something new boarded our ship.

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The force formed from power and loyalty, born to be wild and hungry. This being was a divinity. Like the Shadow Throne of my home, or Teyr, a god of ageless vitality. Divine power ran deep in this being.

The being rushed behind my order, backing me. They surged my power. “I command you to turn to ash,” I said it again.

The Gray General disintegrated.

Only, we were too late. Ayla’s Brand remained.

Ayla

My Firewolf prowled the deck.

Even translucent, spectral in form, she was far more intimidating than the vague visions I’d seen before. She snarled, biting and thrashing. Her fiery attacks turned the remaining Shades to ash. Zayne, Vanessa, and I stilled, stunned, as we watched her work.

Once their gray leader had vanished, the Shades had become mindless. They wandered without purpose. I stood, watching, trembling and stunned, while she destroyed.

She was magnificent. Fire fanned from her chest, shoulders, and hackles, flaming hot and angry. Her fur was a wolfish gray but streaked with burnt orange.

To think she'd risen...from my ring.

I didn't understand how. I'd heard Zayne shout, and I'd heard him scream. There was a ruby light. When it faded, the Gray General was gone. And she was there.

Awe consumed me. The sight of my Firewolf left me stunned. Or maybe that was the cold Brand taking hold.

If only she'd arrived earlier.

My hand went to my chest. I couldn't see the Brand, not without removing my leathered armor, but I knew it was there. The Brand was a pressure, binding my chest tight. Already, it called me, beckoned me. It whispered dark threats that it would win my soul. It always won.

With a final snarl, the Firewolf turned the last Shade to ash. Her work done, she looked around, glancing at Zayne and Vanessa before settling her stare on me.

Her eyes were as green as my own, and they peered into me. After a lifetime apart, we finally saw each other. With anybody else, the sensation would have been terribly vulnerable.

I trusted her. Despite what happened at Mariana's coronation ball. Even if she had arrived too late, she meant me no harm.

She shook her gigantic frame, tail whipping. Sparks flew as her hackles settled. Her flames shrank, becoming welcoming and warm. She seemed smaller, less threatening. She padded toward me.

"Ayla," she said slowly, her deep voice reassuring. It was the first I had ever heard her speak.

“You’re... you’re here.” Hesitantly, I lifted my trembling hand, allowing her to sniff at my palm.

She flickered, a spectral figure passing through my hand. The ruby glowed as my fingers tingled.

“You can’t stay, can you?” I asked.

“I’ll send a turtle.”

“A turtle?” I asked, but she was already gone.

8 | A Heart Turned to Coal

Zayne

With the Firewolf gone and the Shades destroyed, the deck of the Umbral Star seemed larger. Especially now that the divine being had faded.

“Who are you?” I asked Ayla yet again. She looked up at me, eyes wide, like she had forgotten anyone else was there.

When the Firewolf had spoken with her, she had softened, becoming warm and welcoming. She had so many faces—from the timid girl she’d introduced herself as to the warrior I had seen in action. Now this. Someone vulnerable.

She scowled, all gentleness gone. She thumped her fist over her heart, her voice breaking as she cried, “I’m branded?”

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“It... it wasn’t supposed to be you.” I wondered if she could ever look at me with the same softness she showed the Firewolf. Especially now. My whole plan felt foolish. I had taken the risks, but Ayla faced the consequences. “I was supposed to be branded. The Brand was supposed to lead me to Eleanor.”

“You knew they would come,” she realized. “That handkerchief was the bait. You knew someone in the tavern would see it—that they would track you and send Shades after you. This whole fiasco, it’s your fault.”

I shrugged guiltily.

“You better fix it. You better fixme,” she gritted. “You caused this. You and that ugly handkerchief.”

It wasn’t ugly. Eleanor had embroidered it just for me. I stepped toward Ayla, my hand open, eager to have the handkerchief returned. “If you hate it so much, I want it back.”

“I... I can’t. It vanished. After bringing me here.”

Oh. It was irreplaceable. My hand quivered, and it clenched into a fist, hardening with the loss.

Eleanor. How was I going to find her if I didn’t have the Brand? Everything was ruined.

Except...

Except Ayla was branded.

A new plan began to form. One that would still allow me to save my twin sister. It wasn't a plan to be proud of, but Eleanor's life was at stake. The future of the Shadow Court depended on her—and I was its prince.

“Vanessa, continue our journey north,” I said. Then I motioned Ayla toward the boat's single cabin. “I have something that should help.”

Her eyes sparkled with relief. “You have a cure?”

It wasn't the cure she wanted. “Yes,” I answered.

Ayla

Like the rest of the boat, the cabin was small. A bed filled the entire back wall, consuming most of the space. A desk was bolted to one wall and a wardrobe to the other. Cabinets lined the walls.

The bed had proper sheets and thick, fur-lined blankets, offering warmth against the sea's cool mist. Plush pillows lined the back wall. Clothes hung from the wardrobe, and several antique books were tied down against the desk.

I took up most of the standing room, so when Zayne entered, he had to press himself against the wall to reach the desk. He settled on the bolted stool.

“I'll need to, umm...” He blushed. “To apply the ashflower, I'll need to access the Brand. So you'll need to, uh, remove your armor.”

The Brand was right over my heart, between my breasts. He needed to see that? “That is, by far, the worst invitation to undress I've ever heard,” I said.

My bawdy words rose from discomfort, but they were already spoken. I grinned like I'd said it on purpose.

He blinked up at me, obviously flustered. "Was there a better way to say it? I'm trying to give you a magical treatment. I don't want to see your body." He paused, shaking his head. "Not that there is anything wrong with your body! You're quite breathtaking—"

"It's fine," I said, saving him from further embarrassment. He found me breathtaking? With my pitiful antlers? "I wasn't serious."

"Oh. I'll look away while you get ready."

"Right." I swallowed.

The overcoat of my leather armor was tightly laced, and I took stock of my circumstances as I released the bindings.

I had seen my Firewolf—she was real. And now she was going to send me a turtle? She gave me a proper direction. It was my first goal that went beyond escaping to a fae fiddle bar. Only now, instead of playing merchant's cousin, my traveling companion was the Shadow Prince. Zayne.

I didn't know what to think of him. We had fought together, his plans unraveling with mine, tangling us together. He deceived me, as I deceived him.

His botched plan had branded me, and I hated him for it. Yet there was also pity. There was tragedy in his childhood, in the Collapse. It worried me that he wanted the Brand to find his sister.

He was still hiding something. As was I.

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I tugged a cord through the final eyelet in my armor, loosening the binding. My body tightened, anxious.

I was branded. I hadn't seen the damage, but I could feel it. My heart was heavy, pulled by a calling to travel elsewhere.

With my armor gaping around me, the sea air made my skin clammy. My hands trembled as I lifted the leather away.

My sweaty tunic stuck to my skin as I pulled it off, revealing my tighter undershirt. The tank cut to a soft V between my breasts. Carefully, afraid of what I might find, I tugged the V downward, exposing the space above my heart.

The Brand was easy to spot. Uncomfortably so.

The skin wasn't normal. My body was...wrong. Wrong, like the gray skin of the Shade general. My muscles clenched as I examined it closer.

The mark was nonintrusive, the size of a thumbprint. It was gray, the color of ash, and it reflected the light, shiny and slick. I ran a finger across it, finding the skin unnaturally smooth.

My stomach turned. I'm broken. The blemish summoned dark thoughts. Bastard. Flawed. My mother's mistake.

Heart racing, I stumbled, falling to a seat on the bed.

“Are you okay?” Zayne asked.

“I’m fine.” I waved him away. “I need a moment.”

“Okay.” At first, he focused on the Brand, but soon his gaze wandered. To the swell of my breasts, my exposed midriff, and down... A flush claimed his face. “Sorry,” he muttered, turning away.

“Don’t worry about that. Not now,” I replied. Truthfully, I hadn’t minded. Teyr, the heat of his wandering gaze had distracted me, stopping the spiral of my thoughts. Instead of worrying, I wondered at his handsome face.

Another glance at my defacing Brand reminded me of my bleak circumstances.

“Okay,” I breathed. “Is it supposed to look like this?”

“I didn’t see Eleanor’s mark until it had reached her collarbones...” He considered clinically. He stared at the mark for a long second, evaluating, before daring to make glancing eye contact. “But yes, it looked the same.”

Eleanor. So it had been his sister who he watched fall victim to the Brand.

But did he say... “Collarbones?” I asked. “You mean it grows?”

He nodded. “They branded her at midday—we defeated the Shades and thought we were safe. By the time we settled for the night, it had expanded to her neck and shoulders.”

I breathed, processing that. “And that’s when the Brand claimed her soul?”

“No, the Brand took her in the middle of the night...” He paused, unwilling to

continue.

“Tell me. I need to know what to expect.”

He sighed. “That night, I woke to her scream. It was like another being controlled her body, jerking and twisting awkwardly. In the Underworld, I saw her soul contained, trapped in a jar. Then she was gone. She ran away, racing with the speed of the possessed.”

The Brand seemed to relish in my discomfort. It threatened me. “Darkness is inevitable.” The words resonating in my mind, I shivered.

“I tried to follow,” Zayne added. “I chased after her, but she moved too fast and... I lost track of her, somewhere north of Issa Neu.”

Issa Neu? “You were on the Isle of Shadow? You traveled into Gloom? Why?”

He didn’t answer. “The point is, since then, I’ve found a cure.”

“Thisashflower?” I asked. I had never heard of it before he mentioned it.

He nodded, opened a satchel tied to his waist, and showed me his prize. The petals were tiny, forming five-pointed stars small enough to sit on my fingertip. Their vibrant red coloring was reminiscent of flowing lava. “I asked Teyr for a way to save Eleanor, and he gave me this.”

That surprised me. Reaching Teyr’s volcano was a perilous pilgrimage, one that killed more than it saved. It was a journey made in desperation, but those who returned were gifted Teyr’s vitality. “He gave you a cure for the Brand?”

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Zayne nodded. “By placing this on your Brand, I’ll be able to use my shadow magic to draw the Brand’s power from your body. Under my direction, the Brand will consume the flower instead of you. At least, in theory.”

He hadn’t tested it.

Regardless, he squared his shoulders and pinched a few of the flowers between his fingertips. “Are you ready?”

“Under the circumstances, I’m not sure I have a choice.”

“Hold still,” he directed. “I’ll do the rest.”

I braced myself, clutching the edge of his bed, as he dropped to his knees before me. So close, he smelled of cedar and amber, grounded and heavenly.

He pressed the petals to my chest. Like a warm hearth, it soothed the ache of my broken heart. The scent of fallen rain rose from our contact.

“Shade’s Brand, leave and let Ayla be,” he ordered, his voice shifting in the same way he had commanded the Shades. The scent of rain intensified with his words, his magical signature shifting as he spoke. He said it again, his dark eyes growing wide with power as he repeated, “Shade’s Brand, leave and let Ayla be.”

Zayne pressed his hand to me, and I had to stop myself from leaning closer. I was all too eager. Eager for him, his words, or the cure. Maybe all three.

His fingertips grazed my flesh, caressing where my skin felt bad, his touch promising I would be okay.

He leaned closer and made eye contact. He said it a third time, his words shaking me. "Let Ayla be."

His fingers became hot, injecting heat. It stretched me, pulling wrists and ankles. It woke something in my spine. My back shifted, electricity rushing upward, rising from tailbone to skull. I bucked under its demand.

The rush left me gasping for air. I gasped, rampant with release. My body cooled. My core clenched.

I shivered as the last of the sensation passed.

"Looks like it worked," Zayne said, drawing his fingers away. The distance between us grew, becoming empty, and I managed a glance at his handiwork.

The Brand was now the size of a freckle. "It's smaller," I agreed. Only... I thought he would cure me. Maybe we had delayed the Brand's expansion, but it remained on my skin.

I wasn't sure if I should thank Zayne or slap him. Either way, I missed his contact. I leaned closer.

Zayne flushed, pulling away. He pointed to the wardrobe. "Help yourself to my tunics. They're clean."

Suddenly my undershirt felt far too small. Our moment much too intimate. We barely knew each other, but he wielded this power over me.

“Thanks.” I lunged for the wardrobe, quickly pulling on a silky black tunic. It pooled around me, hiding me. “Do you think you could try again? Maybe you could make the Brand disappear correctly?”

“In theory...” He glanced away nervously. “But that’s enough for now. My magical reserve is low, and I need to rest. It’ll be fine for now.”

He was making excuses. I could hear it, the rushed tongue of a liar. “You don’t have enough ashflower,” I realized.

“Teyr promised I would have exactly what I needed,” he answered.

Divine gifts were irreplaceable. My heart raced. The tiny Brand seemed to flicker in my frustration.

“So...” I squirmed, realizing what he intended. “You’re making me your guide. To Eleanor.”

“Yes.” He had the decency to stare at the back wall as he answered. “It’s the best way forward.”

“The best way for you!” I raced for the door, but there was nowhere to go. We were on a boat. “You can’t just kidnap me!”

He flinched. “I didn’t mean...”

“Clearly, like your last ‘great idea,’ you haven’t thought this through. Because if I don’t willingly go with you, it’s kidnapping. Someone is waiting for me at Port Saundrys. They’ll sound an alarm if I don’t show up.”

“Sound an alarm?” His brow furrowed. “Do you know why the Shades pursued you?”

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“What do you mean?”

“Shades are drawn to the strongest magic. That was supposed to be me. Yet in the Underworld, you shone like a star. How are you so powerful?”

“Me? Not possible. I’m no one. I’ve never had magic. For Teyr’s sake, I’m half human. My magic is definitely not outshining yours.”

“You are not a nobody. Nobodies don’t go into hiding while crossing the Rift. They can’t fight like you. Nobodies don’t have people waiting for them in Port Saundrys.”

I huffed. All my life I’d wanted to be someone, and now, I couldn’t imagine being anyone. I clenched my fist. “Maybe it’s the ring.”

He stood, closing the space between us. “Stop deflecting and tell me the truth. Who are you?”

For the first time, I felt threatened by him. My heart pounded. He had me cornered, and I was on his boat. His ashflower controlled my future.

Grasping what power I had left, I threw my shoulders back. “I’m Ayla, firstborn daughter of Queen Aveline of Valterra, third of her name. I am the scorn of King Consort Grayson. I have been given no surname, nor title, nor inheritance. I am best known as the bastard princess.”

His lips twisted in recognition. “I have heard of you. Part-fae, red hair—”

I didn't let him finish. Grabbing my armor, I rushed for the door. "I really do have a friend waiting for me in Port Saundyr, so I'm going to step outside and inform Vanessa that the port will be our next destination."

I slammed the door closed behind me, clenching my throat to hold in a sob.

Zayne was a miserable princeling. To think he could turn my Brand into his compass. I couldn't believe I'd felt sorry for him, that I'd allowed his touch to run so thoroughly in my body.

No matter. I gathered my anger, twisting it with betrayal. I used the power to bury my attraction to Zayne deep, deep, deep into my heart, a heart already turned to coal.

9 | Becoming Stone

Zayne

Ayla slammed the door shut. That hadn't gone well. It couldn't possibly have gone well.

An exiled prince and a bastard princess. What a pair we made. Placed within courts and intrigue, we were tools to be used and then forgotten.

I should have recognized her, realized who she was. I had been so distracted with my plans I hadn't noticed the importance of someone right before me.

That flush of receptive warmth she'd shown while I healed the Brand, it was the most she would ever give me. It was the most I could afford to feel for her. To finish my quest, I had to become a prince of stone.

While healing her, I had struggled to hold back. My palm over her heart, I longed to

give her release. The way she'd responded to me, my touch...

If she were only a female, and I were only a male. If only the Shadow Court were secure. But we weren't. And my court wasn't.

The fate of the Isles was at stake.

Or so I believed.

Eleanor and I had journeyed to the Shadow Court because we believed we could make things better. We believed that if she claimed the throne, she could change the tide. With the powers of the Shadow Throne, she could shift Gloom. She could face Inarus and end his nightmare of Shades.

It was a claim the other courtiers doubted. Nobody had seen Inarus since the Collapse, and only a few witnesses lived to say how the event had started. Most denied claims that the Shades were undead, since that meant accepting necromancy was real.

Most assumed that the Collapse had simply ruined the Isle of Shadow—those who visited never returned—and that was the end of public interest.

Yet Eleanor was certain the throne waited for her. She said she could feel it, the heart of the Shadow Court, asking her to return home. She was determined.

And so, because my twin believed she could make this right, because I trusted and supported her—we had journeyed alone.

How did I explain that to my unexpected guest? That I was risking my life because of my sister's hunch? This was my duty, but Ayla's life was tangled in it.

A true prince of stone wouldn't have told her about the ashflower. They would have sent her away, let her prepare herself to become a Shade. My heart wasn't hard enough. There were cracks and soft spots.

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Bracing against the cool mist, I joined Ayla and Vanessa on deck. As one, both ladies turned to me. The scowl on Ayla's face, the betrayal, twisted my heart.

Vanessa's lips drew a thin line. "I won't be part of a kidnapping."

"Neither will I," I admitted, lifting my hands in the signal of defeat. "Take us to Port Saundrys."

"And my Brand?" Ayla asked. "You'll heal it?"

I shook my head. "This gives me time to think. And you should see your friend. Besides, if we are traveling together, I'll need to pick up more supplies."

"Traveling... together?" Ayla asked.

"I'm hoping you'll choose to stay."

She laughed. "I don't think you can call it a choice if you won't heal my Brand."

"It's not fair. I know." I glared at her. "Life isn't fair."

"I know that."

"Then why do you expect me to be fair?"

She met my gaze, her green eyes sharp with hurt. "Because I thought you were different."

“Sorry to break it to you, but I’m not. I’m as ruthless as they come.” Or at least I should be.

“Fine,” Ayla gritted. “Vanessa says we’ll reach the port by sunset. If you need me, I’ll be resting in the cabin.” She stormed off, leaving Vanessa and me alone.

“That went well,” Vanessa said.

“You think?”

“Well, only one member of our crew is branded. That’s a win.”

“How optimistic of you.”

“I do my best,” she preened. “Now excuse me for being pushy, but shouldn’t you go comfort her or something? Tell her why this mission is so damn important.”

I bristled under her complaint. “I’ll explain later. She needs the chance to think before learning that the future of the Isles is possibly in our hands.”

Vanessa hummed thoughtfully. “I think you’re underestimating her.”

“Or maybe she’ll think Eleanor is crazy. Like the others.”

The afternoon passed in relative ease, the mist giving way to sunshine. On a different day, it would have been pleasant.

Ayla remained in the cabin, and I swallowed my impulse to remove the Brand completely. I couldn’t spend more ashflower on her if she wouldn’t stay. It was foolish to have wasted what I did.

My quest was larger than infatuation. I focused on the duty of a prince, my responsibilities to my court and loyalty to my liege lady.

I distracted myself, arranging crates at the bow of the boat to form benches. By adding a barrel, I formed a makeshift table. With nothing else to do—not daring to retrieve my books from the cabin—I lay upon the deck, resting on its surface.

Hours later, as we approached the docks of Port Saundyr, Ayla finally emerged from the cabin. She had donned her armor and carried her assortment of weapons.

I noticed her empty quiver. “I have spare arrows, if you’d like to take any,” I offered, immediately regretting it. I didn’t want to be nice to her.

“I’ll buy my own at port, thanks,” she replied. “But I took a scarf from your wardrobe. It’s not enchanted, is it?”

“No, it’s safe.”

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She wrapped it around her head, hiding her hair, antlers, and ears like the night we met.

“You really don’t like being recognized, do you?” I asked.

“Can you say you’re different?” she asked, glancing at the shadows billowing around my feet. “Unless, of course, you’re trying to get the Shade’s attention.”

I pulled my shadows tighter, still relieved to have them back.

“Weird question,” she continued. “Have you seen a turtle? The Firewolf said she would send one.”

The Firewolf. She was yet another loose thread, another mystery. The beast was clearly a divinity, one linked to Ayla. Ayla believed she was no one, but I saw so much more.

“If you stay with me, we can seek your Firewolf,” I offered suddenly. “Assuming this turtle finds us, and it doesn’t take us far from our route.”

“Really?” she asked.

I hesitated. This seemed unnecessary, too kind. But maybe this would give Ayla a reason to willingly join my quest. Besides, the Firewolf might be useful. “The Firewolf saved us. It’s the least I can do.”

She smiled, the first time all afternoon, and the sight brightened my mood. “That

would be—” She frowned as she remembered our circumstances. “Okay. Thanks for the offer. I’ll keep it in mind.”

We shared a diplomatic silence as Vanessa approached the docks. The port city came into clarity, illuminated in the sunset.

Travelers filled Staria Bay under the dusky sky. Fishing boats and vessels for those traveling between isles. Though she tried to hide it, Ayla’s gaze turned bright as she took in the activity. Rightfully so, the bay was a gem of the Isles.

Distant mountains radiated purple while the sea turned a brilliant orange. Fae lights twinkled, the evidence of civilization. The scent of food, slow-cooked meats, wafted through the air, joined by the twang of music. The city was bustling, ready for dinner and dancing.

Protected from the worst of the sea winds, Port Saundrys supported a vast network of docks. Countless craftsmen prepared their fae goods while merchants moved them to the other isles and south, to the human continent. Ever since the Starlit King invested in the infrastructure, it had become an economic hub.

It was also the gateway to the rest of the Starlit Isle, the de facto political center of the Isles. Farther inland, the Starlit King ruled from his capital city. While he was only the king of this single isle, the other courts sent delegates to his capital.

After the Collapse, I had been raised on the Starlit Isle, a royal fosterling in the king’s care. It was a poor fit—a shadow prince grieving his exile was not suited to such a bright court.

Vanessa steered us to an available dock, the type common for boats like ours. These boats, usually owned by sprites, were available for hire by those seeking easy travel between the Isles.

I handed Vanessa a coin. “I think this will cover our dockage fee.”

She accepted it. “Can you also pick me up a book? Something spicy. And don’t forget that I want a new anchor! The type with protective shielding.”

“Got it.”

“Are you going ashore?” Ayla asked.

“I have shopping to do. Besides, I want to make sure you reach your friend. I assume that they’ll be waiting for you at the merchants dock?”

“Yes.”

“I can show you the way.”

“Umm, thank you.”

“Pay attention to where we are,” I said, motioning to the surrounding ships. I pointed to the end of the berth where there was a tavern and a clothes shop. “Tomorrow, we sail at noon.”

“We? I’m not—”

“Vanessa and I sail at noon. And that’s how long you have to decide what you’re going to do.”

10 | The Merchant Prince

Ayla

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Until noon? Tomorrow? I tried not to bristle.

His recent offers, to help me find the Firewolf and to guide me to the merchants' dock, were genuinely useful. And I hated him for it.

While in his cabin, it had been easy to reframe his character in the worst possible light. The deceitful Prince of Shadows, foster child and pawn of the Starlit King. He had deceived me, led me astray, and created the circumstances that led to my Brand. Even now, he lorded the power of his antidote over me.

It annoyed me that he was helpful. It irritated me that, for a moment, I believed his intentions were anything but selfish.

With his shadows and my scarf, we felt thick as thieves. An exiled prince and a bastard princess, sailing into Port Saundrys—it had far more poetry than it should have.

Soon I would see Rhett. I had sent my merchant friend only a brief message through our paired speaking stones, just enough to establish a rendezvous point. I wanted to explain my situation in person.

Maybe Rhett could make sense of this. Or at the very least, I could spend the night at his apartment, somewhere safe and away from Zayne. I needed space to pull myself together.

The docks of Port Saundrys were vibrant, distractingly, delightfully so. As sunset turned to dusk, the evening's revelry grew. Music flowed from every establishment,

mixing on the cobbled streets.

Steady fae lights illuminated rows of several-story apartment buildings as we crossed through a quieter district and toward the main boardwalk.

Fae and sprites, trolls and satyrs, shifters and humans. Together, they crowded the stalls, shouting as they shopped. Restaurants overfilled, their seating pouring into the streets. Street performers played at every corner.

It was merry. Enough to make me smile.

Rhett said he would meet me at The Orchard. The pub was easy to find, central and brightly colored. Trees ascended through the structure, and ripe fruits—oranges, apples, avocados, and cherries—dripped from the sides of the building. Enchanted fruit, free of disease and rot.

“This way.” I pointed, leading Zayne to the pub. He’d been quiet throughout the walk, watchful and aware. He stayed the right distance away, close enough to have my back but respecting my personal space.

The trees grew from within the pub, their trunks providing a framework of pillars. A fiddler played a vibrant tune from the stage, filling the pub with a jubilant air. A few couples danced. And one of them...

Ah, there’s Rhett.

He danced with a younger male, laughing in his embrace. His feet tapped to the speedy rhythm, as graceful as the day I met him.

He looked so handsome, so comfortable with his magic at his beck, like Valterra had dulled him. His blond hair lifted with life, and his tall, muscled build became

somehow more graceful. Here, he positively sparkled.

The sight of him, the pull of the song. They invited me. My nightlife had always been a distraction. Here was no different, and the energy lured me closer to the dance floor. I approached on instinct, drawn to the release.

Rhett saw me and gasped. He said something to his partner and ran to me. He pulled my hand, grasping it between his. “You made it!”

It was such a relief to see him, to hear his voice. I blinked back tears as we hugged. He lifted me, spinning me around in a dance that wasn’t one.

Back on my feet, I tried to answer, but a woman joined the fiddler. She began to sing, her voice overpowering all conversation. “Once, the sea sought a lover, and so she bedded the sky.”

I pulled at his wrist. “We need to talk,” I tried to say. He understood well enough, waving farewell to his partner and following my lead.

Zayne had stayed near the door of the pub, watching the whole thing with a scowl on his face. He seemed practically invisible within his shadows, but I was glad he had stayed. I needed Rhett to meet Zayne—it would help him understand the depth of my troubles.

I pulled Rhett forward, closer to Zayne. Rhett acknowledged the prince with a quirky grin. Zayne’s frown deepened. Rhett’s broad shoulders and bright charisma countered Zayne’s shadowy looks.

Zayne spoke first. “Are you two...? When you said friend, I assumed...”

I smirked. “You assumed my friend was a girl?”

“I suppose I did.”

“Well, you shouldn’t assume. It’s a poor look on you.” Why was I being so playful?

“Rhett is my friend. Maybe my only one.”

Rhett frowned, contemplating the space between Zayne and me. Then he found his sparkle again, pointing toward a free table. “Maybe it’s best if we take a seat near the back. Ayla, my dear, I fear you’ve got some explaining to do.”

We settled at the table, and with a signal from Rhett, a bartender served us, pouring glasses of mead. The music still rang with a steady beat, and I tapped my feet.

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“Nobody objects if I pull the shadows around us?” Zayne asked. “Nobody will hear us. They’ll barely see us.”

“Shadow magic?” Rhett asked. “If you’re able, yes.”

Zayne responded by pulling darkness closer.

Rhett glanced at me. “This is worse than I imagined, isn’t it? You two. Together. I mean, assuming you are...”

“Zayne, the Shadow Prince,” he said, meeting Rhett’s playful gaze with a cold stare. “And Ayla has already told me who she is, so let’s not waste our time with pretenses.”

“The merchant’s ship...” Rhett looked around the pub. “Now that it’s docked, it should be busier in here. What happened?”

“Zayne is what happened,” I replied. “The ship is safe, but they had to retreat. The only casualty was me.”

Rhett straightened, muscles tensing.

“I had my reasons,” Zayne replied. “But first, how do you two know each other? Ayla, what was your original plan?”

I told him part of the truth, not mentioning I was on the run. “Rhett forged my travel papers, and I escaped the palace. We planned to meet here.”

“And how did you two meet? A common fae meeting the bastard princess? Seems unlikely.”

“Now, that’s a good story,” Rhett interjected before I could deflect. “And one I’ve never told before.”

“But—” I interrupted.

“Oh, let me tell it. Your reactions to Zayne are far too broody for my liking. Whatever is happening between you two... well, it’s interesting, but we clearly need an icebreaker.”

Zayne looked at me, eyebrows raised, clearly entertained by Rhett. Rhett had that sort of charm.

“I am also a prince,” Rhett began. “A prince of merchants. Ayla and I met while I was working in Valterra. One evening, like any fae with starlight in his feet, I went dancing. And then one day—about three years ago—who should I find but Ayla.”

He smiled at me, recalling that day, waiting for me to pick up the beat of the story. He wanted to play. Fine. Hell, it might even be fun.

I grasped for the version of me that was the patron of fae fiddle bars. Carefree and fun. I leaned back in the chair, swirled my drink, and allowed a sultry smile to emerge. “My dear friend, I remember it fine. I lost myself in the rhythm that night. The fiddler played like fire while the wine was fine as desire.”

“We danced the night away.”

“Well into the morning.”

“You lasted until morning,” Rhett countered. “Once that fine chap worked up the courage to kiss me, I was done for.” He fanned himself, all drama.

I laughed. With Rhett by my side, the laughter tumbled from me.

By now, Zayne grinned, the expression cockeyed, clearly torn between amusement and his constant state of annoyance. “What happened next?” he eventually egged Rhett on.

“Well, the next night,” Rhett continued, “there was a grand ball. With the Shades hampering trade, the royal family was eager to celebrate and honor the premier fae merchants.”

Zayne smirked, understanding where this was heading. “And Ayla was there?”

I nodded. “I was part of the royal entourage hosting the ball.”

“Ayla had worn her scarf at the fiddle bar, while at the ball she had her antlers on full display. Still, I knew it was her. Recognized her the moment the orchestra played ‘When the Wolf Walks into Town.’ Her dancing gave her away.”

Zayne played the eager audience and asked, “So what happened at the ball?”

“Rhett asked me to dance.” I laughed, lifting my cup and toasting him. “What a bastard.”

Rhett clinked his glass to mine. “The look on your face!”

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“I played along, like I didn’t recognize him.”

“You were so beautiful,” Rhett added. “So poised, almost a perfect princess—at least until they played the fae songs.”

I scowled, as I always did when he said princess. He knew that, and he laughed, as he always did.

“Princess...” he said, sobering suddenly. He turned to Zayne. “And a prince.”

I swallowed.

Rhett finished the story. “I made her dance with me three times before I admitted I recognized her. It was fun to watch her sweat. And I suppose the rest is history.”

I smiled, thinking of all the nights I had spent dancing with Rhett. “Then, about a year ago, we started planning...this.”

I looked about the pub and stilled. I had lost myself to our storytelling, only now reality struck. I was swapping tales with my oldest friend—we were together. I was here. Despite the many dangers, I had made it to the Starlit Isle.

The circumstances were nothing like I’d imagined.

As if sensing my darker mood, the fiddler paused between songs. The humor died.

Rhett must have seen it on my face. He looked at his empty cup. “Can you lower that

shadow?” he asked Zayne. “I have a feeling we’re going to need a second drink to finish this conversation.”

We ordered another round and settled again. The next leg of our conversation lacked the rhythm of before.

I did my best to explain my circumstances, Zayne also adding where he could. There were parts of it he understood better than me.

At least Rhett had my back, clarifying everything. “So the Shades attacked Ayla because she was the brightest being in the Underworld?” he asked.

Zayne agreed. “I wanted them to brand me—”

“Then this handkerchief shadow-stepped Ayla into your boat because it appeared that you were in danger?”

“Exactly.”

“That’s when you lost control of the Shades?”

“I got...distracted.” Zayne tried not to sound sultry, but the fact remained. He blamed me for what happened, for worrying about him.

Me and my big heart. Him and his stupid handkerchief.

“Will you swear this is true with an oath?” Rhett asked.

“I’ll swear it,” Zayne replied.

I leaned forward. I’d only heard a fae oath once, when Rhett promised to help me

reach the Isles.

I had never given an oath. When we were children, Mariana had tried to trick me into it, but the Firewolf warned me. Mother had been furious when she found out—it was one of the few times she'd disciplined Mariana, the Princess Heir and my half sister, because of her treatment of me.

Fae oaths were dangerous. They bound the speaker and recipient with the Isles' magic. The consequences of dishonesty were diverse and often cruel.

Zayne didn't hesitate. "I give my oath that I never meant to involve Ayla. That I tried to keep the Shades from her. Whoever she really is, she's so bright they can't ignore her."

His words fell, landing with gravity, binding him to them. Whoever she really is, she's so bright choed in my ears. Nothing shifted as the oath held true.

Zayne continued, "I give my oath that the Firewolf fueled my curse, allowing me to destroy the Gray General. I swear that ashflower works as I've described, and Teyr gave me exactly enough."

"What about the Firewolf?" I asked.

He nodded. "If Ayla joins me on this quest, I give my oath that—if it is on our route—we can find her Firewolf."

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I smiled, satisfied he would swear to this. I thought he would stop there.

“And when this is done,” he continued, “I give my oath, I will heal Ayla by any means available.”

His oath didn’t mean my safety. His promise didn’t mean he would heal me. But I heard more security in his words than I felt facing the Brand alone. I looked to Rhett, curious if he heard a trick to Zayne’s words.

Rhett’s brow furrowed as he sorted through the assurances. “That’ll do,” he answered. He sighed. “Damn, this is messy.”

Surprising myself, I laughed. I didn’t know what else to do. This was messy. And I still hadn’t told either of them why I was on the run.

Yet here I was, with these two. It suddenly seemed ridiculous. My little chortle turned into a full belly laugh, and then tears rose to my eyes. I didn’t know what was funny, only that the whole situation was absurd.

Zayne lifted his cup. “Here’s to a very messy month,” he said dryly.

I could drink to that. I clapped my cup to his. For a moment, there was silence, almost friendly.

Rhett cleared his throat. He stood, taking a step toward Zayne. He towered over the seated prince. “Here’s what I propose,” he said. “Ayla stays at my apartment tonight.”

Zayne stood as well, meeting Rhett's full height. Darkness gathered around Zayne, amplifying his bearing. "And what happens next?" he asked.

Rhett shrugged. "Ayla decides what she wants to do. You sail away, tomorrow at noon. And until then, you're going to stay the fuck away from her," he threatened.

Zayne's shadows shifted. For a time, everything had seemed conversational. Rhett's dark tone felt out of place in the vibrant fiddle bar.

"Fine," Zayne answered. He tossed a few coins on the table and gave me one last, lingering look. "Tomorrow. Noon. That's the longest I'll wait." With a turn, he faded into shadows, stepping into the night.

11| Hunger

Ayla

Soon I'd be a captive.

Technically, that wasn't true. Zayne had shared his ash and had sworn an oath. I would be protected. I had access to a boat and a chance to find my Firewolf.

Even if I was branded, I had a choice.

A rotten choice.

I tossed, turning on Rhett's couch. My legs pressed against Rimu, Rhett's gigantic dog, and the beast snorted. The dog took up most of the couch, generating way too much heat. Shame he was so sweet. I scratched his head, and he rolled closer to me.

For the second night in a row, I struggled to sleep. I turned to my other side. Still

nothing.

The streets below were finally quiet, nightlife giving way to the darkness before dawn.

Rhett and I had lingered at the fiddle bar, our dancing dampened, not quite the celebratory night we had always planned. My Brand dulled the brightness, and every time I tried to tell Rhett about what had happened at Mariana's coronation ball, the truth burned in my throat. We celebrated the best we could.

Once we reached his home, I crashed on his couch. Drained from dancing, my buzz gave way to sleep. It wasn't the type of sleep that lasted through the night.

With a sigh, I pushed the blanket away and went to Rhett's washroom. A fae light turned on, dim and easy on the eyes. The shower had hot water. For such a simple apartment, Rhett enjoyed more luxuries than my palace bedroom.

And now, looking in that mirror, at the base of my neck... my Brand peeked through. Frightened, I tugged off my tunic—Zayne's tunic—and considered the Brand anew.

It had grown since I'd last checked. The gray skin once reduced to a freckle now stretched from the base of my neck to my belly button, extending to the edges of my breasts.

I swallowed and watched my throat bob, shifting blemished skin that wasn't skin. Panic rose, belly to throat. "I'm inevitable," the Brand seemed to say.

I pulled the tunic on before the sight made me sick. Some fucking choice.

From the sound of light snores, Rhett slept soundly in his bedroom. Rimu snorted loudly, like he wanted my company back on the couch.

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I couldn't sleep. I couldn't stay. I had to go.

My departure had to be silent. I couldn't bear to wake Rhett and say goodbye so soon after our reunion. So, munching on a heel of bread, I quietly gathered my belongings.

There was a new pack next to my armor. Rhett knew me too well, knew I wouldn't say goodbye. Instead, he'd left a note.

Ayla, darling, please take this. There's food and coin inside. Shops open at sunrise, buy what you need. I always carry my speaking stone—please let me know when you're safe. Forever your prince, Rhett.

A sob escaped me, followed by a swallowed scream of frustration. My whole body shook, and I fell, stumbling to my knees. Rhett had known the perfect farewell gift: a private exit.

The dog snored, falling back asleep. The sound resonated for a moment. He snored again.

I was truly alone. No one to perform for, and no need to act. My body quivered in the vacuum, and I began to shake.

I'd been running for so long. First from my family, and then from Zayne. Last night I'd danced, fleeing my fears. In the dark before dawn, the shaking subsided, and I finally held still.

I had so little control over my life. I'd lost everything. I'd gained a Brand. A

Firewolf. An unexplained brightness. Everything was confusing and awful, beautiful and new.

I shuddered one last time. When had the tears begun to fall? They covered my cheeks.

I gulped, drowning. The air was too thick.

My next breath was sticky, and I tried again. With each breath, my lungs moved more smoothly.

For so long, I'd worked toward this freedom. First planning this escape with Rhett, but balking before starting. Then my rushed decision to flee, running from what Mariana had done—what I had done.

I'd been so focused on the act of reaching a damn fiddle bar, the fantasy of putting responsibilities on hold, that I had forgotten what I really wanted.

Freedom. I had longed to leave my royal role and become someone fae. Fate brought me Zayne.

I didn't want to join Zayne because I had no better ideas. If I joined him, it had to be because I wanted to.

It was tempting to stay here, to wallow in dancing and drink until the Brand took me. It could be fun to ignore my problems.

Avoidance was a persona I knew well, trapped in the palace, losing myself in training and nightlife. I was skilled at ignoring discomfort. I was familiar with wrestling a cage.

It was a cage I needed to melt down and destroy. I had hesitated, afraid of being burned. But I did it anyhow. Now I stood on the Isles of Fae. My first step had already been taken.

Sure, I didn't have great options, but my odds weren't bad with Zayne. I had to be smart. He couldn't be trusted, not completely.

I trusted the Firewolf. Despite her absence at Mariana's ball, she had destroyed the Shades.

And I trusted the oaths Zayne had made. He had cleverly joined his quest with my desires. The Firewolf. The ashflower. The longer I thought about it, the deeper my hunger grew.

Maybe this could even be fun. Vanessa was a delight. My Firewolf would send a turtle. And through it all, Zayne would be at my side. Alluring and playful. Aggravating and presumptuous. Adventuring with him would be challenging; it would be exciting.

If I traveled with him, he would reapply the ashflower. He would touch the space above my heart, pulling the darkness from me. The memory of last time stuck to the back of my throat, thick with his scent.

I had the Brand, but I still had a choice. I couldn't change what had happened, but I could choose my response.

My choice was a fragment of power, so small it was easy to dismiss, but it was mine. I claimed it.

I sat there, steeling myself, for a long time. I gathered courage like a shield. At some point, the sun rose. The light was slow to start, but soon, the room was no longer

dark.

I rolled my shoulders, preparing for adventure. My body knew what to do.

Zayne. I was ready for him.

He made me hunger; he made me hurt. This prince had seen something in me I failed to find in myself.

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The Shades targeted me.

The complications were more than I understood. Who was I? No one, I refrained. Yet, for the first time, I wondered if I was wrong.

12 | Hollow

Zayne

“Maybe she’s not coming,” Vanessa whispered, voicing my fears.

The sun neared noon, and Vanessa basked in the light. She sparkled, sunlight striking her watery skin as she sprawled on the deck. The Starlit Isle was known for its bright sunshine, and today was no exception.

This isle had no suitable home for the heirs of shadows, but Eleanor and I had tried. When the Starlit King offered us safety, we would have been remiss to reject him.

It seemed like only yesterday, yet it also seemed like an era ago. A month ago, Eleanor and I had left this shore, beginning her quest to claim the Shadow Throne.

We thought we understood the Shades. We believed we knew the location of the throne. Somewhere along the way, we had been misguided.

I swallowed. I didn’t know if our mistakes had resulted from foolishness or outside manipulation. Regardless, they had nearly ruined everything, becoming errors I had to fix.

I couldn't stop. Not now that Eleanor was gone. I still believed she was alive, since Teyr had told me as much. It felt foolish to believe the words of a distant deity, but I needed the hope.

Guilt haunted me like a specter. As a child, I had lost Sandra. I couldn't afford to add Eleanor to my list of regrets.

Now Ayla was tangled in this too.

She didn't belong on this boat, and I couldn't blame her for abandoning my quest. Ayla could wear her Brand boldly, burning bright like a falling star, flaring before fading.

Ayla was a survivor; I saw it from the spark of her eyes. She had intrigued me the night we met. By our second encounter, she had made me laugh. As we sailed into Port Saundrys, she failed to hide her awe. And last night, as the fiddle played, she had tapped her feet, a fae taking her first steps on our magical lands.

First Sandra, then Eleanor. Would Ayla be next? How many would fall prey to the Shades?

My fire had died long ago, watching Sandra die. For years, I had faded, an exiled prince trapped in a cage. Eleanor had helped, sharing her motivation. Since her capture, I moved mechanically, urged by duty, resigning myself to my fate. I prepared to die for Eleanor because there was nothing to live for.

Once, I'd believed my family motto: a shadow may fade, but it always remains. I wasn't sure I could remain if I lost another to the Shades. Ayla stirred the ashes of my heart.

Grinding my fist against the bulkhead, I faced the sea. Tired of looking at the empty

docks, I embraced the horizon. Soon we would leave, and it seemed that Ayla would not be joining us.

The first of the noon bells rang. With a huff, I turned around, preparing to unfasten the lines.

“Sorry I’m late.” Ayla dropped a bag on the deck. She leaped onto the boat.

She was breathing hard, like she’d run all the way here. Under the duress, her throat bobbed, her Brand shifting. Regardless, my chest swelled—she had chosen this. I could still cure her.

Glancing at her bag, she explained, “I had some shopping to do. I lost most of my gear in the attack. Since I’m new to the fae markets, I got a little distracted—did you know there are towels spelled for cleaning? Wipe the cloth on your body and grime goes away. Pretty neat.”

Her ash-colored throat still captured my attention. My first impulse was to pull her into my cabin, to treat her Brand, to touch her. I would bring ashflower to her heart, making her whole.

“I wouldn’t know,” Vanessa said when I failed to speak. “Water sprites don’t exactly getgrimy.”

“Ha!” I forced a laugh. “Vanessa, you looked quite worse for wear when I met you at Vila Port.”

“Woe is the sprite who travels south. I’ve learned my lesson, and I’ll never do that again.”

“Why were you there in the first place?” Ayla asked.

Vanessa sighed loudly and dramatically. “I left for reasons of the heart,” she said, stopping there.

I still hadn’t learned the truth of it. Vanessa deflected whenever I asked. The last of the noon bells rang across the bay.

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Vanessa continued, “That’s our cue. Ayla, you really pushed your arrival to the last minute. You should have seen Zayne brooding with worry.”

“I wasn’t—”

Ayla snickered. “Sorry to worry you.”

Her eyes glinted in the sunlight, warming me. I still couldn’t believe she was there. “Why did you come?” I asked.

“Well, Port Saundyr’s is a little dull, don’t you think? All that dancing seems a little tiresome compared to the adventure you have planned.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I thought you liked the dancing.”

“The Firewolf matters more. Now”—she pointed to the rope still tying us down—“should we get this adventure started?”

I was reminded of our chat on the merchant’s ship. Her eyes had the same gleam. The confidence was a good look.

Hell, having her along could be fun. A teammate would be better company than my ghosts and memories. I inhaled, taking in her scent—spicy and sweet, tart like cherry—and my tongue swirled within my mouth.

She grinned, ever the flirt.

I chuckled, the laugh a welcomed relief.

Will she compromise me? The thought rose unbidden and unwanted. This wasn't a playful adventure. It wasn't fun and games. Eleanor was depending on me. Our lives were at stake.

I needed Ayla as a guide, not as a friend. There was no room for errors. No space for distractions.

My laughter died, and my lips turned in a frown. Growing up, I had learned to mask myself, to keep my motivations safe, my reactions secure. I relied on that training now.

"Let's go," I said, and with mechanical motions, I unfastened our boat. The rope slid onto the deck, filling our silence with awhoosh.

Vanessa climbed into her crow's nest. "To the Isle of Shadow?" she asked.

"To home," I agreed.

13 | The Ash Between Them

Ayla

Hot or cold—I didn't know who Zayne intended to be. With his frown, the warm day turned clammy, and my adventurous optimism felt silly.

For a moment, he had smiled. It was a glimpse of who he could be—not the Shadow Prince, but someone eager to live despite his duty. I thought he wanted to play.

He had the slightest of chuckles, so quiet and serious. He shifted suddenly, like the

sound of his own laughter had startled him.

If I'd been raised in exile, would I be serious like him? Instead, I had been an irreverent child, lost in her conflicting role of royal bastard. I laughed to escape, and he couldn't safely chuckle. He was the Shadow Prince, and I was a mistake.

As Vanessa led us out of the docks, he stood rigid at the bow of the boat. He didn't look back at me.

Whatever. I had worked hard for my positive attitude, and I would not let him take that from me.

I reached for my pack and retrieved my new phonograph. It was the whole reason I had been running late.

The fae good was composed of two parts: a small brass horn and a thick crystalline mount. The mount held a gigantic library of music, and under the direction of magic, it could play any of the encoded songs, tunes blaring through the horn. It was portable music.

Since operating it required magic, it was useless south of the Rift. However, the moment I heard it, music streaming from the merchant's store, I knew I had to have it. Music that played at will—exactly what I needed to keep my fears away. Unfortunately, I couldn't even operate it myself. Not without magic.

"Hey, Zayne?" I asked. "Can I ask a favor?"

He looked at the phonograph and frowned. "Really? That's what you bought?"

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I had purchased practical things too. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“That’s a trinket.”

It’s not like I had long to shop. By the time I finished buying necessities, I had rushed this purchase. “I can’t play it,” I admitted. “I don’t have magic.”

He sighed and shook his head, like he couldn’t fathom my impracticality. I shrugged. It wasn’t my job to please him.

“We need to apply the ashflower,” he said. “That’s more important than your music.”

I set the phonograph down, carefully tucking it back into my pack.

He was right. The Brand had grown, and so had its calling. The pull had haunted me through the morning, growing stronger, whispering how it would claim me. I worked to ignore it. Whenever I gave into my despair, I could feel the Brand growing, claiming any fraction of my soul that it could. It waited, hungry for opportunity, eager to expand.

Since stepping on the boat, the Brand had grown more aggressive. Somehow, it knew I now stood on a seaworthy vessel. It told me to seize control of this ship. It begged me to surrender to its pull.

The promise of Zayne’s healing touch sounded like relief. When I recalled our last session, the pressure of his fingertips... There was more heat to my desire than the burn of my Brand.

“Of course,” I agreed.

Together, we entered the cabin. Once again, he crowded behind me to sit on the stool. I looked at the bed, large enough for two, but that didn’t mean...

We were sharing this space.

It hadn’t quite dawned on me. At the market, I had tried to prepare. Clothes and food, medicine and hygiene supplies—yes, I had thought of all that. I had forgotten the size of the cabin.

“I tried to trade for a bigger boat,” he blurted out. “Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything Vanessa could manage by herself. If you prefer, I can sleep on the deck.”

There he was, being friendly again. Maybe the hot and cold wasn’t about me. It had more to do with our uncomfortable arrangement.

“We can put the pillows between us,” I answered.

I settled on the mattress with a sigh. Through the port windows, the docks of Port Saundrys faded into the distance. I began unlacing my armor.

Zayne waited in silence, looking at the floor, the windows, anywhere but at me. My motions were mechanical, contemplating where the leather needed cleaning. I forced my mind to the fae-made tonic I’d purchased for the effort.

Removing my armor, I realized I was still wearing Zayne’s tunic beneath. He saw that too. “It’s yours now, if you’d like,” he said.

“Thanks.”

By Teyr, this was awkward. The heat between us was taut. There was no release, and the tension had nowhere to go.

Our dynamic had shifted so many times I was losing track. Who were we now? Not friends. Comrades, perhaps. Those who had each other's back because it was safer. Trustworthy, but only out of necessity.

Comrades didn't need a spark between them. Attempting to be mundane and uninviting, I removed the tunic, baring my undershirt.

At the sight of my skin, I sucked in a breath. My body—my Brand...

My entire stomach had turned, becoming sickly gray. The Brand now stretched up my neck and across my sides, covering my shoulders. It dipped beneath the waist of my pants. The strange, smooth texture begged me to surrender to it. My transformation was an inevitability.

At the sight, I started calculating options, ways that I could overpower Zayne and take control of this boat. I could obey the Brand. I stood, taking a step toward Zayne. My hand drifted toward my dagger—

No.

I squeezed my fist, focusing on the ring. The pressure of it. I allowed the pain to bloom. I clenched my eyes, waiting for the moment to pass.

Zayne's breath hitched. "Are you okay?"

"The Brand, it... it wants to take control."

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His hand trembled, the satchel of ashflower shaking in his grip. “We shouldn’t have gone this long between applications. I don’t exactly understand how this works. Clearly there’s an inconsistency. Your location or emotions may impact the Brand. You’ll need to let me know if you’re about to lose control.”

Had I nearly lost control?The possibility unsettled me. “Let’s do this then,” I said, bracing for his touch.

“Uh, your shirt,” he said.

Oh. Right.

Zayne kneeled before me. His horns, long and sharp, were at eye level. Wisps of black hair swayed across his face, and when I inhaled, his scent flooded me.

Cedar and amber. I could focus on that. Lifting my hand to my heart, I drew the tank downward, exposing the core of my Brand.

He closed the distance between us, pressing red petals against my Brand. As he made contact, I forced myself to still, clamping down my urge to shudder.

He repeated the command as he had before, “Shade’s Brand, leave and let Ayla be.”A new scent joined the others, reminding me of a rainy funeral.

With the Brand engorged, Zayne had to apply the ashflower several times. He had to work for it, and I absorbed his touch. The scent of dirt and rain, of petrichor, bloomed from his effort. By the time he was finished, sweat beaded on his brow.

The entire time, I soaked him in, unable to resist. His refrain, the repetition of his sounds, the way he said my name... His command consumed me. I entered a haze, trembling beneath his touch.

Zayne had power over me.

If he were anyone else, I would have run in fear. I had run in fear. Even now, while I shuddered, I didn't turn away. Would he turn on me, like Carson or Mariana? Could I trust him? Trust was awful; it was dangerous.

Finally, he nodded, pleased with the freckle-sized mark. He wiped the sweat from his brow. Slowly, stiffly, I released my undershirt, hiding the diminished Brand. I blinked, and a tear fell.

The Brand was silent, the calling no longer haunting. I felt spacious. There was release and relief.

My vision darkened. I swayed, proud shoulders falling forward. Zayne caught me. He held my shoulders, helping me steady, forearms to my knees.

His hair tickled my cheek. We were only a palm's width apart. My heart raced. I blinked, taking him in, the sharp line of his jaw, his lips... He didn't back away. His gaze darted across my face.

I couldn't say who moved first. Maybe we moved together. Closing the space between us, our lips met.

Thrill consumed me. I pulled him closer.

Everything quickened within me as the kiss expanded, lips parting. From lips to collarbone, navel and thigh, my body burned with need.

My hands dug into his hair. His fingertips graced my neck. Desperate tongues thrust, hungry.

So fast. So sudden. This was urgent and now.

My fingers traced up his horn, the smooth texture making me shiver. I ran my finger over the point. There was a sting. I felt the ebb of blood; I must have pricked myself.

What am I doing? I tried to push the question away, to ignore the sting of my bleeding finger. Still, I paused.

His lips froze, our kiss left wanting and broken. He backed away, clearing his throat. "I'm sorry. I..."

He raced to the door, moving like he couldn't get away fast enough. His absence left a vacuum, confusing and empty. One in which my emptiness, my fears, festered. Was he using me?

I grabbed a fresh tunic, hiding my skin as fast as I could. "Wait," I croaked.

He stopped, his hand on the door. "What?" He didn't turn to face me.

"I know..." With my heart racing and face flushed, it was hard to find my words. I decided to speak directly. "I know it's really inconvenient that..." We just kissed? I looked at the bed. "It's inconvenient that we'll need to share such a small space."

I needed to know if I could trust him. Only he was an exiled prince raised by the Starlit King, trained in the art of shadows and dissembling. I licked the blood from my pricked finger, tasting metal and salt.

Either I could follow his lead and pretend that kiss didn't happen, or I could say what

I meant.

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“You’re frustrating me,” I said. “One moment we’re kissing, and the next, you run away. You smile and laugh—we kiss!—then you leave. So, if we’re going to share this small space, we need to talk. Are you attracted to me? Because this back-and-forth attitude, this hot and cold thing, it’s pissing me off.”

I waited, hoping that he was listening—that he could hear my need through the anger. His gaze darted to every corner of the room. I silenced my instinct to keep ranting. Hopefully, he would answer soon.

Eventually, he picked up a particularly long pillow and placed it next to me, dividing the bed in two. He sat on the other side.

“I feel it too, only”—he dug the pillow into place, solidifying it between us—“it has to mean nothing. We have to mean nothing.”

My lips parted. A thrill ran through me—he was attracted to me!—and my delight died as quickly as it came.

“Your mission,” I said. “It comes first.”

“It does.” He pressed the pillow deeper into the mattress. “You’re right. It’s inconvenient that we share this space. It’s unfortunate that there is something between us, something that bubbles up every time we apply the ashflower. But they’re just feelings, and I can’t afford the distraction.”

His answer felt more honest than I expected, and it left me off balance. It would have been easier if he had expressed excessive devotion—then I would know he was

playing a game.

“Okay,” I said it aloud. “No more kissing. We’re comrades on a mission and nothing more.”

“And nothing more,” he echoed.

We nodded our agreement, not trusting ourselves to touch. Unable to seal our agreement in any physical way, I grabbed a second pillow, placing it between us. Now the bed was fully divided.

Resolved, I straightened my back, but before I could rise, my ring glowed, ruddy light filling the room.

“Zayne! Ayla!” Vanessa shouted. “I don’t know what is taking you two so long, but you need to see this.”

14 | Thwarted Thrones

Ayla

A giant turtle swam next to the Umbral Star. From snout to tail, the animal was half the boat’s length. Zayne and I stood at the edge of the boat, stunned by its magnificence.

His shell had intricate patterns, burnt orange broken in fractal formations, filled in with streaks of opaline. At the center of his shell, grass and ferns grew, forming a small habitat. I saw a salamander and two frogs. Like a floating island, an ecosystem thrived on his back.

“His name is Heim, and he says he’s going to be our guide,” Vanessa explained.

“You can speak with him?” I asked.

“Of course I can—I’m a water sprite!”

Right, I knew that. Sprites could speak with animals within their elemental domain. It was one thing knowing about the Isles and another applying the information.

“Guide to where?” Zayne asked. “Did he tell you?”

“Does it matter? The Firewolf wants me to go,” I insisted. I needed her—someone I could trust.

Vanessa glowed, her blue mixing with a green swirl, communicating with Heim. “He says he is guiding us to Leodoras, the Great Turtle.”

“The Great Turtle?” I asked.

“I think she’s mentioned in an ancient song,” Zayne replied. “Something about Leodoras traveling the Isles to pick up her siblings? Scholars say the song is a myth.”

“A myth?” Vanessa huffed. “Heim doesn’t look like a myth to me. Should we follow him?”

“Yes,” I rushed to reply, not even giving Zayne the chance to disagree.

Regardless, Vanessa waited for Zayne’s final answer. He startled, surprised she delayed. “Ayla’s right. If this Leodoras is involved, we’re going.”

I hid my surprise. His oath only bound him to pursue the Firewolf if she was on route. I didn’t expect this generosity.

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Vanessa signaled to Heim, and we were off. The turtle took the lead.

The sea was now teal, serene and calm, as we sailed between the isles—so unlike my crossing of the Nearbright Sea. From here, the Starlit Isle had become a distant landform, and if I squinted, I could sense a second isle across the way.

The turtle's pace was steady, and after a few moments of adjusting, Vanessa settled within the turtle's wake. "With Heim's help, we're actually moving faster than I can alone," she explained. "He says we'll reach Leodoras soon."

Leodoras. I didn't recognize it, but the name gave me pause. The Isles of Fae weren't magical because of the fae, but the inhabitants were magical because of their land.

The king, queen, and heir of each isle were connected to their throne far more intimately than my mother was to hers. The exact relationship between isle and ruler varied, but often the magics of monarchs were elevated, fed by their direct link to magic's source.

Teyr and a Firewolf. Heim and Leodoras. I didn't know how to perceive the complex web of magic surrounding me.

And the Firewolf wanted me. She had appeared to me. I thought our connection had broken.

It had always been easy to trust the Firewolf with a childlike surrender, accepting that she cared for me. She had earned that trust, saving me from folly time and time again. She had even saved Mariana the night an assassin hid in her room.

Except for the night everything had gone to hell... She hadn't appeared, and I had barely survived.

I didn't know why. Had I broken our bond? Her reappearance had shocked me. So many questions, one tumbling into another, raced through my mind.

Zayne sat on a crate, settling before a barrel-turned-table. His back was straight, firm with restraint. I remembered, just a few minutes before, when he'd been nimble and hungry, responsive to my hands and placing demands on my lips—

No. We had erected our wall. Pillows across a mattress.

I banished the memory of our kiss, the remnants not quite vanishing from my body. I ached.

Regardless, I settled on the other crate, letting the table separate us. "While we were in Port Saundrys, did you tell anybody I'm here?"

"No, of course not," he replied. "I restocked the ship. I sent letters to the other courts, documenting some of what I have learned about the Shades... But I didn't even include a personal message for the Starlit King."

That surprised me. "I thought he was like a father to you."

"I was raised in his court. That doesn't mean I trust him."

"Nor should you," I snapped back, parroting what I'd been told. "At least, my mother doesn't trust him."

"She's right." He rubbed his chin, thinking. "Many say your mother is wise. Is that true?"

“Even the sprites like her,” Vanessa agreed, calling down from the crow’s nest, her voice sounding through the ship.

The question made me pause. The public loved Queen Aveline, calling her a fair and just ruler. Even my birth had been spun into a symbol of her fertility—fae births were uncommon and fae goods were valuable. Furthermore, my existence provided a useful angle for all those who disliked the King Consort. My birth proved Queen Aveline would not be ruled.

My mother and her advisors had made me a symbol with no concern for how I felt about it. Despite her popularity, I found her to be cold and calculating, clever and occasionally cruel. My sisters and I were tools for Valterra’s greatness, not daughters.

“She is a wise queen,” I answered. “She isn’t nurturing.”

Zayne nodded. “Eleanor and I had a nursemaid, Sandra. Our parents were over a hundred years old, still in their prime, but already too distant from their childhood to be interested in ours. Sandra was nurturing when our parents weren’t. I’m thankful we had that, even if she’s gone.”

“She died in the Collapse?” I asked.

He nodded, his shadows tightening around him, protective and tense.

I changed the subject. “What was it like, being raised by the Starlit King?” I asked. I didn’t repeat what was said of him and Eleanor, whispers that called them puppets.

“I trusted him when I was a child,” Zayne answered. “The Starlit King seemed like a sound choice for a guardian—he is nearing three hundred years old. He promised our safety, and Eleanor and I didn’t have many options. We didn’t know better. The king offered us palace apartments and arranged our education. He gave us a place to grow

and grieve.

“Only, he took advantage of us too. As the Shadow Heir, Eleanor had jurisdiction over certain matters, like the resettlement of our people, management of our remaining coffers, and limitations on shadow magic. When we were fourteen, she signed her first legislation, and it was, to say the least, ill advised.”

“Mother told us about it,” I replied. “She used it as an educational opportunity, warning my half sisters, ‘Never trust the word of another kingdom. Even your father’s.’”

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“Queen Aveline doesn’t trust her King Consort?”

I shook my head. “Grayson was a fifth-born prince from one of the southern kingdoms. There, fae goods are extremely rare. As the story goes, his family wanted to wage war on the other kingdoms, and access to fae goods would help. So he married my mother to improve their trade.”

“And then the Collapse ruined his plans?”

“The Collapse ruined lots of things,” I replied. “Regardless, my mother is right. She can’t trust Grayson, even if he provides a useful connection to the southern kingdoms. Yet he dotes on Mariana, and the two of them are close. When she inherits the throne...” I swallowed. This conversation had strayed too close to my raw wounds.

“Anyhow,” I continued, “you and Eleanor were so young when that happened. I can’t imagine being responsible for so much so young. What did you do next?”

“For a time, we only trusted each other. We dismissed all our servants and tutors. Then slowly, over time, we refilled the positions with those also in exile from the Isle of Shadow. We’ve rebuilt a small court we can mostly trust.

“Then, a few months ago, Eleanor started having visions. The Shadow Throne called to her and said it was dying. It needed her—a queen—to continue its connection to the land. For years, we had been studying Gloom and the Collapse, trying to plot our return, and with these visions, Eleanor grew confident in our theory: if she became queen, she could commune with Gloom. She could make the Isle of Shadow

inhabitable again.”

My heart stopped. “Really? That’s possible?”

“It’s a little more involved than that,” he added. “But it didn’t matter. Nobody believed her, and the Starlit Court blocked our first attempt. Most courtiers doubt my claim that the Shades are undead, hesitant to believe a necromancer caused the Collapse. Maybe they don’t want necromancy to be real. Maybe they just don’t want Eleanor coming into power. Either way, we ended up journeying alone, in secret.”

“And that’s when she was branded?”

He nodded. “We evaded the Shades long enough to reach the throne room—but the throne was gone. It had been cut, like a tree chopped from its roots, and taken somewhere else. Eleanor sensed she could find it if we journeyed farther inland. The Shades found us first.”

“I didn’t know thrones could be moved.”

“It’s rare but can be done. It allows a population to claim the throne if they think the monarch is poorly chosen. The process damages the throne, forcing it to regrow somewhere new. Since Eleanor’s visions rose from a weakened throne asking for help, I suspect that Inarus took it. Wherever your Brand leads us, I expect we will not only find Eleanor, but also the throne. And Inarus.”

It was a name I had only heard in rumors and speculation. “Who exactly is Inarus?” I asked.

Zayne stilled. In my curiosity, I had forgotten that the Collapse wasn’t some historical event that had changed our world. He had been there. His family died because of it. Now that I looked at him, really looked, he seemed tired.

Exhausted.

“Inarus was our childhood tutor,” he answered. “He was the Court Sorcerer, the lead scholar on shadow magic. Now he’s a necromancer... Like me.”

Zayne shifted his weight.

“That was necromancy?” I realized. “When you commanded the Gray General... You’re a necromancer?”

“I am. It’s why I can use the ashflower.” He swallowed. “I found out when Eleanor was branded. I accidentally used necromancy to end the fight.”

My stomach twisted, an ancient prejudice producing bile. Death drove the living to discomfort, and stories of necromancers always portrayed them as villains. Yet Zayne didn’t strike me as evil. I tempered my reaction.

“I’ve been training to travel the Underworld ever since,” he continued. “For Eleanor’s sake.”

“If she can end the Shade attacks, it’ll be worth it.”

“I didn’t say she could end the Shades. I said she should be able to commune with Gloom.” He paused. “Everyone thinks Gloom and the Shades are related. But they’re not, not really.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gloom has always been there, long before the Collapse. She is a goddess of rest and stagnation, and unlike Teyr, she is not suited for beautiful ballads. Stories of her are hard to find and rarely believed. Before the Collapse, she stayed north of the Isle of

Shadow, a thick mist consuming the Darke Sea.”

“You’re saying that in the Collapse, Inarus influenced a deity?”

Zayne nodded. “And he simultaneously raised the dead, making the Shades. The undead are sensitive to light, so he uses Gloom’s mists to protect his army—but they are not the same force. They’re merely controlled by the same person.”

“He’s that powerful?”

“Apparently.” He shook his head, grief roiling within him. “I was a child when Inarus was my tutor, and I doubt my own memories. But he never seemed cruel. Inarus was strict, but he was kind. He doesn’t strike me as someone evil enough to brand fae, kill them, and turn them to Shades.”

Betrayal shone in his eyes, a pain I knew too well.

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“Sometimes those who appear kind are only acting,” I replied.

Zayne chewed his lip. He nodded. My mind spun, working to take it all in. Eleanor’s goal was to seize the Shadow Throne. Maybe she could influence Gloom, but only a necromancer could control the Shades.

And like Inarus, Zayne was a necromancer.

An heir, a throne, and a necromancer—this quest sounded like trouble.

I shivered, my hand wandering to my Brand. Inarus’s mark haunted my mind, taking up a different type of space than skin. The blemish threatened to overpower me and take command of my body. It wanted my soul contained, my body slain.

What if Zayne couldn’t contain it? It was uncomfortable to see him as someone with necromancy, yet my life now depended on his command of death.

“Land ahoy!” Vanessa shouted.

Zayne jumped, and I startled too. This quest wasn’t just about saving Eleanor. It was about the future of the Isles. The future of Valterra. The stakes were higher than I imagined.

I had no time to consider. Because there, beyond Heim the turtle, was Leodora, an impossibility.

Zayne

Leodoras was a second turtle—so much larger than Heim that a forest grew upon her back, its heart dark and dense.

Countless trees sprouted from her shell, providing a canopy to the bushes and grasses and flowers beneath. Rabbits and squirrels ran across the forest floor as birds chirped from the higher branches.

As we approached, she lifted her gigantic head in acknowledgment. Her neck was as long as the boat and her bright, clear eyes as large as our cabin. Wrinkled skin marked her wise with age. Blinking slowly at us, she almost smiled, in a strange turtle-like grin, before dipping her head beneath the surface. She caused waves to crash against the Umbral Star.

“Heim says you need to board her shell,” Vanessa said. “The Firewolf is waiting for you.”

The shell seemed as inhabitable as a small isle—except for its strange, dark center.

“I’ll do it,” Ayla said without question.

She watched impatiently while Vanessa nestled the Umbral Star against the turtle’s flank, easily fitting in the ample space along her side. Nearby, Heim swam toward two other turtles his size.

Leodoras picked up speed, her long fins pushing through the water. Vanessa gasped. “We’re moving much faster than I can. She’s taking us to the Shadow Court.”

We were racing home.

My oath to follow the Firewolf's directions had gone so much farther than I expected. I had worried this promise would become a wild goose chase—now we faced a giant turtle.

Until Eleanor insisted on claiming the Shadow Throne, I had only a theoretical interest in the true power of deities. They were ever present in our songs, but absent from our lives. My perspective had since changed—first with Teyr and then when the Firewolf surged my power—now I faced Leodoras.

I should have been intimidated.

Yet I trusted. Something bigger, something impossible, had guided us here. The Firewolf had bound my fate to Ayla's, and while I didn't understand, I saw that our momentum ran hand in hand. Belief was impossible to justify, but I knew my path. I saw my next step.

"I'm going too," I said.

Ayla's eyes widened.

I tapped the satchel of ashflower tied to my waist. "I'm responsible for your Brand."

What I didn't say—what I didn't know how to explain—was that this was exactly where I was supposed to be. With Ayla. Boarding a giant turtle.

I offered her my hand. "I can shadow-step us over."

Ayla laughed. "I'd rather jump."

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She didn't hesitate; Ayla leaped. Despite the height of the ship and the distance between us, she landed gracefully on the other side. "See? It's not that hard."

I pulled darkness to me, and relying on the omnipresence of shadows, I transported myself to the turtle's back.

I claimed the high ground, standing over Ayla on the sloped ground of the turtle's shell. "And that is even easier."

She laughed, shaking her head. "Show-off."

"You started it."

She grinned and ran, taking off deeper into the dark forest. "Well, can you catch me?"

I shadow-stepped, blocking her path, leaving only a hand's width between us. "I could catch you."

Ayla flushed as my sudden appearance impacted her. My throat tightened, thick with desire.

She gave a long sigh, like savoring a scent, then rolled her shoulders and stepped back. "Fun," she said with a grin.

Then her lips tightened, becoming serious as her gaze turned distant. She pointed. "I think that's where we're supposed to go."

An archway rose from the apex of the shell, hidden by dense trees, its dark boulders covered by moss. Nestled in the trees, it had been difficult to distinguish from the surrounding foliage. Now it was obvious. This was the focus of the forest.

We walked closer, our playfulness turning to caution. I watched her back.

Upon approach, I could see that the archway seemed to open to another realm. It led to a room with no windows, only doors. Judging from the craggy walls, it was carved out from a cave. This room was an atrium. It led to four other doors, each marked with a different element.

“Do you think the Firewolf is there?” Ayla asked.

I paused, considering.

—snaaap—

We reacted, turning back to back, guarding each other.

“Come out!” Ayla called. “Whoever you are. Where is the Firewolf?”

16 | The Trial of Leodoras

Ayla

“I am the Firewolf.”

Her voice resonated, echoed by the land we stood on. When she next spoke, the resonance faded, the voice sounding from a clear direction. “You can call me Ninti.”

She stepped out from behind a tree, her paws crunching on fallen leaves, flickering

fire heating her fur. Her signature of fire and cinnamon bloomed on the air.

She was terrifying, with teeth, claws, and flame; she was beautiful, her green eyes welcoming me home.

Home. Relief crashed into my soul, powerful enough to make me weep. I fell to my knees. My arms spread wide, welcoming her.

How I was capable of trust like this, I would never understand. Fortunately, I didn't have to. I just held her gaze.

She strode toward me. With each step, she transformed, shifting smaller.

She shrank herself, becoming the size of a large furry dog instead of a giant wolf. The flames on her shoulders and chest drifted upward, becoming smaller tongues rising from perked ears. From the tip of her tail, a new flame appeared.

With her new appearance, she was more adorable than threatening, and my heart leaped with eagerness, my hands waving, beckoning her closer.

She stepped into my embrace. Tongues of fire kissed my skin without burning, offering heat without the bite of flame. I sat back on my heels, basking in her, taking in her shifted appearance. Her emerald eyes captured my attention. No matter her size, they remained identical in hue.

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The Firewolf, once fierce beast, now seemed...cute.

“You can shapeshift,” I whispered.

“Some,” she replied. “I can shift within the Canidae family. Wolf, dog, fox... The wolf you know me as is my truebody. It’s easier to spirit travel in that form.”

“Spirit travel?”

“It’s how I visited you before. I couldn’t leave Leo, but I could reach you through the ruby.”

“The stone connects to you?”

“It’s my divine artifact, similar to the way the Isles link through their thrones. This stone was shaped for me, a lesser deity. And I’m sorry I didn’t find you earlier. Leo is a touch overprotective.”

I didn’t fully understand, but it didn’t matter. She was really there. She stepped into my arms again, allowing me to wrap my arms around her. I clung to her, a child meeting their protector.

Her warm fur invited me to nuzzle deeper, and I fought the instinct to bury my head in her shoulder, to give way to the threatening tears. I longed to accept her comfort.

Only, I wasn’t ready to surrender. My bitter question lingered. I swallowed the urge to ask, Where were you when everything went wrong? I had nearly died, and to

survive, I had done a terrible thing.

For years, she had warned of danger, from Mariana's childish cruelty to dark alleys laden with thieves.

My face buried in her fur, I failed to confront my fears. She had sent the Gray General away—wasn't that enough? My Brand burned, but she could help. We were together now, and it would be okay. It had to be.

Finally, I sat back, admiring her feisty yet endearing appearance. "You've been here, with Leodoras, this whole time?"

She nodded. "Leodoras is a supportive sister. For millennia, she has protected many of us lesser deities on her back."

"Thank you, by the way," Zayne said, joining the conversation. "For your help with the Gray General."

"Thanks for helping me too," she replied. Her tail gave a small wag. "I had been trapped in some sort of haze." A haze? It made me question, but she continued, oblivious to the void she had left behind.

"You said you were a lesser deity?" Zayne asked. "Everyone knows of the god Teyr, but I thought the Isles were the only other deities."

Ninti's brow furrowed. "You fae have forgotten so many things. It's more complicated than that. Long story short, Mother Sea and Father Sky had many, many children. Some are just more famous than others.

"There's Teyr, of course, but why do you overlook his sister, Gloom? They are the firstborn, intended to keep these lands in balance after Mother and Father lost their

lives in the act of creation. They created the isles next—countless islands, more than anyone could map—each with its unique magic and the ability to connect to its inhabitants.

“Then there’s us. The lesser deities, the final fragments of creation, scattered in countless forms. You met Heim and Leo already. We don’t travel around much. Leo doesn’t think it’s safe, not since the black diamond shattered...” Ninti frowned. “Anyhow, I convinced Leo that you can take me on your quest, if you pass her trial.”

I blinked. Trial? I glanced at the archway and the cave beyond. Excitement thrummed in my stomach; this was my chance to prove myself. I’d been waiting for this since Ninti had first appeared to me.

Ninti spun around, admiring her smaller body. “Is this size appropriate for travel? I’m excited to see the world, and I don’t want to be a huge bother on that little boat of yours.”

“You’ll be fine,” Zayne managed.

She bounded closer to the darker archway. “Then let’s get this trial started, shall we?”

This was all happening so fast. I struggled to speak.

“What is this trial?” Zayne asked.

“Leo designed it to test if Ayla is worthy of being my companion. There’s another realm through that arch, one Leo made just for this occasion.”

“What do we have to do?” I asked.

“Four doors. Four elements. To pass the trial, you must complete four challenges.”

Fire, earth, air, and water. “Seems straightforward.” I took a step forward, ready to charge.

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“Can I come with her?” Zayne asked, lunging ahead of me before I could cross the archway. “I need to make sure she stays safe while she has the Brand.”

Ninti hummed. Her gaze darted between him and me. “You two are precarious. One of you could easily destroy the other. Or you could accomplish many things together.”

“What do you mean?” Zayne asked. “Teyr—You—Did you cause the Shades to attack Ayla instead of me? Did some divinity bring us together?”

“Of course not.” She laughed, giving a short bark. “We don’t have that sort of power. We’re magic, but our inhabitants decide what that power does. Teyr dabbles in divination, but he doesn’t know the future. So whatever brought you two together, call it chance, call it luck, but it’s not destiny. Your fate is your own.”

She looked back at the doorway. “Leo says she’ll allow it. It’s Ayla’s trial, but Zayne, you can go through.”

“Thank you, Leo.” Zayne spoke to the turtle-shell-earth, his puzzled brows furrowed.

Ninti studied me with her big, beautiful green eyes. “Are you ready?” she asked.

A final doubt quivered in my heart. The night everything had gone to hell... why had she been in a haze? I needed to tell her about that night. I didn’t know how to do that.

I’d tell her about it later. Once this was done.

I stepped forward. “I’ll do it.”

Before I lost my nerve, I crossed the first threshold, entering the stony atrium. I rushed forward.

Zayne chased after me. “Which door is first?”

I was already running toward it, moving toward the element I most understood. I kicked the door open. “Fire.”

Together, we fell into Leo’s realm.

17 | The Unwanted General

Zayne

We raced toward the ground. We fell.

Wind raced through my hair, and my stomach plummeting as we plunged to the distant earth below. The planet curved on the horizon, blanketed by layers of blues and purples. Stars and the moons framed the sky above. We fell toward a red desert.

I tried to shadow-step and failed. My power was missing. Like in Valterra, I was magicless. Not powerless.

I quelled my panic. This was another reality—like the Underworld or Divine Realm—falling could be different here. Hopefully, I was right. It was the best peace of mind I could find.

I surrendered to the drop. Bliss pulsed through me. Freedom found me. Insight pierced me.

The night before crossing the Rift, I had prepared to die. I had done so with cold resignation, surrendering my life before my quest started. For Eleanor, I would have laid down my life.

It was the same night I met Ayla—the night I gave her my handkerchief. What a mistake, what a blessing. Because of Ayla, I was no longer alone.

Death was easier to face with company.

Falling beside me, Ayla hadn't hesitated. She laughed, hearty and hungry for life. Her hair went wild, caught by the wind. If she was afraid of gravity, the fear was nothing compared to the thrill.

Ayla knew she could survive this. Maybe I could believe that too.

“Woo!” I cried out, testing a shout.

“Whoop!” she cried back, much louder than me.

“Yeaah!” I tried, loosening my stuck throat. I got it that time. “Yesss!”

We hooted and howled, celebrating and surrendering. Our shouts filled the sky, and I fell. For a moment, I let everything go. There was nothing to do but accept our fall.

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Our screams bubbled around us, like a yellow aura. The barrier buffered the wind, slowing our speed.

“Woo-hoo!” Ayla cried, feeding the barrier, grinning at me.

We kept shouting, building up the protection, until we slowed enough to land. We drifted to the desert below.

By the time we reached the ground, we landed with ease. My legs trembled, taking my weight as gravity returned. Ayla ran a hand through her windswept hair, smiling broadly, like she had never worried.

We stood on a large plateau of rusty red rock. The platform was large, rising several body lengths above the desert below. It was barren except for the occasional stubborn shrub. The desert continued in every direction, not a cloud in sight.

—shaaake—

The earth shifted. A portal opened in the middle of the plateau, a blue sky shining on the other side.

A drake darted from the portal.

It flapped its wings, flying above us, as big as a bear. Drakes were highly dangerous. With their sharp teeth and claws—with their fiery breath that could kill. With spindly bodies, they were maneuverable and fast.

I wished we had donned our armor. This tunic felt too thin. At least we carried weapons.

The drake hissed. It dove toward Ayla.

My dagger was ready. I aimed and threw—

I missed. More accurately, the dagger passed through the beast like it wasn't there.

I reached for the shadows...

Nothing.

I wasn't really here. After all, it wasn't my trial. I searched for what tools I had. My voice, my appearance—

Ayla didn't need my help. She had the situation completely under control.

By the time I understood my limitations, Ayla had landed two arrows, one in each of the drake's wings. It flapped, gliding to the ground, but couldn't rise. The drake began to fight from land.

Ayla pulled her sword and swung fast, keeping the drake's spindly limbs out of reach.

The drake screeched. With a lurch, it swiveled its neck and unleashed a breath of fire. The maneuver was fast, unexpected, and clever. My heart raced, my body a bystander.

Yet Ayla danced. She dodged the first round of flame and ducked under the next. She swayed, knowing the right place to be. She struck—forging forward.

Ayla profited from her strengths, unafraid to display her fae gift of grace. Her actions revealed she was trained by soldiers, yet she showed more than skill or schooling. She fought smart. Ayla anticipated the drake's every move, planning and executing a counter-strike in an instant.

Their dance was beautiful, and she was breathtaking.

I couldn't believe we'd kissed—that she'd kissed me. The way she moved, I wondered what she might do with her bed partner...

Her rhythm overwhelmed the drake, forcing it back. It stumbled on feet not suited for land. When she sliced, it submitted. Smiling, she did it again, and the drake danced to her will.

Step by step and swing by swing, Ayla pushed the drake where she willed. She drove it to the portal's edge.

Ayla motioned to the portal with her sword. "Go. Glide down and recover. I don't want to kill you."

Either the drake didn't understand or didn't care, for it swiveled its proud neck and hissed at the sky.

Ayla hesitated, smiling sadly at the drake's stubbornness. Even facing defeat, it did not give up.

Then there was a clicking sound—a warning from the drake. The next fire blast would be larger and hotter than those Ayla had faced so far.

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She didn't recognize the noise. There was no reason she would know.

"That sound—big fire attack!" I shouted.

Ayla jerked to action as the drake's mouth hinged open. With one fluid movement, she threw a dagger.

The dagger's hilt slammed into the drake's shoulder, the blade lost in its flesh. The panicked beast stepped back, falling over the portal's edge.

It vanished, a blast of fire filling the portal in its wake. The blast would have destroyed Ayla, but she had taken down the drake instead.

Ayla waited, her stature still sturdy.

Then the portal changed. It now opened to the central cavern. The four elemental doors remained to one side, while the stone-made portal was on the other.

Ayla hissed. She dropped to her hands and knees, working methodically for breath and calm.

"Thank goodness," she gasped.

I looked down at the room below—the floor seemed far away. Instinctively, I tested the shadows—

"If I could, I would shadow-step you down," I said.

“Your magic doesn’t work here, does it?”

“My dagger went right through the drake.”

She shook her head. “What a strange world Leo made.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“What do you think the other trials will be?” I asked.

“More fighting, if I’m lucky,” she replied. “Thanks for the tip about the fire. I didn’t realize what the clicking meant.”

“Glad I could do something.”

She swallowed, like my simple act still surprised her. She straightened her spine. With a grunt, she jumped to the chamber below.

I followed, and as we landed in the central cave, the portal vanished. Simultaneously, the fire door disappeared, leaving the three remainders.

One trial down.

Ayla took a moment to gather herself, checking her weapons. “My leg is trying to cramp. Let’s rest before knocking down the second door. I don’t want to rush this.”

She sat against the wall and began massaging her thigh. She was all business, a professional fighter, one who had shown mastery even when fighting a drake.

I sat beside her, nearby but not touching. Even this far from her, tension tumbled from my body. She had been amazing to watch.

As she worked on her leg, I tired of our silence. “You’re an amazing fighter,” I said.

She grinned, wicked and fully aware of her ability. “It’s my one useful skill. Dancing? That’s fun, but my family doesn’t value the dances of a part-fae non-princess.”

I laughed, deeper than I was used to. “I’m sure you have plenty of useful skills.”

She shrugged, shifting so she could stretch. “As a child, I hated sitting through my sisters’ lessons, so I ran off and played soldier. There was always someone from the Southern Watch on rotation at the palace, and they thought I was endearing. They trained me.” The watch was Valterra’s most prestigious military group, a team of soldiers who lived along the White Claw Mountains and protected the border. “Mother wanted me in the classroom—it drove her crazy. Though she still found a way to use my skills.”

“What was her plan?”

“In a couple of months, she planned to name me a general of the Southern Watch. Since they trained me, it would have been a natural fit.”

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A general. With her sharp mind, Ayla would have been a force to reckon with, but I couldn't imagine her living in the mountains. The main pass was mostly a trade route, moving fae goods farther south. Mapmakers marked it "difficult to travel in winter."

"Sounds snowy," I replied.

"Snowy and isolated." She huffed a short laugh. "I think that was the point. It would give me prestige and limited power. It would take me away from the limelight of the palace without making it obvious I was being sent away. A perfect solution for a bastard princess."

I cringed at the moniker, the way she always named herself cruelly yet casually.

She quickly added, "It would have been a terrible place for me. The Southern Watch is far from the cities, and few fae or part-fae are there. Certainly no fae fiddle bars. I think I would have suffocated."

"Is that why you left?"

"Not exactly." Her gaze cut away. "Rhett and I had everything ready a year ago. I'd planned to leave soon, but not the night of Mariana's coronation ball..." She froze and stopped talking completely.

Whatever she had left unsaid gnawed at her. Before I could gather the courage to ask, she stood. "My leg's better. I'm going to face the earth trial next."

"Okay," I agreed. This was her challenge, not mine.

The earth door was now covered with green moss. Ayla frowned, considering it. “What do you think is behind here? For fire, I fought a drake, so maybe this is a troll.”

She pushed the door open, and we stepped into a vibrant garden. Plants covered every surface, every wall. Blooming flowers accented with bright colors, while the trickle of water sounded from a fountain. The sky was clear, and it was a pleasant day.

However, throughout the garden, the next challenge surrounded us, hidden in camouflage, only recognizable because I knew what to look for.

Gnomes. Bounding and bouncing gnomes. Humorous, stubborn, and deeply irritating. They hid amongst the foliage.

Honestly, I would have preferred a troll.

18 | Taproot

Ayla

The garden was walled in. The door disappeared, my escape with it. Yet I didn't feel trapped, not with the breeze scented with flowers. The fresh air was a relief after the stagnant cave.

The central fountain was encircled by flowers of all hues—bright blue, shades of sunset, somber black, and tender periwinkle. They grew from luscious green stems, and several had thorns.

Short grasses formed pathways, traversing between flower beds. Hedges and vines disguised the stony outer walls with more greenery.

“Fascinating, fascinating,” a high-pitched voice said somewhere near my feet. I looked, but nobody was there.

Another voice spoke, this one deeper and annoyed, “Too strange. I recommend rejection. Send her back!”

A third voice, thin with age, disagreed. “We must complete the test before making judgment.”

“What—” I spun about, running through the garden. The voices seemed nearby, but I couldn’t see the speakers.

Finally, I caught movement from the corner of my eye. It hid behind a bush. It vanished, but if I squinted... something was off. The light warbled strangely.

Wandering in that direction, looking at everything except the bush, I tried to keep my target unsuspecting. I waited for it to make its next move. And then—

I lunged.

“You got me! You got me!” the first, lighter voice cried out.

Silky white hair framed her enormous brown eyes. Her green face was smooth and young. She was as tall as my knees and chubby, wearing a purple dress.

She squirmed. “She caught me. The game is over.”

Another stepped out from a hedge. He had the same white hair and green skin. He wore trousers with green suspenders.

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“It’s your fault she caught you,” he grumbled, talking to the one in my arms. “You didn’t hide properly.”

“Regardless, she passed the first test,” the third, thin voice replied. “There is something strange about her, but at least she’s aware of her surroundings.”

The elder stepped forward. They wore robes and a pointed hat. I released the one in the purple dress, and she scampered away. She joined the one in green suspenders, and they took positions at the sides of the wizened one.

“Gnomes?” I asked Zayne. He had watched all this patiently.

“Gnomes,” he agreed.

The elder laughed. “Of course! What did you expect? Trolls? Gargoyles? They never would have been assigned such an important task.”

“So you’re the trial? I have to gain your approval?”

“We must decide if you can be trusted with Ninti’s safety. And just because you’re fast and clever enough to catch us doesn’t mean we’ll let you pass.”

The one in suspenders stomped his foot. “We can’t approve of someone like her. Look at her—no magic! It’s like she isn’t even fae!”

It stung, having my deficiency called out so blatantly. Defiant, I tapped my pointed ear and antler nubs. “I am definitely fae.”

“Of course you are,” the elder said, glaring at the grumpy one. “We know you’re fae. However, my acolyte is unfortunately correct—your lack of magic is a reason for concern.”

The elder was reassuring. I didn’t feel defensive, and as I allowed their words to settle, my stomach sank.

“I really don’t have magic, do I?” I asked.

“Not a lick of power,” the one in suspenders jabbed. “Completely unnatural. We clearly can’t give our approval. Ninti’s companion must have magic. And don’t even get me started on the Brand infecting her.”

The one in the dress disagreed. “There is nothing in Leo’s rules that says—”

“For Ninti’s sake, she should have magic. After all—”

“Stop it,” the elder hushed the younger two. They peered at me. “There’s... something more to her than meets the eye.”

The acolytes copied their leader, squinting at me too. Their green heads quirked in unison.

The elder crooked their finger. “Come closer. Sit.”

I obeyed, taking a seat before the three of them.

The elder pursed their lips. “Very interesting.”

“What is it?” the one with the dress asked.

“It’s subtle, but here, let me show you. This will be a good lesson,” the elder continued, giving me instructions next. “Hold still. This will be easier for you if you stay rooted.”

They began their work, falling into a trance. They seemed to leave their bodies behind, favoring otherworldly senses. Zayne had looked similar when the handkerchief sent me to “rescue” him, like he had vanished from his body when he visited the Underworld. It made the gnomes vulnerable.

In whatever language the elder gave their lesson, they spoke it on a frequency I couldn’t hear.

The three gnomes continued like that, and as time went on, I wasn’t sure what to do. I made eye contact with Zayne, and he shrugged, suggesting he had no better ideas.

So I obeyed, holding still, waiting.

It was terribly uncomfortable.

I had nothing to focus on. I twitched, wishing I could stretch or practice my exercise routine.

What if they refuse me?The idea of moving on without Ninti left me empty. I’d already spent a lifetime wondering, hungry to know her.

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I made an effort to settle, ignoring the residual twitches of my body until they faded away. I stilled; my mind slowed. Everything blanked, a moment of blissful emptiness...

Then I landed in another plane of awareness. I fell into the guidance of gnomes.

The tree grew alone on the hilltop, willowy branches sweeping in the breeze. It looked strong, yet damaged somehow. The injury was recent, raw treeflesh exposed beneath the missing bark. Gray ash streaked across the scar, a parasite working to expand. The Brand would take down the tree to claim it.

The elder's guided tour had long since passed this point. Now the gnomes examined the roots.

I followed into the trunk and down into the roots. My consciousness split, streaming through all the roots at once. Simultaneously, the sensations overlapped, stacking as I considered each root at the same time, diving deeper, driving down, into the core of the hill...

I didn't have to travel far.

There. They struggled. All the roots, all at once. They all ran against the same barrier, a block.

Metal. A thick sheet of iron was under the tree. It restricted the growing roots. The boundary thwarted the tree from security and expansion.

The iron denied the roots, but in their perseverance, the roots grew creative. They grew sideways, sprawling and spreading over the hilltop. They grew shallow, tangling in higher soil, when they were meant to grow deep.

The tree had done such creative things, constructing clever roots in the unsuitable hill. Even with a stubborn taproot pressed against metal, the tree had survived.

“Let’s focus here,” the elder said. With her guidance, my mind dropped the simultaneous strands of roots and focused instead on the tree’s taproot.

Denied its desired depth, the taproot had grown thick. It rammed against the metal plate, stopping there, at the edge, too stubborn to take an alternative path. It grew, pushing against the metal, like it might one day overpower it. Never giving up hope, it planned to grow.

“If we go beneath the binding...” My awareness was pulled past the taproot, leaving the tree behind. I followed deeper into the earth, journeying beneath the iron.

The earth glowed, bright after the darkness, the shallowness. The light welcomed me with a serenade, and I basked in it. It had always been there, meant to be a part of the whole, a part of me...

If the taproot ever punched through the barrier, the poor tree would light up, burning with more power than it knew how to contain. If the taproot ever succeeded, the tree would adapt or die.

I grew afraid—weirdly, strangely, overwhelmingly afraid—at the possibility. This power wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be...mine.

I blocked it away. I returned to the tree, to safety. I froze, detaching. I had to go, go, go—

“Wait a second, what are you doing here?” the elder said. “Oh. Sorry, dearie, you’re not supposed to see that.”

She pushed me away, back to the surface of my mind.

“And that is how you balance the gluons. Be sure to never skip this step—it’ll wreak havoc on your patient if you do.”

The acolytes were wide eyed. “Impressive,” someone said.

The elder faced me. “Terribly sorry about that. I must have done a poor job casting my boundaries. I was careless with those two coming along. Hopefully, you’ll be able to forget what you saw.”

What did I see? “The tree, was that—”

“Now, now,” the elder continued. “Up! Up! And off with you! You passed with flying colors. Go on then, adventure with Ninti. She’s excited to explore.”

I stood, head rushing and body unbalanced, as the three of them began jumping, reaching my waist. They bounced, waving their arms about. “Go, go. Off with you. Go,” they said.

They backed me into the door, and I followed Zayne through the threshold. “Best of luck!” someone cried. And the door vanished.

19 | Lingual Lessons

Ayla

It took me a few minutes to collect myself. My senses reverberated, overwhelming

me.

Zayne was patient. Thankfully, he had the common sense not to ask questions.

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I really didn't want to deal with whatever lay beneath that iron sheet. That power seemed dangerous, like a lit fuse creeping toward its inevitable blast. A bolt of lightning ready to strike when all I wanted was to live. All my life I thought I wanted magic, but power like that could kill me.

Besides, it probably wasn't about me. Right? I was just making assumptions. It ached to imagine the twisted roots, growing on a hilltop unsuited for such a beautiful tree.

That couldn't have been about me. I shoved my suspicions down deep. I made a mental promise to avoid gnomes in the future—and never let them anywhere near my mind.

Slowly, feeling a little more like myself, I focused on the task ahead. "Two doors left."

"Air or water?" Zayne asked.

"Water will be last." Water was cold and wet, like snow and mountains. It was damp, like tears. I would rather take my chances with air.

He motioned to the door. "When you're ready."

Yet I hesitated, cautious about barging through another door. Confidence had driven me after defeating the drake, but whatever those gnomes had done...

Zayne saw my hesitation, my doubt. He raised a brow, curious. Suddenly, I felt far more naked than when he applied the ashflower. I wanted to be brave and heroic.

Now he knew I wasn't.

"Ayla, you're doing great," he said. "You didn't need my support to face the gnomes. Ninti chose you for a reason—you can complete this trial."

He encouraged me.

My family never did that. My family watched silently from a balcony while I trained on the fields. The Southern Watch cheered for me, as teammates do. Yet, I had been different—a fae, a royal. Their future leader.

I wanted to hate Zayne for his kindness, but his encouragement warmed my aching heart.

Zayne understood me in a way no one else had. Even Rhett couldn't grasp how my family played into my identity. With Zayne, I could piece myself together. Angry and playful. Daring and willful. Tenderhearted, though I tried to hide it. He understood all of it. He saw me.

The realization terrified me. I was trusting him too fast—

I needed Ninti. Shoulders back, I pushed down the third door.

The air trial was straightforward. It wasn't easy—my palms were sweaty the entire time, but at least there were no battles or visions.

The trial took place on the rooftop of a floating building. Looking over the edge, I could see the aqua sea far below.

Five air masters instructed me to stand in the center of a large circle. They surrounded me, four griffins and one sphinx.

They asked me many, many questions.

“When did the Dusk Court move its capital?”

“Who is the prince of the Dawn Court? Please also name his partner.”

“What resource is Wisp known for?”

My education had been far more concerned with Valterra than the Isles. I wasn’t exactly prepared for this sort of interrogation.

Yet every time I answered wrong, they corrected me without chastisement. The air masters could talk and talk, giving mini lessons to answer their own questions. The lessons were worth paying attention to—sometimes they helped me answer a different question.

For a while, I answered more questions wrong than I did right. My palms grew sweaty.

My luck changed when I mentioned I was from Valterra. A few of the air masters expressed an interest in the kingdom, and they wanted to know everything—from geography to culture to history.

Those were questions I could answer.

I hadn’t been a great student. I could strategize moving parts, but I couldn’t study for hours. In the classroom, I would grow twitchy and start tapping rhythms against my desk, annoying the tutors until they let me run to the training grounds. Yet I still had a wealth of knowledge compared to the air masters, who seemed contained in the Isles of Fae.

Their questioning seemed to go on for hours, and I lost track of time, lost in a haze of doubt and concern. Anxiety buzzed through my body—Would they pass me? What waited beyond the water door?—but in time, even that faded to fatigue.

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Finally, they stopped asking questions and instructed me to leave while they deliberated my fate.

The sphinx led Zayne and me to the floor below. It was eerily empty—just a large empty room, like Leo had spent little time designing this part of the trial. Still, it was a relief to step away after all the questioning.

Out of sight from the air master griffins sniffing disapproval at my fidgeting, I relied on my exercise routine. It was a progression of postures designed to focus the mind and strengthen the body. The repetition, the familiar way I aligned my body, dancing without music... My body became familiar in a strange place.

Zayne watched, studying me, as I started the cycle a second time. By the time I began the sequence a third time, he asked, “Can I do it with you? I’ve learned something similar.”

I dropped into the first pose. “Sure.”

Zayne dropped into a similar posture.

“Hips to the front,” I corrected.

He shifted, improving the posture but still missing something. I wasn’t used to teaching. Maybe I could show him what I meant...

It wasn’t until my hands were on his hips, until I was saying, “Keep your hipbones forward,” that I realized I was touching him.

My fingers pressed into his muscle, finding his strength. Flushing, I jerked away.
“I’m sorry.”

“Actually, that helped—I get it now.”

“You look better,” I agreed.

“The next posture is the balance, right?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, showing him, tipping forward until I balanced on my front foot. “The tricky part will be to keep your hips forward. I suspect your instinct will be to open them.”

He didn’t need my help. Regardless, I offered it. “If you’re okay with my hands on your hips, I can apply pressure, giving you feedback through the transition.”

He swallowed, and it was his turn to blush. Damn. I was asking if he wanted to play with fire, and he didn’t back down.

“Okay,” he said.

Pretending exercise was our intention, knowing it was a ruse, we began.

I set my hands against his sides, a slight pressure to his hipbones, my fingers gravitating lower. I allowed him to take the lead.

He tipped forward. As I’d predicted, his alignment slipped, placing extra pressure into one of my hands as his hips shifted. He responded, using my hand as feedback while he straightened himself.

He steadied into the balancing pose, the weight of my hands becoming unnecessary.

He had the posture. I could step away, yet I savored the feel of him for a final moment before lifting my hands.

This had become self-created torture.

“You don’t have to go,” he whispered.

I should have disagreed, but I didn’t hesitate. My grip on his hipbones firmed...

For the second time that day, I didn’t know who moved first. Was it my hands drifting up his shirt, or his arms pulling me closer?

No kissing. We didn’t break that rule, but by Teyr, did we explore.

He dropped all pretense, stepping from the posture, and we embraced. Not a sweet hug. Our bodies clung together.

My hands wandered from his chest to shoulders before working my way back down his spine, dipping beneath the waistband of his pants. My thighs clenched as I felt his bulge forming against my stomach. His fingertips grazed my neck and collarbone, drifting under my shirt and toward my breast. I arched my back—

“Ahem.”

My hands were down his pants, one palming his ass. Zayne’s fingers stopped short of my nipple.

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We jerked away from each other.

The sphinx stood at the base of the stairs. They blinked, wisely ignoring whatever had just happened. I tried to do the same, despite my perked nipples. Zayne adjusted his pants.

The sphinx continued, “Congratulations, you passed. The committee will see you off.”

“Wonderful,” I breathed. Hot and bothered, I tried to celebrate. I felt confused. One more trial completed. That was all that mattered—right?

We followed the sphinx upstairs. I forced cold air through my heated body, straightening my tunic.

We bowed to the committee, and I rushed to express my gratitude, speaking quickly before the sphinx could share what they had seen. Moments later, the doorway appeared. Zayne and I dashed through, returning to the central cavern in a flushed silence.

I didn’t trust myself to speak. My frustrated body urged me to say, I’m hot for you. You’re hot for me. We might die. Let’s do this. I didn’t dare.

Zayne chose not to speak. Through our silence, we agreed not to talk about it.

Instead, we distracted ourselves, staring at the last door. Water. Eager to move forward, refusing to reflect, I didn’t hesitate. I faced the door and stormed through.

I froze, stumped by what I saw, my entire body going cold. In an instant, I knew I couldn't face this.

I tried to step back, to get away. Too late... the doorway had already disappeared. The trial forced me forward.

The scene before me was all too familiar. The downpour of rain, the freshly dug grave. I started trembling. This was the night everything had gone to hell.

20 | Her Rainy Night

Zayne

The downpour cooled the lingering heat at my core. It was either that or the fear streaked across Ayla's face. Whatever this was, whatever this meant to her, she was terrified.

I'd never seen her scared, not like this. A primal fear, driving her to flee, and when the portal vanished, she froze. Trusting her instinct, I lowered my weight, readying for an attack.

We stood in the middle of a vast forest, a freshly dug grave before us. Rain beat against the canopy above, dripping onto us, soaking my shirt, plaiting my hair to my face.

But nothing happened. There was no attack. The tension drained from my body, yet Ayla remained rigid.

She had faced a fierce drake and curious gnomes. She had faced the interrogation of scholars. But this? This was rain. A grave.

Still, Ayla didn't move, and I was getting drenched.

"Did I miss something?" I asked. "Are you expecting an attack?"

"The attack already happened," she whispered.

"What do you mean?"

It took her a while to reply. In time, she opened her hands to the sky and let the water flow down her face. If she cried, I couldn't see the tears. "This is the challenge. Me. Being here. Facing this."

I still didn't understand.

She slumped, falling to her knees before the grave. "This was the night I ran away."

"Is that you?" I pointed to the grave, horrified. "Did someone bury you alive?"

"No. Not exactly." She placed her hand against the grave, the dirt turning to mud. "The grave was dug for me, but I'm not the one buried in it."

"Then who is..."

"The first and only person I've killed."

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This. This was what she had been running from. While I had been marching toward a heroic death, Ayla had been running from a grave.

She pressed her hand to the dirt. The forest didn't shift; there was nothing else to face. To pass this trial, she had to face the past. Yet she hesitated, clearly needing support.

I sat beside her. "What happened?" I asked.

She sighed irritably and spoke to the forest. "Am I supposed to tell Zayne what happened?"

The rain lifted, becoming a patter instead of a downpour.

"Fine," Ayla gritted.

Speaking slowly, she began, "It was the night of my sister's coronation ball, the afterparty of a coronation rite. Mariana had just been formally recognized as the Princess Heir. Mariana and I... well, we weren't exactly close."

As she spoke, droplets of water coalesced, and two figures appeared, as tall as my hand. They formed like watery ghosts, two girls. The taller one formed with red hair, Ayla.

Their performance began, enacting the past on the stage of a grave. Voices rose from the aqueous actors. I watched as Little Mariana tried to trick Little Ayla into making a fae oath, but the Firewolf warned Ayla away. Ayla watched the performance with

knees to her chest, nodding along with the exchange.

The girls aged, and the watery play continued. Young Ayla hid behind a corner of the palace, listening while Young Mariana told their sisters wicked tales of Ayla. She said Ayla was only capable on the training field because of her abomination of a father.

With a swirl, the figures became young women. Together, they attended a party. Teenage Mariana goaded a young lord into sharing lewd poetry about Ayla's antlers, pressuring him to repeat it until Teenage Ayla started a brawl. Mariana blamed everything on Ayla's wildfae heritage.

The play stopped and the figures paused. They looked at the real Ayla, like they needed her permission to continue.

Ayla obliged, continuing with her story. "Your dedication to your sister, it confuses me. It wasn't like that with Mariana. Though that did change, for a time, after I saved Mariana's life."

The specters grew older, became women. Adult Mariana slept soundly, ignorant of the assassin in her room and the dagger inches from her heart. The Firewolf led Adult Ayla into the room, and Ayla fought, defending her sister. When it was over, Mariana thanked Ayla with tearful gratitude.

"That was about a year ago," Ayla added. "Afterward, she was kinder to me. I was hungry for affection, and I trusted her—I trusted too fast."

The scene swirled, water gathering to form a more elaborate scene—a large ballroom. Mariana stood front and center, wearing an ornate gown. Ayla stood against the back wall, presented with her other half sisters. She stood a hand taller than the rest.

The figures froze, unable to progress until Ayla gave her next direction. The rain became a whisper, and her breath hitched. She struggled to speak.

This part of the narrative had just happened to her. This experience remained raw.

“I couldn’t even tell Rhett what happened,” she gasped. “All I had to do was say, ‘I’m coming to the Isles,’ and he was ready to help.” She glanced at the spectral ballroom. “It still doesn’t feel real.”

“How did Mariana betray you?” I asked. “Let’s start there.”

Ayla swallowed, nodding as she focused on my question. “I think it started with something in my drink—later that night, I found a vial of an inhibitory drug. The effect was subtle, if that was the case. Sometimes I wonder if I made that part up, hoping drugs were the only reason I’d been so naïve...”

The figures shifted. Now that the rite was done, a celebration began. Soon Mariana was introducing Ayla to a handsome man. “This is Carson, a lord of the southern kingdoms. My half sister is a wonderful dancer, especially if you’re interested in the fae dances.”

“He wasn’t really a lord,” Ayla explained.

We watched as the evening ensued, the ghosts of the past dancing outside of time. Over the course of the night, Carson rarely left Ayla’s side. Flirting and dancing, he kept pace with her. Watching them together, dancing on the grave, my jealousy tasted like acid.

“Maybe I was just easy to trick,” Ayla mused. “Usually nobody pays me attention at balls. Maybe Carson, or whatever his name truly was, succeeded because I was weak to flattery.”

The ballroom emptied as the night drew long, and Carson tugged Ayla's hand, goading her to leave with him.

"I have rooms outside the city," he said. Together, they stepped into his coach, leaving the palace behind.

Ayla clenched her fist. "I can't believe I trusted him—that I trusted Mariana to have my best interests at heart, introducing him to me."

The coach approached a forest.

"He brought me here," Ayla said, looking around the forest clearing. There was a road, not far away and hidden behind trees.

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The figures grew bigger, becoming life-sized. Past met present, and the larger figures of Carson and Ayla walked from the carriage, side by side. They approached the grave, now empty, a pile of dirt at its side.

Ayla stared at Carson's ghost, her lips forming a tight line. She quivered. Once again, the visual retelling froze, waiting for her direction to continue.

"I can't." Ayla flung her face into her hands. She dropped her chin to her knees and rocked like a child seeking their own comfort.

"This time, you're not alone." I reached out, offering her my embrace.

She leaned in, and I wrapped my arms around her. For a moment, she tensed, restrictive for a final beat, before shuddering, surrendering in my arms.

This touch was different from before. I had healed her with ashflower—we had kissed and pawed. But I hadn't comforted her, not like this.

Her scent turned sweet as she sobbed. Whatever circumstances had brought Ayla to me, her companionship contradicted my belief that my death was likely, a necessary sacrifice. If Ayla had lived through this—I could find my way too.

The water figurines remained, suspended in their walk from the road to the grave. Ayla sniffed, cleared her throat, and continued, "He brought me here. He was supposed to kill me, bury me. It may have been luck that saved me—that he hadn't administered more of the drug. Maybe I survived because he underestimated me."

The figures spun into action. Past Ayla struggled when she saw the grave, but by then, Carson already had the upper hand. She was nestled into the crook of his arm, and it was easy for him to wrestle her to the ground. She fought, her reflexes and strength stunned, dazed by her circumstances. He overtook her.

My stomach twisted, but I couldn't flinch; I held Ayla still as she shivered.

Carson had Past Ayla pinned. He sat on her hips, holding down her wrists. She squirmed, failing to push him away as he brought her wrists together. He pressed them down with one palm, and with his freed hand, he grabbed his dagger.

Past Ayla resorted to begging. "Don't do it, Carson!"

"Carson," he cackled. "What a joke. I'm no lord."

Ayla shook.

He continued, speaking as an assassin so confident in his kill he could boast, "When I was hired to kill you, I thought it would be more difficult. Wooing someone as jaded as you? Overcoming a trained part-fae in combat? I thought I'd have to work at it, but this? You were easy, so desperate for love."

While bragging, he hadn't noticed how Past Ayla had shifted, slow and subtle. She pulled her feet closer to her hips, prepared to pin his legs. She slid her bound hands to the side, finding leverage.

He smiled, lifting his knife—

She sprung. In one punching motion, she twisted, pinning him. Caught by surprise, the assassin lost his grip on the knife. The blade flew out of reach.

In my arms, Ayla breathed. “I can’t believe I pulled it off. There’s still a part of me that believes I should have died that night.”

“You survived,” I whispered, hugging her tighter. “You’re still here. And I’ve... I’ve got you.”

I blinked, realizing what I had said. I wanted to deny it. Could I truly support her? I had failed others.

I had made mistakes and learned from them. With Ayla in my arms, I vowed to do better.

Ayla snuggled closer. “Thank you.”

She let me hold her as the play of the past unfolded.

The assassin broke Past Ayla’s hold, and they both darted for the knife. She was faster. When it came time for the killing blow, she hadn’t hesitated—she drove the knife straight into his heart.

My Ayla twitched, squirming at the sight.

“If you hadn’t killed him, I would have done it for you,” I whispered.

Past Ayla stood there a long time. Not moving. She may have stayed there longer, but—

“Is it done?” the coachman called into the rain. “Let’s go. It’s too wet.”

Past Ayla twitched, reflexes taking over once again. Deepening her voice, she answered, “I’m burying the body now.”

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Quickly, she checked the assassin's pockets, finding the half-empty vial of a drug and a beautiful broach. Even in its watery form, the broach sparkled with wealth. Past Ayla deliberated whether to pocket or bury it—She kept it.

“It was Mariana's,” Ayla explained. “I suspect it was his payment, and I still have it. I hid it in my armor—I might need the evidence.”

It was a shallow grave, and she made quick work of filling it. Mud covered her dress.

Body entombed, Past Ayla picked up the dagger and walked to the coach. From the grave, we listened as she overtook the driver, pushing him from the carriage.

She threatened him further, waving the blade to bully him into surrender. He let her go, standing on the roadside. Past Ayla drove the carriage, turning it back the way they had come.

Finally, the specters vanished, their forms falling into puddles.

Ayla finished the narrative. “That was the night I finally ran away. I broke into my mother's jewelry box and stole Ninti's ring. My escape plans had been prepared long ago, and I followed them by reflex. I was out of the capital within an hour.”

She breathed, settling into herself. The sun rose quickly, time accelerated in this strange world. Beyond tears, she gave way to sleep, slumping into my embrace.

“I'm sorry I wasn't there.”

Ayla straightened, facing the Firewolf at eye level.

Ninti seemed hesitant, a strange look on such an emblazed beast. She settled on her haunches, head hung as she waited for Ayla to respond.

“What happened?” Ayla asked.

“A block, I think,” she answered. “It started a few days before Mariana’s coronation, but I don’t know what caused it. When you stole the ring, the block began to weaken, but I couldn’t break through—not until you struggled against the Gray General.”

“How?” Ayla asked.

“There are lots of ways it could have happened.” Ninti nuzzled her, her fur brushing my face. “What matters is that we’re together now.”

Ayla dug her face into Ninti’s fur, and the sky turned blue, the sun warming the forest. The rain passed and our clothes dried, cleaning themselves as if we had never been soaked.

“Shall we?” the Firewolf asked, stepping past the grave. The mound of dirt vanished, replaced by the stone arch. On the other side, Leo’s forested shell seemed bright.

“I did it,” Ayla breathed. She hugged me. “We did it.”

In her exhaustion, she leaned into me. I picked her up, holding her to my chest as I carried her across the threshold.

“We did it,” I echoed, unsure who we were.

Ayla

Vanessa's voice boomed through the ship. "That fiery beast is not allowed on my ship."

"It's not your ship, not yet," Zayne corrected her.

"Don't worry," Ninti replied. "My fire won't burn a thing. I'm only dangerous when I want to be."

Vanessa sniffed, already at odds with the Firewolf.

Safe in Zayne's arms, I was content to listen and too tired to contribute. Zayne had me; he held me, and for the first time since the night from hell, I felt safe.

It was a nice feeling—and one I didn't think would last long. Not with the nature of our quest.

Yes, I had joined this crew when I boarded that morning, but my heart held back. How could I save Zayne's sister when mine had orchestrated an assassination attempt? My wound was fresh, prone to inflammation and infection.

Mariana had tricked me. Not-Carson made a fool out of me. Now my misplaced trust shamed me. Could I confront my sister? Would there be consequences for killing the assassin? Was it ever safe to trust?

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I had buried those questions when I filled the grave. To escape, to survive—I had ignored the pain.

I had been a stowaway. A captive. Now I was free.

I sailed the Isles of Fae in the company of a prince, a sprite, and a lesser deity. Our quest was to save a princess—to face a necromancer.

This was the greatest adventure of my life. This was an adventure from hell. That I'd held myself together this long was a miracle. Maybe I was stronger than I thought.

Instead of facing the water trial, I had wanted to run. With Zayne by my side, I faced it. While forced to relive my splintered memories, I had found something.

Not peace. Not comfort. Not exactly release.

But watching again, I saw that the assassination attempt hadn't been my fault. I hadn't deserved deception or betrayal. I didn't deserve to be broken. I owned the power of my healing.

Now Zayne knew the truth—who I was and why I left. He had faced my deepest secret. He had stayed by my side, learning why sisterhood meant something different to me. Zayne had listened and watched and understood.

We had bonded in a new way. And it scared the hell out of me.

The last man I trusted had tried to kill me.

And I had watched the life fade from his eyes.

I knew the rush of certainty that my dagger had struck true, the realization I was safe, that I'd killed a man...

I shuddered in Zayne's arms. He lifted me closer.

If you hadn't killed him, I would have done it for you.

I listened to the thump of Zayne's heartbeat, grounding myself in the consistency. Without thinking, I nuzzled into him, toward safety.

"Ayla needs rest. I'm taking her to the cabin," Zayne said, putting an end to the banter between Vanessa and Ninti. "Vanessa, can you continue our route to the Isle of Shadow?"

"Sure." The water sprite sighed. "As long as she promises not to burn down the boat."

"As long as you don't get me wet," Ninti countered.

"It's a deal."

Their words sounded so far away. I blinked my eyes open as Zayne carried me to the cabin.

The giant turtle lifted her head. Leodoras gave a final farewell before swimming away. I didn't understand exactly what had happened in her trial; it was possible I never would.

The sun hung low on the horizon, confirming hours had passed since we started the trial.

Ninti padded nearby, following us into the cabin. She wore the form of a dog, and even in this smaller body, her presence stole took my breath away.

My Firewolf was real. Ninti was with me.

It didn't seem possible. I couldn't grasp the consequences of what had happened, what my bond with Ninti truly meant.

I thought our quest was to help a princess claim her throne—my reward was to have my Brand destroyed. That was easy to understand.

Everything concerning deities was much more confusing. There were threads to this quest I didn't have the strength to untangle.

Zayne settled me on the bed, the wall of pillows still dividing the middle. I curled up on my side, facing his side of the bed. I sank into the mattress, relieved to let it support me. The boat swayed, rocking back and forth.

"How's your Brand?" he asked.

I tugged at the neck of my tunic. "It's the size of my thumbprint." Since the gnomes entered my mind, the Brand's controlling impulses had grown quiet.

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He nodded. "Get some rest now. I'll treat it later this evening."

I considered protesting, to ask for another dose of ashflower, but my eyelids grew heavy. He was right; I needed rest.

Zayne tucked the blanket around me, awkwardly respecting our boundaries as he reached around the pillow wall. A divider that... I didn't quite understand anymore. Who were we to each other now?

The question pushed me to the edge of exhaustion. Zayne seemed just as unsure. Nodding to himself and whispering, "Just rest," he left the cabin.

My mouth parted. I almost asked, Will you stay?

He might say no. Or maybe my sense of security with him resulted from my imagination.

Ninti jumped onto the bed. She settled in the nook of my chest, becoming the right size to fit. Even if her fire didn't burn, she warmed me.

I scratched her head. The flames of her ears tickled my hands, pleasant and welcoming. Within the whirlwind, she became a constant.

"Thank you," I whispered, "for choosing me."

She shimmied against me, her little flames growing brighter. "To think, I believe I should be the one thanking you. For so long, there had been nobody I wanted

for my companion. Now I can see how the Isles have changed.”

My mind still reeled, and I contemplated my ruby ring. “I can’t... I don’t deserve you.”

She snuggled deeper into my side. “Nobody can deserve me. But I still choose you.”

I petted her from ear to tail, and with each stroke across her fur, I grew a little bit sleepier, a little more confident.

Ninti was right. I couldn’t deserve either my misfortunes or my luck—I could only own my power. A power I now suspected was much, much larger than I ever wanted. Assuming I could safely unleash it.

22 | Delicious Dates

Ayla

It was dark when I next stirred. The sailing was smooth and the sea air fresh. We moved with purpose, onward and into danger. If I put my uncertainty aside, it could be a wonderful night.

Ninti rolled over, moving closer to the wall. Like a heating stone, she kept the entire cabin warm. It had been cozy to cuddle her, but now the bed was too warm.

My brain whirled at full speed; my body felt normal. However long I had slept—had I skipped dinner?—I was eager to face the world again.

To face Zayne again.

Zayne...

He wasn't in the cabin, and the boat wasn't that large.

With a hesitant breath, I shifted my tunic, checking the Brand. To my relief—and surprise—it remained small, like it hadn't grown at all.

Grabbing my cloak from the wardrobe, I stepped onto the deck. The crow's nest glowed blue as Vanessa's magic swirled and swayed, mimicking the rhythm of waves and sea. The two moons hid from sight, and under starlight, we sailed forward.

Zayne sat at the makeshift table, a fae light casting shadows upon his face. His gaze was distant, lost to the horizon. He drew his lips into a tight line, adding to his somber expression.

My heart skipped as I studied him. The light struck the firm line of his jaw. My fingers burned, remembering the feel of the muscles under his shirt...

"Can I join you?" I asked.

He startled. It took a full moment before he realized I was there. He stared at me, blinking, as if clearing dark thoughts from his mind.

Eventually, he indicated the other crate. "Sure," he said. "Join me."

I sat. "Something on your mind?"

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“Vanessa says we made good time traveling with Leo. We’ll reach the Isle of Shadow tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I choked. “What time is it?”

“Midnight, maybe.” He shook his head, still stirring from his sullen thoughts. “Sorry. You must be hungry. Let me get you something.”

“I’m fine. I didn’t mean to interrupt... If you need space—”

“Stay.” He stood, pressing me back into my seat. “You need to eat.”

He placed a rough cloth over the barrel-turned-table. From nearby containers—one of which was an ice- blue cooler box—he retrieved provisions for our dinner.

There was bread, baked fresh that morning. A spreadable cheese and savory sausage. A sweet apple jam and a spicy pepper sauce. Crackers for good measure and—

“Are those...dates?” I licked my lips.

“Glad you don’t find the meal too humble, Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty?” I snorted with laughter. “I’ve learned not to expect much from you, princeling.”

He chuckled too, adding a waterskin to the table.

It was nice, the laughter, the jokes. It was strange too. We retreated into silence, the wind and starlight becoming our companions. After my first bite, I found I was quite hungry.

He shifted a few times, like he didn't know what to do with himself now that he had company.

“You should eat too,” I offered. “Tomorrow will be a big day.”

“Tomorrow. Yes.”

He was worried. I didn't know how to help him.

I loaded slices of bread with meat and cheese, making up for my missed meal. Our silence continued as I ate. I tried to give Zayne the space to contemplate.

For dessert, I reached for the dates. They only grew on the Isles—Valterra was much too cold. As I bit into the dried fruit, the world slowed. No matter the chaos, there could be presence in a bite of food.

Zayne smiled shyly, tilting his head. “Are you feeling better?”

“The food helps.”

“I'm glad.”

“It's also a beautiful night. If we're facing Inarus soon, why shouldn't I enjoy food with fine company?”

“You think my company is fine?” he asked.

“I didn’t say it was great.”

He laughed, the sound shallow, as it often was. At least he had laughed at all. His lips drew tight, serious again. “How is your Brand?”

“It’s still small. Your second healing seems to have lasted a lot longer.”

“Is it... quiet?”

“Very quiet,” I admitted. Since the gnome’s vision of the shallow-rooted tree scarred with gray ash, the Brand hadn’t bothered me. Not in the same way. “Maybe the gnomes helped.”

“Let’s hope,” he mused. “Regardless, I’m curious. What did the gnomes show you?”

“I don’t understand it,” I said it too fast.

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“You don’t understand it. Or are you choosing not to understand it?”

I smirked. “Choosing not to understand.” It hurt too much, the surreal evidence that I was unsupported by my environment—a mighty tree, broken and blocked.

He didn’t pry. “I want to show you something.”

He returned to the ship’s containers, this time opening a chest, padded for breakable items. He pulled forth another phonograph, this one larger than the one I purchased. He set it upon the table and ran his finger along the crystalline base.

A ballad sang from the horn. It was a tune usually played late in the night—a song of storytelling and beauty. A chance to take a break after a faster dance. This one told of the romance between a princess of the Dawn Court and a swan shifter.

I picked up another date. “Now it’s a perfect night.”

The ballad played out, a long and familiar tune, wrapping around me like a warm blanket.

“Do you sing?” he asked. “Or play an instrument? Since you like music so much?”

I laughed. “Not since I was a child. My sisters had music lessons, and Mother encouraged me to attend them. But the human songs never interested me—my voice wasn’t suited to it. Once I discovered fiddle bars, I never attended a lesson again.”

“Shame, I would have liked to hear you sing.”

I blushed. Even in privacy, I hadn't sung in years. "What about you? Do you sing?"

"I don't even dance."

"Really?"

He shrugged. "I know some of the formal dances. I learned refrains from the starlit chorus. It was part of my education, for a time."

"Is the starlit chorus as enchanting as I've heard?"

"It's breathtaking."

He began to relax, leaning on the table and supporting his chin with his hand. When he caught me looking at him, the corners of his lips turned in a slight smile. He had nice lips. Good for kissing.

I waited for my doubts about him to set in, for my fears to change my mind. But I knew what I wanted. I distracted myself, reaching for another date, only it was too sweet.

I needed something...different.

The way Zayne was looking at me, a glint in his eyes. He could be thinking the same thing.

The shadows sharpened his features, highlighting him in his element. His horns added to his stature as his dark eyes beckoned.

He smirked. An invitation—one I rushed to accept.

My hand gripped his shoulder as he grabbed my waist. Our lips met, sealing our kiss. We pulled ourselves together. We pressed closer.

His mouth was firm. I assailed him with hard kisses. He sucked at my tongue, and I bit at his lips.

When I straddled him, his hardness grew. I wallowed in the pressure against my crux. A promise. This thing between us, the desire—

Am I safe?

I gasped, breaking the pull of his lips. I forced myself to take a proper breath.

Zayne hesitated, his hand supporting my ass, bracing me against him. “Sorry. I... We said no kissing,” he said. Yet he didn’t push me away, and I didn’t stand up.

I wanted him. I wondered if I could handle him after what had happened with the assassin. Just one more kiss...

There were countless reasons to slow down. Yet I hungered for him, and my body was clear about its desires. “I’m open to changing the rules,” I said.

“Me too,” he replied.

We waited. Another second of silence passed, but neither of us stepped away. We held our embrace. We had outgrown our old boundaries. Enough time had already been wasted while we wrestled with our carnal attraction—it was time to surrender.

“Shall we?” Zayne nodded toward the small cabin.

Yes, please.

I stood, pulling his hand after me. My core clenched. I couldn’t consider this for too long. I wanted him—I had wanted him since the night we met.

Nobody had ever attracted me like this. Sure, I had flirted and kissed, but I’d never trusted another enough to move farther.

Instead, I’d read books and learned to make myself come. A nonfertility charm had hung uselessly at my wrist, carried just in case for years. Yet I had held my cards close—until Carson.

My throat tightened. Shame flushed through me, and I shoved the memory away.

That was then. This was now.

Zayne was hot. The chemistry between us made me tremble. Every kiss, every touch, made me burn for more.

Soon enough, Zayne and I would face a necromancer. If we trusted each other enough to do that, we could have sex first.

My core tightened, quivering as I led him to the cabin. This desire was more delicious than dates.

The cabin door opened, and Ninti stepped out. Sniffing the air, she took one glance at us. She spoke in a teasing tone. “It’s far too hot in there. Think I’ll be more comfortable sleeping on the deck.”

23 | Possession

Zayne

I followed Ayla into the cabin, heart racing, pushing blood to my cock. My brain grew hazy, focused on the female before me.

Ayla.

I had longed for her since I first caught her scent. Cherries and spice. I adored her beautiful red hair, her powerful muscles. I couldn’t imagine how it would feel to be inside her...

Not that I had experience. I’d carried a nonfertility charm for years—most unmated fae did—but I’d never needed one.

My life had been one of strict self-control in a palace of deception. There were few I could trust, and fewer who could unlock my heart, driving me to carnal hunger. Ayla made me impulsive, inflaming me in a way no female had done before.

The sensation gave me pause. Would she burn me?

Yet the way she pulled my hand, summoning me into the cabin... her confidence swept away my doubt. I wanted this. With her.

Ayla had lifted me from a self-dug grave. If she had more life to share, I longed to be taken into her embrace, accepted by her lustrous body.

With a growl—a sound so unlike me, yet as true as any laugh she had pulled from me—I grabbed her.

Starting with her wrists, my fingers traced up her forearms. I drew my lips into an O and blew a stream of air against her neck.

She shivered, sensitive to my simple caress.

Stroking myself in the dead of night, I'd daydreamed what I would do if I found a partner. I had countless ideas about how I could please her.

Cautiously, slowly, I laid a kiss behind her ear. My second kiss dropped a little lower. My third landed on her neck.

Her hands slipped under my shirt, and my skin burned where she touched me. I wasn't used to human touch—over years of vigilant exile, my skin had become my private cage. Ayla unfastened me.

I graced her neck with more kisses, tracing my lips to the V of her tunic. I always imagined a long seduction. If I drew this out, I could drive Ayla desperate for release.

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She raced ahead, running her hands under my shirt, fingers exploring the texture of my muscled obliques.

“Too slow,” she groaned.

In a moment, she had my shirt off. In a second, hers was gone too. My slow, steady self-control wouldn’t last, not when she—

She yanked off her undershirt, baring her breasts, dusky nipples pert. My pants tightened, taking in her stomach, tight with slim muscle.

My gaze landed on her Brand. Guilt and shame sickened me. I did that to her.

“Not now.” Ayla blocked the Brand with a palm. “I don’t want it to come between us, not now.”

I reached forward, resting my palm over hers, her ample breasts pressing against my hand. I felt her heartbeat. Tha-thrump.

“Not now,” I agreed.

Ayla

Why won’t he hurry up?

I wanted him between my legs, yet he dragged this out, like poetry when I wanted the punchline. My breath caught, half-moan and part-gasp. More.

I thought we had moved past the Brand. Even so, he hesitated. He didn't seize control, and I didn't know how to rush ahead.

"Wait," I realized. "Is it your first time too?"

"Too? You mean—"

"I kiss and flirt... but I've always stopped there." I held his gaze, easing his embarrassment. "I'm sure we can figure this out together."

"I... I have a nonfertility charm."

"Oh, I have one too."

"Okay."

"Okay," I whispered.

With a rush, I realized what we'd just agreed to do. About damn time.

I wrapped my hands around his neck, pulling him against me. I braced myself against his firm chest.

Darting my lips to his, I moved forward, tasting him with my tongue. His scent of cedar and amber mingled with the salt of desire. My fingers ran up his face, exploring chin to cheekbones.

I found his horns, testing where their base met his scalp. He shivered, giving a light moan. He likes that. Heady power ignited me.

Sound, scent, and sensation. I drowned in him.

He pulled me closer, pressing me into him. Frenzy flitted down my spine, building in my sex. My crux bloomed with wet, adding to the building scent of salt.

Now.

I tugged at his belt and pulled at his pants, pushing them to the floor. His underwear strained, the fabric taut with the bulk of him.

My breath hitched. I'd seen a cock before—the men of the Southern Watch could be competitive knuckleheads. Yet the sight of Zayne's package, wrapped beneath the fabric...

I swallowed. "Mm-hmm," I choked.

His fingertips graced my waist, drifted to my belt, and loosened it. My pants gone, I remained in my underwear. Daring, his finger wandered lower, tracing my hipbone. He found skin that was never touched.

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I trembled. Thighs pressing, breath catching.

“Let’s go,” I whispered, pushing him toward the bed, pressing his back against the mattress.

I straddled over him, standing on my knees, just high enough that our sexes almost met. I dropped to my forearms, cradling his head between my hands, and caressed the sweet spot where his horns met skull.

He twitched, writhing under me, bucking his hips. His bulk brushed my crux, and even through our underwear, his contact destroyed my remaining restraint.

I pressed myself against him, writhing my clit against his hard member. He moaned beneath me, squeezing a breast—he brushed the Brand.

I was driven by need need need—

“Bind him,” a voice compelled me. “Take control of the ship.”

The Brand. An intruder rising in my consciousness.

“Ayla, are you okay?” Zayne sounded far away. “Your Brand... it’s getting bigger. Fast.”

“You belong with the Shades. Darkness is inevitable.”

The Brand hadn’t been silent. It had been dormant, waiting for the right opportunity.

Now it stole the power of my desire, transforming it into something darker.

Zayne squirmed under me, trying to get away. My body moved without my permission—I pinned him, grabbing his wrists and clenching my thighs against his sides. I held him down with preternatural strength.

“Bind him,” the Brand commanded.

“Ayla...” Zayne whispered.

My core clenched, my body still hot with need...a need that the Brand twisted to destructive ends. Zayne’s voice changed, rising with the darker tenor of the Underworld. He spoke a command, “Ayla, it’s the Brand. Ignore it. Overcome it.”

When he spoke that way, it was easier to understand. His necromantic command countered the voice of the Brand. I managed to hesitate, stilling my body for a moment. It was long enough for Zayne to free himself.

“You gave yourself to lust—why can’t you give yourself to me?” the Brand whispered. “You don’t deserve your body. GIVE IT TO ME.”

My soul slipped. Once expansive, I felt trapped, growing small. The Brand was no longer contained by my skin—it surrounded me. Pressure consumed me; the Brand smothered me.

A memory flashed. Carson. We kissed in the carriage on the way to his death, his hands running through my hair. The Brand gave its commentary. “You’re too impulsive. Let me take control.”

The words made me feel even smaller. I ran, retreating deeper into my mind. My eyes remained open. I could still see, even if I couldn’t control my body.

Zayne reached for the satchel of ashflower. I chased after him. The Brand covered my skin, elbows to knees.

Zayne needed more time. I fought. What had happened with Carson wasn't my fault. What I wanted with Zayne wasn't a problem.

I had a right to my body—to protect it, enjoy it.

For a moment, I found leverage. For a second, my body froze.

The door opened, and Ninti pushed her way into the room.

Something tickled at my chest. Ashflower. “Shade's Brand, leave and let Ayla be,” Zayne said from far away.

I reached for the ashflower like a lifeline, begging it to suck the Brand from me. Ninti's fire flickered at my feet. My body remained rigid, uncertain of who had control.

Zayne gave his command again. Like a prayer for my soul.

The Brand showed me more images. Carson's surprise as the dagger slid into his heart. His body in a grave, sprinkled with dirt.

“You left with him. It's your fault,” the Brand whispered. “You can never escape what you've done.”

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The Brand pressured my soul. It diminished me. It ate at the fringes of who I was.

“Darkness is inevitable.”

It consumed me.

24 | Containment of the Soul

Zayne

“I will take control of this ship,” Ayla hissed.

The Brand covered her completely now, toes to fingertips. Her joints shifted, more mobile than before.

I blocked the door, and she shredded her fingernails wildly into me—prepared to go through me if it meant reaching her destination.

I shoved the ashflower to her chest, touching her too-smooth, too-reflective skin. Ayla’s body—once soft and firm and enchanting—had become terrifying.

I yanked on the Brand; I gave my command. “Shade’s Brand, leave and let Ayla be.”

She stilled. I forced the Brand to heel. I reached past the Brand, searching for Ayla—I couldn’t find her.

Her eyes had turned entirely gray. The Brand bucked her body; she twisted out of my

grip. “Ayla is mine!”

Ashflower withered in my palm.

Ninti grew, becoming the largest wolf I’d ever seen. She shoved Ayla to the bed and pinned her down. Ayla squirmed under the weight of the Firewolf, but even with her unnatural strength, she was no match for Ninti.

“She’s still there,” Ninti insisted. “Trust me—trust her.”

“How do we reach her?”

“Descend to the Underworld,” she directed. “You’re more powerful there. I can back your command with my power, like we did with the Gray General. Prepare yourself with a handful of ashflower, and when we’re in position, tell the Brand to leave.”

My heart raced. This was beyond anything I had done before, but I couldn’t lose Ayla, not to the Brand. I couldn’t lose anyone else—

“All right,” I said.

I dove into the depths of the Underworld. The flow of death dragged at my feet, and I allowed it to pull me toward a dark mass, toward Ayla.

Her brightness was gone, blocked by the Brand. What had been a lump of coal, implanted by the Gray General, now consumed her.

As I neared, my vision cleared.

There was a jar. Ceramic and tall.

The Brand appeared as a gray ghost—one gaining definition, finding form. It grew bigger, looming over Ayla’s diminutive form. Her arms and legs were transparent and wispy, her torso faded. Eyes closed, she seemed unconscious.

As Ayla dissolved, the Brand grew defined. It was taking shape. With its newly formed body, it drove Ayla to the jar.

Ayla shifted, obedient to her new master. She drifted, decreasing in size. The fringe of her soul dipped into the jar.

I’d heard of these soul jars. Once sealed, the container would hold Ayla, easing the Brand’s reign over her body.

The Brand formed a hand, and in it, it held a lid. It braced, ready to seal the jar—

“Ayla,” I called for her. I gathered all that Ayla was—all that I knew. The fae whose blood drove her to dance. The lost daughter. The fiery fae I wanted to fuck. She was so much more than I knew—if only I had the chance to learn.

My spirit reached for her soul.

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In the Living Realm, I pressed the ashflower to her heart.

“Shade’s Brand, leave and let Ayla be.”

I didn’t speak alone. Ninti joined me, her raw power adding to my command.

In the Underworld, I stepped between the Brand and Ayla, coming between the ghost and the soul. Spreading my arms, I pushed them apart.

My hand crushed against the Brand’s chest. I pounded it, shoving it. The ghost lurched away, but tendrils of darkness remained, tied to Ayla’s soul and the jar.

I reached for Ayla, finding the core of her soul and pulling it closer to me. I lifted her from the jar. She rose, still caught in the Brand’s web.

Ninti’s power faded as the command ran its course. We made progress, but Ayla was not yet free.

“More ashflower,” Ninti ordered me.

I swam to the surface of the Underworld, returning fully to the living.

The ashflower was half-gone. I should have hesitated, but I didn’t. I couldn’t, not until Ayla was free. “You will have enough,” Teyr had promised. I hoped he was right. I grabbed another dose.

In the Underworld, I had seen improvement. I had sent the Brand away and lifted

Ayla from the jar. Here, her skin remained completely gray.

I pressed the ashflower against her chest. “Ayla, come to me,” I commanded her.

I bid her soul to rise, to fight the Brand’s curse. Ninti backed my effort, fueling it with her power. The Firewolf called Ayla to return.

Together, we broke more tendrils linking the Brand to Ayla’s soul. We directed the Brand’s power into the ashflower, allowing it to absorb the darkness.

Ayla blinked. Her eyes glinted green. It was working.

We finished the surge, releasing only when the ashflower was gone, turned to dust.

I lifted my hand to examine the freckle-sized Brand. It looked small again, secure, I hoped.

Then I remembered Ayla’s breasts were exposed. She remained shirtless. She realized it too, her body tightening, a sudden blush coloring her cheeks.

I looked away and pulled two tunics from the closet, tossing one to her and tugging one on myself. In the rush of it all, I had forgotten how bare we were.

Ninti shook, shaking her entire spine, growing smaller at the same time. Dog-sized, she cocked her head, staring at Ayla. “I’m glad you’re okay, but no need to be so modest. I’m a canine.”

I found my pants and pulled them on.

“We all have itches to scratch,” Ninti continued. “But to be honest, I’m not sure you two should trythatagain. Not while Ayla has the Brand.”

Ayla crossed her arms over her covered chest. “Whatdidhappen?”

“The Brand took over,” Ninti replied.

“How?” I asked.

Ninti sat on her haunches. “The Brand has a mind of its own, especially when facing ashflower. It’s become creative in its methods—this time, it delayed, saving energy until you were vulnerable.”

“Do you think... Will it happen again?” Ayla sounded haunted.

“It’s possible,” Ninti admitted. “But now we can prepare ourselves.”

“Is it even safe to sleep?” Ayla rubbed her forehead. She was collapsing again. The intensity of her day, of our conversation. Of our...attraction.

Everything added to the weight of her burden.

“You should sleep,” Ninti replied.

“Here, you take the bed,” I said. “I’ll sleep on the deck.” We couldn’t share a bed, not after that. Our magnetism was dangerous, and sharing a sleeping space would practically invite a second attack.

“No, I couldn’t,” Ayla replied. “It’s your ship. I’ll sleep on the deck.”

“No, I will,” I insisted.

Ayla’s face firmed, growing stubborn.

Ninti looked from her to me. “How’s this—I can sleep on the deck, becoming large enough to be Ayla’s bed. I’ll keep her warm, keep her safe... and I’ll be ready. Just in case there is another attack.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I don’t mind—”

“That’s perfect,” Ayla interrupted. “Thanks, Ninti. I really appreciate it.”

Before I could object another time, she left the cabin, Ninti padding after her.

Ayla

I could have hurt him.

A part of me wanted to hurt him.

This part.I brushed the Brand. The same blemish that was supposed to guide us made me attack Zayne. It wanted to kill him, steal his ship, and drive us toward...somewhere.

It was for the best that I slept outside.

Ninti grew in size. Filling the bow of the boat, she curled up on her side.

“Careful!” Vanessa complained from the crow’s nest. “You’ll make the boat heavy.”

Gingerly, I found a place against her stomach, nestled between her paws. I shifted, fidgeting until I felt supported. I didn’t need a blanket; she warmed me.

“Oh, hi, Ayla,” Vanessa continued. “I guess this will work.”

“Just for the night,” I told her.I hope.

25 | Discerning Her Direction

Ayla

Nightmares interrupted my uneasy sleep. In countless creative ways, I relived my experience.

Gnomes surrounded me. They bounded on each other’s shoulders until I was trapped under a mound of them. They chanted, “Break the barrier.”

I looked up from a grave, swallowed by the earth. I was trapped in a clay jar, my body taken from me. Death was a leaden blanket holding me down.

Finally, I was in a strange barn. An ice-blue coffin at its center. Shades shoved me

into it, pressing me down. They wanted me to freeze.

I woke with a shiver.

My tunic was damp with sweat, and I peeked down the neckline, checking my skin. The Brand remained a pinprick—I used to believe that was safe.

None of us had seen it coming. The Brand was sneaky, ready to pounce if it had the chance.

No wonder I had nightmares.

Ninti sighed, her gigantic stomach pressing and lifting beneath me. The sound of her breath, rhythmic and reliable, reminded me I wasn't alone.

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She was awake, her eyes open in a sleepy sort of way. She didn't ask questions; she didn't intrude, but her eyes were dark with concern.

"I'm okay... Okay enough," I reassured her. I reassured myself, running a hand against her back.

I wasn't okay. Wasn't sure if I'd ever be okay again.

I remembered glimpses of what had happened.

There was a long blur in my memories while my soul had been bound. Once the Brand had its grip on me, I struggled to find my wits. It had continued an onslaught of abuse. It used my weaknesses and twisted my memories. It told me of my worthlessness.

Then I woke. Zayne was touching me, spent ashflower drifting between his fingers, his hand between my breasts.

Such a different touch than before—he had transitioned from lover to healer. Yet I could still remember him stripped, his sculpted chest and large bulge. The sound he made when I brushed the base of his horns. Even now, my sex itched, a little wet.

How embarrassing.

I had attacked him in nothing but my underwear. I had lost control of my body. I still felt naked. I detested myself. After the Brand's abuse, it was easy to scratch at my flaws.

Now we headed for Gloom. The Brand wouldn't weaken anytime soon. This would get worse before it got better—

I breathed, in and out, forcing my spiraling thoughts to stop. I had to destroy my Brand before it drove me insane.

I hoped Zayne was right. That defeating Inarus would destroy the Shades. That putting Eleanor on the throne would encourage Gloom to return to the north. Then maybe this hell would be worth it.

Right now, I needed sleep.

Lengthening my breath to match Ninti's long sighs, I closed my eyes and miraculously found stillness.

I dreamed again.

The roots might be broken, busted, and planted in poor earth, but the tree stood tall. Mostly straight, mostly sturdy. The trunk supported the branches, a spine lifting leaves from mud, closer to the sun.

Except the trunk was damaged with ash.

Bark had been scratched, treeflesh exposed. The gray ash thrived there, a parasite.

Yet the tree lived—contaminated and complete. It had grown to accommodate the injury. Like the roots, the trunk had adapted. It was resilient.

I studied the details, where ash met bark. The edges of the injury had healed, forming a new boundary. The bark would not regrow, but the edge had scarred. The infection struggled to spread past the scar. In its hardness, the tree limited the parasite. The ash

remained, but it no longer commanded the tree.

My Brand had belittled me, making the most of my flaws, and yet I remained. I was still here. The ashflower had given me time to thicken my scars, a defensive boundary.

Darkness was inevitable, but that didn't dictate what I did with the life I had left.

Dreamily, I fell into the ash, and it didn't consume me. I settled beyond space and time.

I saw that the ash forged connections, building a web of those infected. Anything could become a tool—if I had the courage to wield it.

Leaning closer, I saw countless threads.

A single strand separated itself from the web. I had once held a handkerchief with magical essence like this. Lilac...

Eleanor.

She was far away, consumed by the Brand. Her soul was contained while her body remained alive. She was more of an echo than anything solid.

Still, it was her.

My eyes snapped open.

“Vanessa!” I called upward. “I know where we need to go.”

More importantly, I knew I was capable. The Brand’s expansion might be inevitable, but in the meantime, I would learn to control it too.

26 | Stagnation

Zayne

Gloom haunted my waking moments. The sun had risen, but it did little to chase the darkness away.

Judging from the sluggish weight on my mind, we neared Gloom’s boundary. The sensation was unforgettable, linked to unhappy memories.

Yanking on tunic and trousers, I recalled how Ayla had seen me the night before. I checked that my tunic was tightly buttoned, my chest covered. No more distractions. Even if Ayla...

Even if Ayla was the most attractive female I’d ever seen. To think we almost... I shifted my pants, hushing the impact those memories still had on me.

When we finished our quest, I would remove Ayla’s Brand. What would she do with her freedom? There would be nothing tying her to me. She could run from her former life and adventure as she pleased. Now that she had reached the Isles of Fae, she had countless options.

Meanwhile, I had my duty. The thought of losing her company made my heart ache.

I focused on Gloom instead. The goddess loomed over my mental horizons, her lethargy covering me like a sobering wet blanket.

Whatever was happening between us, Ayla and I would have to address it later. We had work to do.

Only, when I stepped from the cabin, there she was... Ayla looked to the horizon, poised and magnificent. Absolutely distracting.

She sat at the makeshift table, a handful of dates served on a plate. Windswept hair framed her face, her antlers crowning her as the emboldened heroine. Her lips were pursed, and following her gaze, I understood her brooding.

The distant fog was unnerving. The densest of mists still paled compared to the weighty Gloom. Clouds bleak as a thunderstorm, Gloom had shades of dark and darkest gray. Her mists were heavy and static, a smog in need of breeze.

“Is it always like this?” Ayla asked. “So... suffocating.” She shivered.

She already wore her cloak, but I retreated into the cabin and pulled a spare one forward. Not daring to touch her, I set it beside her.

“Thank you,” she whispered, slipping it on.

Ninti prowled nearby, once again the size of a dog. She sniffed at the crates, inspecting our goods and giving us a wide berth.

From her crow’s nest, Vanessa’s blue glow shone brightly, her magic flowing strong. The water sprite seemed in high spirits, rejuvenated by unity with her element.

Ayla finished adjusting the cape, wrapping it tight around her. “About Gloom... She’s not just mist, is it? There’s something more. Even my mind is foggy.”

“Yes, she’s...” Despite my studies, Gloom remained an enigma, a prehistoric goddess. While Ninti implied Gloom was on the same tier as Teyr, no historian suggested that. There were no reports of Gloom interacting with fae the way Teyr could. “The challenges of traveling through Gloom are more than visibility,” I agreed.

“The mist feels...stale.”

The statement, such a simple one, still made me hesitate. I recalled my childhood lessons. “Inarus was the first one to teach me about Gloom,” I realized.

“Inarus...” She repeated his name and shook her head. “I don’t think I said this yesterday, but I’m sorry. About the Collapse. That it happened to you. I can’t imagine what you and Eleanor have gone through. I guess I need you to know that despite this”—she touched her Brand—“I do care about what happens.”

The thoughtfulness caught me off guard. “I know you care.”

She seemed relieved. “We haven’t had much time to talk. Not that I really want to talk.” She laughed. “I guess with harder things, emotional ones... I like to deal with them differently, like with dancing.”

“When we’re done, I’ll dance with you.” My offer sounded smooth, but I nearly choked, realizing what I’d just assumed. “I mean, if you want to.”

She grinned. “I’m already looking forward to it.”

Her smile only lasted a moment though. Too soon, her gaze drifted toward the

ominous horizon.

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“So, General,” I teased. “What do you see?”

“Several things,” she answered quickly. Clearly, she’d already been brainstorming.

“First, tell me more about Gloom. What did Inarus teach you?”

“Gloom creates exhaustion and fatigue. Lethargy.” The effect was the opposite of Teyr’s blessing—a source of vitality.

“And it’s like that... everywhere?”

I nodded. “It’s why the Isle of Shadow has been abandoned. Gloom isn’t deadly, but her clouds change life. Crops won’t flourish, and animals won’t breed. Gloom prevents cultivation.”

Her throat bobbed. “What does this mean for us?”

“In Gloom, your reflexes might not be as fast, and your thoughts might feel sluggish. You may feel detached from your emotions. Honestly, it’s the perfect place for Inarus to protect his Shades from decay.”

“Shades decay?”

I nodded. “That’s why they attack boats from underwater. Inarus must work with someone gifted in weather wielding to bring a mist when the Shades attack.”

Ayla frowned. “We barely beat the Shades that time.”

I tried not to show my worry—I couldn’t afford to worry. “We will figure it out. This time, we have the ashflower and Ninti. I’ve gained experience since then, and you’ve...”Found something within yourself.I didn’t know how to say it.

“And I might have magic. Maybe.”

“Is that what the gnomes showed you?”

“It’s blocked, or something. I can’t access it.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that—”

She waved me away. “I’m not sure how to fix it, but the important part is, I figured out where Eleanor is.”

“What? How?”

“My Brand is connected to Inarus—to his entire network of Shades. I found Eleanor through that connection.”

“Where?”

“Point Bethia,” Vanessa answered, descending from her crow’s nest. The sprite scrunched her brows. “I think that’s what Ayla is describing. I’ve already started redirecting us.”

We had been steering toward Nuette, the port town linked to the capital Issa Neu.

Vanessa continued, “Ayla told me the details of the place without knowing what she was describing. Rough cliffs against the sea. A hilly landscape with mountains in the distance.”

“Point Bethia,” I agreed. Several strongholds were in that region, tight communities that withstood the area’s harsh winters. The region had been secluded and cold. It would be a good hiding spot for Inarus.

“Already headed there,” Vanessa added.

My sister. We knew where she was. “Is Eleanor...”

“She’s alive,” Ayla answered. “The Brand has captured her soul. But she hasn’t been turned into a Shade. Not yet.”

I exhaled, slowly. Alive yet captured. I’d barely saved Ayla from the ceramic jar. To think, she hadn’t even been fully contained. My pouch of ashflower felt too light.

“She’s surrounded by an army of Shades,” Ayla added.

I kept my face blank, focused on the task at hand. I needed empowerment, not despair.

Ayla added, “If I understand my Brand, most of Inarus’s Shades are there. I estimate there are three thousand of them.”

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I swallowed, focusing on the tactical information. “Point Bethia is rocky and hilly, so there will be good hiding spots. We’ll need to camouflage our living energy, but between your Brand and my necromancy, I think we can manage.”

“I can help,” Ninti added. “I’ll add my power to your disguise.”

Ayla nodded. “Sounds good. As we approach, I’ll continue to guide us.”

I wished I felt more thankful that Ayla had found a way to handle her Brand, but it worried me. “I’ll want to give you another dose of ashflower before we approach.”

“Agreed,” she said pragmatically.

I turned to Vanessa. “How far away are we?”

“Once we enter Gloom, I estimate we’re a couple of hours from land.”

The clock had started ticking. The sooner we found Eleanor, the more ashflower I would have for her.

Gloom filled our horizon.

I remembered when the goddess had first descended, billowing clouds consuming the land, creeping through Issa Neu, Shades chasing us to the beach...

I addressed Ayla. “Let’s start with that dose of ashflower.” I turned to Ninti and Vanessa. “Prepare yourselves. We are about to enter Gloom.”

Ayla

I focused on Zayne's healing hand. The clammy air hung to my chest, exposed except for my undershirt. Zayne prepared the ashflower while I sat on the bed.

Ninti had opted to stay outside, giving the two of us time alone. I didn't know whether to be annoyed or thankful.

Zayne avoided my eye contact; I avoided his too. We had unfinished business. Only there was nothing for us to discuss. Not until this was over.

"Let's just focus on living through this," I said.

"I was serious about that dance."

My heart raced, and I urged it to slow. My infatuation for him could consume me, but the Brand wanted me first. I needed all my self-control.

"Later."

He steadied on the stool, ashflower readied in his hands. His gaze met mine. This time, our contact held.

He mirrored my stark determination. If he felt anything deeper, more conflicting, he didn't let it show. Good. It would be easier to conceal my feelings if he denied his too.

I glanced at the ashflower. "Let's do this."

This time, when he applied the cure, only the heat of our bodies rose between us. I

focused on the way my body responded to the ashflower, turning raw wounds into callused scars. I ignored the powerful male healing me; I endured the pain of my denial.

Nevertheless, his cedar and amber scent urged me closer. The pressure of his palm made my heart ache.

When it was over, he seemed as relieved as me. We turned away and sighed. We claimed different sides of the small room to don our armor.

Carefully, I altered my armor, reworking the chest. Now Zayne could access the Brand if necessary. With the countless eyelets and ties to address, we lingered in silence.

I focused on the tactical. Something I could control.

“What are you expecting when we find Eleanor?” I asked. “Last night, we saw what happens when the Brand takes over—the victim’s soul is contained, and they lose control of their body. Will she be the same?”

“I suspect that will be the case,” he agreed. “But there are inconsistencies. If my information is accurate and my memories true, during the Collapse the Brand acted particularly fast. We should be prepared for anything.”

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Memories. I shivered. For our safety, I had to ask, “What happened the night of the Collapse?”

Zayne fiddled with his armor. “It was the Longest Night,” he began. “The annual rite was when our court celebrated the monarch’s recommitment to the isle. It was supposedly an all-night party in the throne room.”

“Supposedly?”

“I was too young—I never stayed through the night. Eleanor and I had already been sent to our rooms by the time the Collapse started. Everything I know, I learned through witnesses, and as the survivors tell it...”

He cleared his throat. “The Longest Night is a rite of rebirth, but also a time of weakness. In that moment, Inarus stepped into the middle of the throne room and called upon something—some even claim he held a black diamond. At his call, Gloom descended.

“Simultaneously, the first Shades appeared. They invaded the throne room, attacking the court at their weakest. They held my parents down while Inarus himself gave them their Brands, marking them so deep that it immediately turned their entire bodies. Within an hour, most of the court had been turned. He slaughtered them.

“Countless Shades invaded Issa Neu and the rest of the isle. They turned most citizens, driving the rest away. And so our exile began.”

“How did you and Eleanor escape?” I asked.

“Sandra saved us.”

“Your nursemaid?”

He nodded. “There was an escape route. She led us away from the castle, but when we reached the boat...”

“The Shades branded her,” I realized.

“She bought us enough time to escape.” His gaze grew distant. “We were only ten. Eleanor and I clung to each other as the ship’s sprite drove us into the sea. We watched as Gloom’s mist desecrated our home. Screaming filled our ears while we... we ran away. Clutching each other, we repeated our family’s motto, ‘A shadow may fade, but it always remains.’”

He sat up sharply. “I gave my first oath that day. It was the foolish oath of a child. I told Sandra, ‘I will save you.’ It was a promise I couldn’t keep. I watched as the Shades slayed her.”

I shivered. An unkept oath. “What were the consequences?” I asked.

“Nothing obvious,” he admitted. “Maybe our exile was punishment enough. Or maybe it’s the weight of my regret. Watching as the Shades took Sandra...”

Zayne had loved others. Sandra and Eleanor. He had experienced deeper affection than I had ever known—more loss than I knew how to handle. I touched his arm, offering minimal contact. “I’m sorry.”

Somehow, his eyes glistened with hope. “You truly believe Eleanor is alive?”

“Yes. All the Shades have a signature of rot and decay. Eleanor is like the

handkerchief, lilac.”

“That’s her.”

“I want to help,” I admitted. The omission didn’t even burn my lips; the words settled on my heart. I cared for Zayne, and despite all his loss, he cared for Eleanor. For his sake, for everyone’s sake, I wanted to help.

He walked to the door, motioning I should follow. “I have something for you.”

Curious, I followed him onto the deck. Zayne opened a crate and brought forth two swords. The hilts were simple, sturdy, with a fine grip. It was the blades themselves that drew my attention.

“The edges are wavy,” I observed, reaching forward to pick one up. “It’s so light.”

“A special steel technique from the Isle of Shadow,” he explained. “Eleanor and I found these when we unlocked the old armory. She had carried them until the Brand took her. I think they’re yours now.”

I swished the blade, turning the hilt over easily in my hand. My movement flowed. I reached for the second blade, testing the weight of them together. These lighter swords were easy to dual wield.

“They’re impressive,” I admitted, finding the first posture of my training routine, adjusting the stance so I carried the blades.

“They’re enchanted,” Zayne explained. “With a single strike, you’ll be able to take down a Shade.”

Ninti sniffed at the blade. “They’re ancient, built for a different conflict. They should

help you all the same.”

I settled the swords into their scabbards, tying them to my belt. “Hopefully, I won’t need them. I would prefer to delay confrontation as long as possible.”

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Hopefully, I wouldn't need them at all.

28 | The Seeping Mist

Ayla

Gloom misted my skin. Her waters leached life from my body. Everything dulled. My mind slowed. My anxiety calmed, and so did my wariness.

I looked at the strange sea, finding no movement. I reached out to Eleanor—she was silent and still. I touched my Brand, confirming it hadn't shifted. Repeat. I scanned our surroundings again. And again.

Zayne stood at the bow of the boat while I took the rear. Ninti prowled between us.

Despite my best attempts to keep watch, I felt blind. Blackened water and dark clouds filled my short-sighted vision. Even at mid-morning, it was duller than dawn.

The ship sliced through the water, smooth sailing in the unusually silent sea. Even the waves seemed weary here.

Gloom dampened my fears. Surrender requires a special type of bravery—the faith to run forward, accepting consequences without consideration. Surrender became a power I could depend on.

We remained vigilant. We rotated through the positions, Ninti, Zayne, and me.

Even in her truebody wolf form, Ninti's flames seemed dim. She seemed less magical, more like an animal, in the dim Gloom.

In contrast, Zayne's necromancy practically bloomed. Spirals of darkness spun about us, scented of petrichor, the cleansing scent of rain. He wrapped us in his dark cocoon, intending to avoid the gaze of Shades.

Time passed in silence. So when Zayne spoke to me, his words sounded much louder than the whisper they were.

"There." He pointed to the distance. "Do you see where it's darker? That's the coast. We're not far now."

I squinted. There wasn't much to see. Yet, if I steadied my gaze on the darkened horizon, I could convince myself it wasn't a trick of the light. Land was near.

Vanessa brought us to the coast slowly, the blue light of her magic diffuse at lower speeds. Only once we were almost upon them did I see the silhouette of hills and bluffs.

Point Bethia loomed over us, built upon steep, well-weathered cliffs. Jagged hills formed the rocky peninsula. Eyes narrowing, I struggled to see the top.

The cliffs looked slippery. Water coated everything. I shifted closer to Ninti, wishing her flames burned a little hotter.

"Once we're in position, I'll shadow-step us to the top," Zayne whispered.

"Good." I shivered. I checked my Brand. "We're close. Eleanor is farther inland from here."

Zayne pointed to a crevice. “What do you think of that cove?” he asked Vanessa.

“Out of sight and secure.”

Vanessa maneuvered us closer. The walls were barren. Where lichen might normally grow, there was nothing but gray skeletal rocks.

We hushed, stagnant air filling our lungs, our actions stilted. Everything slowed.

After a time, Vanessa settled the ship, planting a magical anchor in place. The ship swayed and soon stilled.

Meanwhile, I checked my weapons and packs for provisions and survival tools. Zayne tested his speaking stone, confirming he would have contact with Vanessa as we traveled.

Thanks to shadow-stepping, Zayne ascended the cliffs in a moment. First, he vanished, scouted the rocks above, and returned. He jumped Ninti first.

Finally, he took me. His hand cupped mine. At any other time, his touch might have been cold, but in the lifeless Gloom, my fingers weaved into his, stitching a tighter bond. I sought warmth.

I had sunk so slowly, so deeply into the haze of Gloom, I hadn’t realized how deep I’d descended.

“Focus on one task at a time,” Zayne advised.

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Our hands bound, Zayne shadow-stepped me to the top of the cliff. In the fugue, I barely acknowledged the awkward lurch of my body. The disorienting transition somehow less disconcerting than the thick Gloom.

He led me into a formation of boulders clustered at the top of a hill. Behind us, I could still hear the crash of the sea against the cliffs.

Ninti had shifted into a small fox, dampening her flames until she appeared as an unassuming animal. Only a flicker heated her tailtip. She stood on the face of a boulder, claiming a vantage point over the valley below.

I followed her gaze, peeking over the rocks. Light shone through the darkness—someone had brought life to this lonely valley. I squinted, making out the details. There was a large central structure, a stronghold. Surrounding the building...

Shades.

The army gathered below. The listless dead encircled the central structure, a silent guard. Only three Gray Generals moved amongst the troops. Between Zayne's shadows and my contained Brand, they showed no interest in us.

The Shades were calm, a contrast to their thoughtless attack before. The imitation of life had fled their bodies. Their ranks formed concentric circles around the stronghold.

The main building was long and rectangular, its walls reinforced with a dark stone. It was large enough that several chimneys broke through the shingled wood roof,

puffing with smoke and heat. The building was evidence of warmth within Gloom.

There were several outbuildings: barns, granaries, and sheds. A particular barn drew my attention more than the rest, making my Brand pulse. Nothing else seemed remarkable about it.

Goats, sheep, and chickens grazed listlessly in gray pens. A few Shades moved through the settlement, tending to the animals and unloading bags of feed from a wagon.

A few pathways meandered through the settlement, all illuminated with fae light. They merged to form a wider road that wiggled past the rings of watchful Shades, soon becoming invisible in the distant Gloom. It meandered toward the sea.

“A supply route,” I breathed. “There must be a dock nearby.” This stronghold was stocked and organized. Despite Gloom, someone lived here.

“Before the Collapse, several families would have shared the stronghold,” Zayne explained. “Communities like this are built throughout Point Bethia. Gloom has changed the weather, but before, it was snowy most of the year.”

“You think he’s here?” I asked. “Inarus?”

“Yes. When Eleanor and I visited Issa Neu, the Shades didn’t act like this. A Gray General controlled them, but they weren’t this organized. They didn’t manage a stronghold. This level of necromantic control can only be possible if Inarus is near.”

Looking within my Brand, I found the web of Shades. “Eleanor is here too. But this level of organization worries me. Who is supplying this? This operation isn’t cheap.”

“Agreed, but it’s not my biggest concern.”

Ninti flicked her tail. “Seconded.It’s here.”

“What?” I asked.

“The Shadow Throne. Inarus has it.”

29 | Pretense and Camouflage

Ayla

After an hour of watching, our certainty grew: sneaking into the stronghold would not be simple.

The Shades continued their work. The army guarding the stronghold maintained their silent watch. Meanwhile, the servants finished unloading the animal feed. A second cart appeared, pulled by a single horse. This one was loaded with boxes, and the servants moved them just outside the central structure—the Shades did not enter the building.

There was no sign of Inarus. The animals remained the only sign of life.

Only the three Gray Generals shifted, suggesting that the necromancer took direct control of his generals.

“I can’t find a weak spot,” Zayne whispered. He had been probing Inarus’s invisible protections. “I don’t think we can shadow-step closer without detection.”

“So we’ll have to sneak in,” I replied.

“Exactly. The servants will be more dangerous. Inarus needs to control them directly, so they’re more likely to see us. The soldiers are different. They are under the

command of the Gray Generals, so they might be easier to evade. My necromancy and your Brand should be enough camouflage.”

“But there are too many of them. We can’t avoid all of them, at least not while they’re alert.”

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“Do you think they rotate positions?” Ninti asked. “Do Shades need rest? Is there a time when they’re inactive?”

“Yes, rest slows down the decomposition,” Zayne replied. “There might be a hidden troop of Shades. They could even have their own Gray General.”

I scanned the valley, wondering where I might shelter a troop. “Would they hide in a cave?”

“That would help slow the decomposition.”

Ninti lifted her nose to the air. “I think I know where they are.”

In the nimble body of a fox, Ninti slipped among the rocks.

Zayne and I waited, continuing our watch of the encampment, studying its routines. I reached out and found his hand; we shared our warmth, but smothered by Gloom, we stayed silent.

Soon Ninti returned. “I found a cave filled with Shades. They’re not far—”

—scraaap—

—scrnnnnch—

Sounds of movement filled the valley. I startled, afraid we’d been seen. My heart pounded.

A third of the Shades rose to their feet. One of the Gray Generals walked past the outside circle of guards. They lifted a hand, and all at once, their charges shifted. The troop began to march.

Simultaneously, a fourth troop emerged from a cavern. Thumpsof undead feet filled the valley.

“The watch is vulnerable during rotation,” I realized. “This is our moment.”

“Now,” Zayne agreed. “We don’t know when the next rotation will be.”

Ninti jumped to my shoulder and settled against my neck, resting her belly against the nape. She looked over one shoulder, her hind legs wrapping with her front legs. Her flickering tail kissed my cheek.

Zayne called upon his necromancy, wrapping us tightly in his dark aura. I sensed the death in his magic, the petrichor, and it called to my frustrated Brand. Under his influence, we became like Shades.

Together, we made our move. We joined with the exchanging troops, using the cover of their movement to approach the stronghold.

It was all too comfortable to act like one of them. My Brand strengthened, urging me toward the same barn that had drawn my attention earlier. I clutched my chest.

Zayne saw me. “Let me know if you need ashflower.”

I swallowed my stubborn retort—I won’t need it. I would rather ask for his help than become a Shade. “It’s harder now that we’re close,” I explained instead.

In answer, he squeezed my hand. He said nothing more, but the touch carried his

encouragement.

“Stay close,” Zayne instructed.

It was easy to enter the ranks of the dead. Did I actually hear the General’s commands—“march and fall in line”—or was it my imagination? Either way, I did as I was instructed. I blended in.

“Go to the barn,” my Brand insisted.

I shivered. Still, I gritted my teeth and played the part, mimicking the Shades surrounding us. It was easy to obey the programming of my Brand.

The two Gray Generals gave their troops little mind. They stood off to the side, scanning the valley as their charges exchanged places. I held my breath as we crossed their path, afraid it might give me away.

My Brand grew even more insistent. “Onward,” it ordered. “Take your position.”

Zayne by my side, we fell into stride. I focused on the kinder pulse of Zayne’s necromancy, reminding myself I wasn’t alone.

I exhaled only once we passed the Generals. From there, it was easy to approach the stronghold.

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A servant turned a corner. We needed a place to hide—

I pulled Zayne into the barn. During our observations, we hadn't seen any Shades coming or going from the structure. It would be empty inside.

The decision disguised itself as a tactical maneuver, but the moment I saw the ice-blue coffins, I knew—the Brand had guided me here to die.

Zayne

There were storage shelves near the barn's entrance. We hid behind them, staying out of sight of the Shades within.

Two Shades lay dead upon medical tables. Blood trickled from several long incisions, collecting in buckets beneath their bodies.

drip... drip...

The echo of death lingered.

My mind expanded, finding the lens of the Underworld, and I discovered their bodies were fresh, their minds not fully reawakened. They had been branded and killed. They lingered in the process of rebirth.

Another Shade sat nearby, resting while they supervised the metamorphosis. Shades making Shades. The one in charge was likely under Inarus's direct influence.

Ayla shook, a small gasp escaping her. Following her wide-eyed gaze, I examined the other side of the barn.

Ice-blue coffins. One contained a branded body—not quite dead.

The branded were frozen to death. Cold for a hypothermic death, cold for preservation. The process was sterile with necromantic controls, yet the air was tainted with Inarus's signature decay.

Ayla heaved beside me, hand pressed to her chest. She paled.

"The Brand," she explained. "I'm supposed to enter the coffin... It wants to kill me, and I would go like a willing lamb."

Ninti nuzzled Ayla's cheek. Ayla's mouth opened and closed, gulping like a fish.

She didn't ask for ashflower; I wasn't sure she had the mind to. I trusted my instinct—I knew what she needed.

Careful not to leave a single petal behind, I plucked the ashflower from my satchel. Her Brand grew—expanding furiously. She pushed against me, trying to get away.

I held her tight.

Ayla shook. Her foot shifted, stepping closer to her death.

"Don't go," I begged.

Her gaze turned far away. Her body tensed.

I shoved the ashflower against the Brand. "Shade's Brand," I commanded with a

whisper. “Let Ayla be.”

Ninti backed my words, her fur turning a dusty orange. She warmed Ayla, and I extracted the darkness. We held the spell until the ashflower withered.

Slowly, the color returned to Ayla’s face.

“Thank you.” She swallowed, squaring her shoulders. Her eyes flicked to the ice-blue coffin, then to the doorway. “I think Eleanor is near. Let’s go.”

“Shouldn’t you rest—”

“I can’t stay here. We need to keep moving. Quickly.”

I nodded. “Where’s Eleanor?”

Ayla pointed to a door along the side of the longhouse. “I think we should enter there. She’s not far.”

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“Let me check,” I replied.

I found the lens of the Underworld, checking our surroundings. The Shadow Throne was near where Ayla had indicated. I sensed the web of magic surrounding us.

I allowed a thread of my power to glance against the intelligent Shade resting nearby. A spark flashed across the Shade’s synapses.

The entirety of Inarus’s control flashed in my awareness. More troops were stationed throughout the isle. One clustered at the shore, preparing for an underwater venture. Smaller teams of Shade scouts slept hidden within caverns throughout the Isles. The branded were guided closer...

All the threads coalesced at a single point: Inarus. I saw the necromancer, sensing him as if I were in his body. He was in a well-lit room, seated on a meditation cushion. He held a crystal skull between his palms, using it as a focus to help bind his large army. A black diamond, surging with raw energy, powered his commands.

I saw it all in a moment.

Just as quickly, the web of Inarus’s necromancy vanished. The Shade in charge blinked their eyes, coming to life. They scanned the barn, searching, aware that something had been disturbed.

We might have been out of sight, but we were not invisible. The Shade looked in our direction.

I defended with necromancy. “Go back to sleep,” I commanded them. “We are no threat. Return to rest.”

The Shade obeyed, their body stilling.

I found Ayla’s hand, thankful she remained warm. “Inarus is farther into the building. He’s busy managing his Shades.”

“Then there’s no time to waste.” She squeezed her fingers around mine. “We need to go.”

30 | Resurrecting Roots

Zayne

We entered the stronghold, stepping into a corridor that ran the length of the building.

Several small fireplaces were lit along the hall. Each fire seemed to cast off some of Gloom’s influence. There was no mist inside the building. My mind sharpened, becoming the clearest it had been since we first entered the fog. Inarus had created a space free from Gloom.

Multiple doorways led from here. Before, each would lead to a private room or a family apartment. Once, this hallway would have been lively. Now, it was empty.

Ayla looked from one doorway to the next, and her gaze fixed on the one to the left. “This way.”

It was the same door that the throne beckoned me toward. Down to my bones, I quivered under the sensation of home.

Ayla pushed against the door, finding it locked. I suspected we were now within Inarus's shields, so I took a risk and shadow-stepped us into the room.

There, sprawled across the floor, Eleanor lay prostrate before the Shadow Throne.

A weak fire cast the room in flickering shadows, but even in the low light, I knew my twin. My heart flushed as my magic recognized her. She was the lilac of funeral flowers, mixed with the metallic tinge of blood. The scent of fingers pricked by a needle.

The Brand consumed her body, her gray skin impossibly smooth, reflecting the fireplace. Her back rose and fell, evidence of a long breath. Her body lived, but her soul was contained.

Ayla lunged forward. I stopped her.

"Slow," I said. "Let me approach. She might impact your Brand."

Ayla stilled and nodded. To my relief, her eyes remained bright, darting as she took in the room. I evaluated the strange situation too.

Eleanor's fingertips reached for the Shadow Throne. A tendril of root extended from the throne, wrapping around her wrist, curling like a cuff.

In my memories, the Shadow Throne had radiated strength. It was built from the shadows of the living, complex and textured, tried and true. Its consistency filled my childhood, building my backbone.

Now the throne had been humbled.

The black wood had once been intricately carved, designs tessellating and shifting.

Now it struggled to break through the floorboards, a weathered chair rising from mangled roots.

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Eleanor's vision had been true. The throne had been dying without a monarch—even now, the roots reached for her.

Where they made contact, root to wrist, energy moved. They had become symbiotic, but I couldn't tell who needed the other more. Neither the throne nor Eleanor appeared strong.

I prepared my ashflower as I might a weapon and took the first step toward my sister.

Eleanor didn't stir. She still wore the armored dress I had last seen her in, leathered with long slits for movement and worn with leggings beneath. Little had changed despite the weeks that had passed.

The sight was strange, but it was not suspicious.

I rushed to her and turned her on her side, careful to keep the cuffed root in place. I pushed the ashflower against her chest.

“Shade's Brand, leave and allow Eleanor to be.” My work began.

Eleanor trembled. Her Brand didn't resist my command, but it remained, like a stubborn stain. Eleanor's soul had been contained for so long...

The spent ashflower vanished, and I prepared for a second administration.

Ninti approached. She pressed her muzzle into Eleanor's palm, lay her body along the line of the root, and brightened her flames. Ninti fed the root her power, assisting the

throne and healing Eleanor.

I applied the ashflower again, Ninti adding her strength to the process.

Between applications, I glanced at Ayla. She stayed in the shadows, angling herself to watch both the throne and the door. With a sword in one hand, the other hovering near her Brand, she gave me a sturdy nod. She still had control.

I prayed Eleanor found control too. I drifted into the Underworld, finding a far tamer scene than when I faced Ayla's Brand. A jar sealed Eleanor's soul, but her Brand was nowhere in sight. I pried at the jar.

On the third application, the jar loosened.

I applied the ashflower a fourth and fifth time. In the Living Realm, Eleanor's Brand finally began to shrink, the skin at her fingertips returning to normal. She stirred but quickly returned to unconsciousness. In the Underworld, the jar opened. Within, Eleanor's soul slept. She didn't rise.

Nothing improved the sixth time.

I prepared another application, my fingers scraping the satchel's bottom. I grounded myself between the living and Underworld, spreading my mind thin so I could heal her from both perspectives.

Ninti nuzzled Eleanor's hand.

On the seventh application, Eleanor opened her eyes. She blinked several times, her gaze taking a moment to focus. "I'm still here," she whispered.

My breath caught. "You're here."

There was no time for a reunion. She took command right away. “I need the rest of the ashflower—now,” she said. “Finish destroying my Brand.”

“You know about the ashflower?”

“Teyr sent me a vision. He promised you were coming, that you had everything I need. The ashflower, it’s for me.”

I glanced back at Ayla. I waved her forward, asking her to join us. She approached.

“Eleanor, there is someone you should meet,” I said. “This is Ayla. She has been branded too. She’s the one who led me to you—”

Eleanor didn’t let me finish. “The throne can’t accept me while I’m branded. Give me the rest of the ashflower.”

“No,” Ayla whispered. “I need it too.”

Eleanor glanced at her, not quite giving eye contact. “When I am queen, I will make you healthy again.” She faced me with urgency. “Now!”

Ayla blanched. “Are you sure that’ll work?”

“No,” Eleanor answered. “But healing me is the better option.”

“Why do you think that?” I asked.

Eleanor refused to answer. With every moment, her expression became more imperial. The seven applications of ashflower continued to improve her, and the Brand shrank further, moving down her chin.

“Zayne, give me the last of the ashflower,” she ordered. “Teyr said it would be handed to me.”

I didn’t move. I didn’t give her the ashflower, but I didn’t turn her away. Ayla needed it, and if Eleanor was wrong, if she failed to claim the throne or didn’t have the power she claimed, Ayla would fall victim to her Brand.

I couldn’t let that happen.

In the barn, I had seen Shades making Shades. I couldn’t submit Ayla to such a fate. I couldn’t allow her brilliant soul to be contained, her body forced to crawl into an icy coffin.

Eleanor already looked better. The throne was helping her. Maybe she would keep improving.

“Now,” my sister insisted.

I hesitated. But Ayla made up her mind.

She swept forward, grabbed the ashflower, and ran.

Ayla

Soon I'd be a Shade.

Technically, that wasn't true. First, I'd freeze to death. Then my body would be bled, and then I would be reanimated as a Shade.

Only, it hadn't happened.

Not yet.

There had to be another way. I just didn't see it. I wanted to live—I didn't trust Eleanor. Desperate, driven by the base instinct to live...

I stole the ashflower.

Not that I had anywhere to go. We were locked in this room. I had no plan. Darkness descended around me as I settled into a defensive stance in a shadowy corner.

Zayne watched, too stunned to react. I braced for his betrayal. Eleanor had just ordered him to pick her over me. He had no reason to choose me.

Everything that had happened between us—only a few days—felt insignificant compared to their history. Together, they had escaped the Collapse.

My heart rate settled as I shifted my feet. I blinked and saw the two of them anew, prince and princess before their shabby throne. This was their quest, a story of inherent power and siblings uniting against impossible odds.

There wasn't room for me in this narrative.

My knees wobbled. For a moment, the Brand seized my doubt and tugged, trying to unravel me. No. I fought back my control.

In the long silence, Ninti rose from the base of the throne and jumped onto my shoulder. "Can we talk about this?" the Firewolf asked.

She was right. If we brainstormed instead of reacting, maybe we could find an alternative.

"Let's talk," I agreed.

Eleanor blinked up at us, her face turning red with frustration. She pulled herself from the floor, sitting with her back resting against the seat of the throne. The effort took all her strength.

The throne's root remained cuffed to her wrist. She rubbed the binding with her free hand, inspecting it.

Zayne helped Eleanor move. Then his gaze turned distant, like it did when he contemplated the Underworld. He gasped. "I'm not sure there's time—"

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The door clicked, unlocking.

The stench of rot invaded the room. A man followed, his billowing cape and thin hair the most I could see. Yet his magic... While Zayne's necromancy smelled of fresh rain, Inarus's magic stank like his Shades.

He strode right for Zayne and Eleanor, not even closing the door. He didn't know I was there.

The ashflower was in my possession, and Inarus had left the door wide open.

I ran.

Zayne

I recognized him.

Inarus's face was thin and gaunt. The skin beneath his eyes appeared bruised. His hair had grayed, and his once proud goatee had thinned.

Despite everything, I had always remembered him fondly, unable to reconcile stories of an evil necromancer with my first instructor in magic. He had been busy as the Court Sorcerer, but he had always made time for our childhood lessons.

He had guided me through my first shadow-step. He had been the one to realize Eleanor could shadow-stitch. While he taught us, had he also been orchestrating the Collapse?

My hand drifted to my dagger. He must have sensed me in the barn. Or maybe when I shadow-stepped. Either way, he had been slow to react. Would he be easy to overpower? Should I attack first?

Yet I could not underestimate him. The black diamond—rough and unpolished—hung like a pendant from a chain around his neck, matching the stories I'd heard of the Collapse. It was large enough to fit in the palm of his hand, so dark I could barely see through it. When I glimpsed his power, I saw how the stone gave him strength.

He stared at Eleanor, shocked. "You're awake." His gaze flicked to her gray-skinned neck. "But you still have the Brand."

Eleanor stared at him, haughty, giving nothing away. Despite their withered statures, both the throne and Eleanor remained unyielding.

Inarus turned to me, unsurprised I was there. "Where is the ashflower?" he demanded. His voice had grown thin, but his tone remained strict.

"I don't have it," I replied truthfully.

I glanced in Ayla's direction—she's gone.

Ayla had stolen the ashflower. I knew the situation had been desperate, but she couldn't heal without my help. The Brand could take control. It could lead her to the barn...

"We must finish healing your sister," Inarus continued. "The throne won't accept her if she has the Brand. I repeat, where is the ashflower?"

I swallowed. His explanation was the same as Eleanor's. Moreover, he knew of the

ashflower...

I looked from Inarus to Eleanor. The corner of Eleanor's lip turned downward, the smallest of tells in her otherwise impassive demeanor. She glanced from Inarus to me, and I knew the truth: they had formed an understanding. I just couldn't judge how deep their alliance ran.

"We don't have the ashflower," Eleanor confirmed. She didn't mention Ayla.

Inarus's brow furrowed. "You used it all, and it still wasn't enough?" he hissed. His body tensed.

Then, with a sigh and a shake of his head, he let it out. His posture relaxed. He took a step closer to Eleanor, appraising her. "At least you're awake."

"Agreed." She gave nothing else away.

Inarus addressed me. "I see you've unlocked necromantic powers."

"I..." The observation surprised me. "Yes, I've started my studies of the Underworld."

"Be careful," he cautioned. He slouched his shoulders, showing how thin he had become. "It's not a magic meant for the living."

Did he think this was funny? His boney body was not a future I wanted. Haunted bags darkened his eyes.

Still, I had questions—ones only he might know. My understanding of my powers was self-taught, derived from a handful of archaic books. Inarus was the only expert. With his help, could I harness my magic better than him?

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Inarus continued, "Since the ashflower didn't work, we will need to brainstorm a new way to remove the Brand. With Zayne's help, I'm sure we can find an alternative."

Eleanor didn't correct his assumption that the ashflower was spent.

Inarus's focus returned to Eleanor. "How do you feel? May I look at your wrist?"

"You may."

Inarus approached her.

I acted on instinct, pulling my dagger and lunging between them. "Don't you dare."

Inarus laughed. His cackle cracked.

Eleanor huffed. "Isaidhe could approach."

"It's all right," Inarus said. He lifted his hands, a sign of peace. Yet my gaze strayed to the diamond. "I mean no harm to you and your sister."

I refused to trust him, but I stepped back, allowing him to inspect Eleanor's wrist. His fingers hovered around the cuff, but he did not touch her.

"How long has it been since I lost consciousness?" she asked.

"Two weeks," he answered.

Two weeks! I rushed to my twin. “Do you need food? Water?” I had both in my pack.

“Your sister no longer eats or drinks,” Inarus answered for her. He addressed her again. “My lady, the binding has strengthened.”

Since Ninti had lain on it, the root seemed thicker. Eleanor seemed to be growing stronger too. Her Brand didn’t appear to shrink or grow, its influence seemed constant. The throne was nurturing her, more effectively than before.

“Interesting...” Inarus said. If he had a theory, he kept it to himself.

Ayla and Ninti. My worry nagged at me, but I couldn’t leave without giving them away. “What happened?” I asked my sister. “After we were separated?”

“The Brand brought me here,” Eleanor answered. “This is where the Branded are called. It’s where Inarus makes his Shades.”

“I saw the barn.” I glared at Inarus. “For sixteen years, you have been branding fae, sending them to their death.”

He didn’t flinch. “I’ve done what I had to do.”

“And to what end?” I raged. “Shades making Shades, all for the sake of giving you a larger army.”

He didn’t respond.

“Why did you do this?”

“My work is beyond your comprehension. It is my calling.”

I huffed. I definitely didn't trust him. That arrogance. His magic stank with corruption.

Yet Eleanor remained calm. "I never saw the barn. When I arrived, Inarus brought me directly to the throne. By then, the Brand had sapped my strength. Inarus reduced my Brand's controlling nature, but by then, the damage was already done. The Brand is nearly impossible to remove, even by its creator."

I followed the rooted tendril from throne to wrist. "Is that when you bound yourself to the throne?"

"Actually, I tried to become queen," Eleanor corrected me. "Inarus's plan was that once I was queen, I would have the power to cure my own Brand. So I attempted the ascension rite, but it went wrong. The throne wouldn't even let me sit on it—it can't accept someone bound to another."

I pointed to her wrist. "And this root happened instead?"

She nodded. "The throne is trying to heal me, but it's too weak. Originally, I came to help it, but now it's the other way around. I thought I would die attempting this—But then Teyr sent me a vision of the ashflower. I knew you were coming for me."

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She knew. It softened my heart. I had spent my life trying to protect her. Only now, she was bound to Inarus, unable to claim her power.

Inarus remained silent through our discussion. He added nothing—not even defending his mistaken assumption that the throne would accept Eleanor.

“Why do you want her to become queen?” I asked him.

“Same reason as you,” he answered. “She could send Gloom north.”

“But...” I shook my head. “You summoned Gloom. At the Collapse.”

“What happened wasn’t part of my plan,” he said defensively. “A miscalculation.”

“A miscalculation?” I hissed. My parents had died. This miscalculation had displaced my people, exiling them from a salted land. His Shades had killed Sandra. I gritted my teeth. “What was your plan?”

“I wanted to make things better,” Inarus began. “Both of you were so young when it happened, too young to possibly understand.

“The Isle of Shadow was weakening, our people scraping by, reliant on archaic tools. With every year, the Starlit Isle grew brighter. Their investment in trade revitalized their city. To survive, we had to modernize. I made plans, developing shadow-based fae goods to sell.

“But your parents refused. ‘Too dangerous,’ they said. They were stuck in their old

ways, convinced that fae goods would lead to more warfare than medication. With their lofty morals, your parents refused to see how their inaction would lead to decay.”

With his explanation, my childhood memories gained a new significance. I remembered how grand Port Saundyr's first appeared. My childhood had been dark and dull by comparison.

“So you attempted to take the throne?” I asked.

Inarus nodded. “The event you called the Collapse was supposed to go very differently. The first Shades were delinquents, civilization’s unwanted. I learned necromancy for the greater good, killing them, turning them into my servants. I created them to help me claim the throne.

“On the Longest Night, I made my move. My attack was two-pronged: Gloom descended as the Shades rose. My army overtook the throne room, and I cut the throne. Our history speaks of times when citizens have cut down the thrones, deciding their monarchs were unfit. I thought, by claiming the throne, it would then choose me...”

“Only it didn’t choose you,” Eleanor chided, raising her root-cuffed wrist.

“Clearly. As I was wrong about the throne, I was also wrong about Gloom.”

His fingers traced the raw black diamond. There was a glint to his eyes, and he haunted him as he touched the stone.

Inarus continued, “The throne denied me. And then Gloom lost containment. And ever since, I’ve done what was necessary to correct my mistakes—I make Shades because it keeps Gloom from expanding.”

I blinked. “You kill fae to keep Gloom from descending south?”

He nodded. “The exchange works. Gloom is the antithesis of vitality. The less life in the Isles, the less energy Gloom needs to balance. These deaths keep Gloom contained. It’s a necessary sacrifice I’m brave enough to make.” His eyes grew wild. “My corruption is my calling.”

It sickened me. “There has to be a better way—”

Eleanor’s posture straightened. “There is a better way—I need to become queen.”

Inarus sighed. “I wish the ashflower had worked. At least the roots are stronger. You look stronger. Maybe with time, there is hope...” He grew unsure.

Yet Eleanor was direct. She held my gaze. “If only I had more ashflower, then I could become queen.”

32 | Coward

Ayla

“The ashflower, it’s for me.” Eleanor sounded so confident. Everything about the Princess Heir seemed that way—self-assured, like she was above the rest. Every detail, from her leathered dress to her tight dark braid and rising horns, she was a queen.

She reminded me of Mariana. I distrusted her by instinct, righteous anger rising at the tone of her voice. I had to find a way to look beyond my pain.

What if Eleanor was right? What if she could heal my brand? Did her potential power outweigh my immediate safety? Options swayed before me.

Like I had after the assassin's attack, I ran away. I left them—I left Zayne. Ninti clung to me, silent and still. I pressed my cheek against her flickering tailtip.

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With the Shade army beyond, I couldn't escape the stronghold. I needed somewhere to hide. In the corridor, I tried two locked doors. The third door opened.

I shielded my eyes from the bright light. I had hoped to find a storage closet, somewhere dark, with shelving to hide behind. This was a well-lit apartment. Enchanted fireplaces warmed the room, causing Gloom's dulling influence to be weakest here.

These had to be Inarus's apartments, for they reeked of his rotting necromancy. The central room was an enormous study. There was a bedchamber and a washing room. With his Shades working the stronghold, he would rarely need to leave this place.

Shelves covered the walls, filled with books and magical instruments. The room contained several stations: a workbench, a desk, and a meditation cushion. A crystal skull sat on a pedestal, cut from the clearest crystal. No inclusions marred its surface.

I turned, scrutinizing everything I could. An elaborate black ribbon necklace was on the desk, next to a letter. Despite everything, I was curious. Inarus had a supplier. There was more to this army than a single necromancer.

The letter was written to Inarus, but the original seemed to be in code. Inarus's translation was next to the letter. I squinted at his spidery handwriting.

The princess must become queen. The collar will offer adequate control. Our sources have seen the prince in Port Saundrys. We believe he is headed to you.

They expected us—or Zayne, at least. I searched for any mention of me.

An unremarkable fae accompanies him, consistent with your general's report from the Rift. We do not understand why they pursued her.

At least they didn't know who I was. The message was signed, Calindra, Lady of the Mer. I'd never heard of her, but Zayne might know what this meant.

"That paragraph." Ninti jumped down from my shoulder and pointed with a claw.

Our calculations agree with yours. Gloom is expanding. If the princess cannot contain it, you need to increase your Shade intake. We estimate another twenty percent.

"I don't understand any of this," Ninti muttered. "Gloom's power doesn't work like this."

I stared at the phrase another twenty percent. More Shades meant more Brands. It meant more deaths.

"Eleanor might be able to end this," I whispered.

"Something is wrong. That black diamond..."

"Do you think I should give Eleanor the ashflower?"

Ninti folded her ears back. "She might be able to heal you. She might fail. But her success seems more likely than you figuring out how to use the ashflower."

Ninti's cold logic settled within me. It matched my calculations; damned if I do, damned if I don't. At the heart of the matter, my truth was that I didn't want to trust Eleanor.

My grip tightened around the satchel of ashflower. "Am I a coward?" I asked. "First I

ran from Mariana, and now this.”

Ninti sat on her haunches, patient and waiting.

At her silence, I continued, “Maybe I don’t know how to love, to trust. When I opened my heart to Mariana and Carson, I nearly got myself killed. Of course I don’t want to trust Eleanor.”

“Can you trust Zayne?” Ninti asked.

Zayne. His name shifted something within me. My heart beat a bit faster, the Brand beside it. “Trusting him takes more courage than I have.”

33 | Ascension and Absorption

Zayne

Inarus and I waited, keeping close to Eleanor. We all waited, wondering if the strengthened throne would be enough to replenish her. The crackling fireplace filled our silence.

Eleanor leaned against the throne, her eyes hooded, closing in fatigue. Her Brand appeared to be creeping up her neck.

I kept looking for Ayla, but I knew she was gone. We didn’t even say goodbye.

I should have felt betrayed. Instead, I found my admiration. I had been ready to sacrifice everything for Eleanor, and Ayla’s defiance inspired my thirst for life. I just wished she had stayed long enough to help me with Inarus.

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Once again, I wondered if I should attack him. Yet, with a glance at that diamond, I held back. There was more to him than I could see, and I couldn't gauge the risk.

There were undercurrents I hadn't predicted, something important enough to garner the attention of Teyr and Ninti. There was a larger game—one I couldn't guess at.

"I don't know if this is working," Eleanor whispered. Slowly, like every moment pained her, she lay down. Her eyes fluttered closed.

"Fight it," Inarus whispered. "If you fall asleep again..."

"Do you have any more vitality potion?" Eleanor asked. "It might help."

"It's in my apartments."

"Please bring me some."

Inarus gave me a shifty look, considering.

Eleanor yawned, and her body relaxed, drifting. The Brand expanded enough to touch her chin.

"Go," I commanded Inarus. "I'll watch her."

"Fine. I'll be right back." He moved in a rush, leaving the two of us alone.

I lunged to my sister's side. "Oh, Eleanor, I'm so sorry," I began my apologies. I had

one chance to save her, and it had gone so wrong—

“Stop with your brotherly overprotectiveness.” Eleanor opened her eyes. Her posture shifted, stronger than before. She had been acting. “I gave us our distraction. We need to act now.”

She reached into a pocket and retrieved a handkerchief, needle, and thread. “Let me focus on this.”

While she worked, I explored the room’s dark corners, hopelessly searching for Ayla and the ashflower. There was no sight of her. My throat constricted.

“Don’t worry about her,” Eleanor hissed. “I no longer think we’ll need the rest of the ashflower. Not anymore. That fox, she changed the throne’s root. I am getting stronger. All we need...” she pulled her thread taut, knotting it off, “...is a final push.”

She handed me the spelled handkerchief. “Hold this against the root while I focus on overcoming the Brand. I’ve had this idea for a while, but I didn’t trust Inarus to help.”

Eleanor readied herself. Her Brand was already small enough to hide under the collar of her dress. She must have allowed it to grow as part of her act for Inarus. As usual, her control was impressive.

Through her act, I could see the weaknesses—the quiver to her knee, the way she tugged out her braid, quickly reknitting it with fresh intentions.

I folded the handkerchief and pressed it carefully where root met the tree—Eleanor’s spells responded best to orderliness—and waited for her to begin.

She inhaled. “Now.”

Eleanor lifted her cuffed wrist to her mouth, whispering something—a prayer or chant, I couldn't tell. Her eyes closed, and she worked from the depths of her soul.

The root swelled as the Brand passed through it, ashen and bulbous. The bump passed under my hand, and I held the handkerchief taut, easing the root as it transmuted the Brand. The handkerchief transformed Inarus's magic, breaking it down into its primary components, making them more digestible to the throne.

Scents of lilac and dense forest wafted from the throne. It was working. The handkerchief thinned as the root warmed.

Eleanor gasped. Her chin tilted to the ceiling, her eyes rolling back. She shook... and shook... She battled the last stubborn fragments of the Brand.

The root grew hotter, a resistor burning up. Desperate to help, I dove into the Underworld.

From a new perspective, I considered the magic we had created. Once the handkerchief had broken the Brand into its components, the throne could absorb most of it. Except there remained a fraction, the deadliest fraction—something indigestible.

When I used the ashflower to heal Ayla, it hadn't been like this. The ashflower absorbed the Brand completely, withering once it was spent. It destroyed the Brand in its entirety.

In this case, indigestible components had become stuck in the root. The conduit had become clogged; the Brand had no way to flow.

Eleanor strained against it, trying to push the last of the Brand from her body. She squealed. Low at first, but soon she shrieked with frustration. Her body tensed, consumed by the painful effort.

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The sound reverberated through my bones, my memories. I couldn't lose her—not again. Ayla was gone, and I couldn't lose another person I loved.

I spoke the command before I could consider the consequences. "Shade's Brand, come to me."

It obeyed. My body sucked it in, absorbing the last of the Brand.

Eleanor gasped. The final dregs of her Brand passed from her; they flowed through the root and entered me.

"We did it!" Eleanor sat back on her heels, a rare smile tilting her lips. Life flooded her face, pallor becoming color.

My core tightened, death creeping into me. I didn't have to look at my chest to know—I was branded. It would fester within me, growing stronger until it seized my soul.

After what I had done to Ayla, maybe it was a fitting fate. Darkness is inevitable. The words resonated with painful truth.

"Now for the throne," Eleanor said, squaring her shoulders and facing the whittled chair.

I blinked, realizing she did not know I was branded. She couldn't sense it. She prepared to take the next step of her journey without understanding what it had cost me.

At least Eleanor was safe. Finally, she could do what she was born to do.

We had been so young when the throne made its preferred heir known. I couldn't remember not knowing Eleanor would be queen. I had been the spare, the protector.

When we were children, she practiced claiming the throne. It was the first rite she was taught. Sometimes she would sneak into the throne room and stare at her fate. Eventually, she would playact, approaching it like she might ascend, always stopping short of sitting on the throne.

I watched, jealous she had been chosen, relieved I didn't carry her responsibilities.

Today's ascension rite was nothing like we'd practiced. Eleanor wasn't claiming the throne in a peaceful transition of power. The grand throne had been worn down to a chair. This chamber, with its single flickering fireplace, was a pale comparison to the throne room in Issa Neu. There wasn't a watching vigil—only me.

Yet the roots remained. The power of the Isle still flowed through the Shadow Throne. A queen was called to claim her place.

I swallowed, deciding not to tell her about my Brand. I could not distract her.

Eleanor lengthened her spine. She spun, dress swirling around her. She exposed her back to the throne and sat.

Her next breath rattled the room. Starting with her fingertips, the throne consumed her body. Roots wrapped around her legs. Her back sank deeper, merging with the wood. The throne bonded to her.

She didn't flinch as the throne devoured her. Her eyes closed. Her breathing slowed—it stopped. They merged, and she became wooden too.

The rite had begun.

What happened next was a mystery. There would be no physical evidence, and no monarch talked about their experience. Not even our parents had explained.

This rite was her trial.

And protecting her was my duty.

34 | Perception

Ayla

I prepared to run.

Digging through Inarus's rooms, I foraged for supplies. The apartment was well stocked, and I filled a bag with provisions and fae goods.

It was procrastination. I was running into a dead end. I couldn't possibly collect enough supplies to fix my Brand. If I truly intended to run, I would have already been gone.

"I'm going back, aren't I?" I asked Ninti.

She replied with warmth. "See? You're braver than you think."

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“I just hope Eleanor knows what she’s doing.”

I marched to the apartment door before I could reconsider. I wasn’t doing this for Eleanor—I was doing it for Zayne.

The door opened, pushing inward.

Inarus. The necromancer was entering the room.

I reached for my blade. This was the male who commanded my Brand. Instinct drove me to lift my weapon—

Yet he didn’t even flinch. He didn’t fear me. The black diamond sparkled while rot and corruption bloomed on the air.

I paused, and for a long moment, he studied me. More than anything, he seemed curious.

“You... you’re the one who traveled with the prince.” He wasn’t asking a question. “I assumed you were being transformed into a Shade.”

That he thought Zayne would just leave me—use me as a compass and abandon me here—unsettled me.

Inarus huffed. “Zayne was too soft, wasting all that ashflower on you. Now my whole plan is going to fail, all because you somehow hoodwinked my Gray General into branding you instead of Zayne.”

I tried to step past him, but he filled the doorway. If I tried to shove him out of the way, what magic would he use?

He squinted at me. “Only... now that you’re here, I see it. Maybe my general was right. You’re...brighterthan I expected.”

I blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Your magic. It’s strong.”

“I don’t have magic.”

He glanced at my underdeveloped antlers. “You’ve been blocked, that’s all.”

“Blocks aren’t a thing,” I countered, remembering Zayne’s surprise.

“Oh, they’re real—they’re just so difficult that nobody bothers. It had to be done immediately after your birth.”

“Not possible. I’m half-human, born south of the Rift.”

He shook his head. “Someone lied to you. And the longer we talk, the more certain I am—you have a deep well of magic beyond your reach. The Shades saw it, and I do too.”

I trembled. Was he right? My intuition believed—thisseemedright. His description matched my experience with the taproot, the tree growing around a metal barrier.

To accomplish this, Mother must have traveled to the Isles heavily pregnant—hiring a decoy at the palace while she met with a discreet sorcerer. It would have been expensive. Mother was careful with her resources.

Why? My magic had no purpose in Valterra, but she had still stripped it from me. She had tried to send me to the Southern Watch, moving me even farther from the Isles.

She was hiding something.

I raced through my shock, reaching denial and anger. A wave of emotions overwhelmed me—but they had to be dealt with later.

“I could help you break the block,” Inarus offered. “But I must help Eleanor first. In the meantime, try to avoid the barn.” He said it so matter-of-factly.

The old male shrugged and stepped into the room. I let him pass, watching as he went to the desk and picked up the black necklace.

I left him there. He didn’t chase after me—I had nowhere to go.

He called after me, “Tell Eleanor I’ll be back soon. If she can fix this, then I promise we will see what I can do for you.”

Zayne

“Am I too late?”

Ayla rushed into the room. For a moment, I thought I had imagined her, some hopeful delirium. With Eleanor lost to the rite, I had fallen into the trance of her vigil. The whole court should have been there, empowering her journey.

I surfaced to see Ayla. “You came back.”

She shoved the satchel of ashflower into my hand. “Can you help her?”

“I already did. Or Ninti did—she strengthened the root enough for it to heal Eleanor.”

Ninti didn’t preen at the praise. She took a long sniff, her eyes darting as she observed the scene. Her gaze paused at my chest, the Brand.

Ayla stared at Eleanor’s body sunken into the throne. She gaped.

“This is normal,” Ninti assured her. “It’s Eleanor’s ascension rite.”

“How long does it take?” Ayla asked, still disconcerted by the state of my wooden sister.

“A few minutes, a few days. It varies,” I replied.

“And she’s just stuck like that... until she’s queen?”

Ninti answered, “Either she ascends, or her body is absorbed by the throne.”

Ayla shivered. I did too.

“Inarus is coming,” she whispered. “And he’s not what I expected.”

“I know.”

“He’s been corrupted,” Ninti explained. “The power of the black diamond, it’s off.”

“He thinks he makes Shades for a noble reason,” I added. “Something about Gloom’s expansion.”

“What should we do?” Ayla asked Ninti.

Her brow wrinkled. “We need to be careful.” She glanced at the door.

Inarus stood at the threshold. He looked at the throne and lifted his arms. His eyes widened with anger.

In one violent thrash, he threw the vial against a wall. The glass broke, and the potion within splattered.

“What is happening?” he roared.

“The rite has begun,” I said. “Isn’t this what you wanted?”

In his other hand, he carried a collar. It was a choker-style necklace made from black ribbon, accented with a central black stone and thin metal chains.

I knew what it was. “What the fuck is that for?”

Collars were a fae good invention, one quickly forbidden. Only someone who knew

the dark markets would find one of these—someone who sought absolute control over another.

Ayla didn't understand, but she followed my lead. Her hands went to her swords, bracing, as Ninti jumped down from her shoulders, transforming into the Firewolf.

“When Eleanor rises, she will be vulnerable,” I explained. “We cannot allow Inarus to place that collar on her—it will give him control over her.”

“I have no choice,” Inarus replied. “For her safety—for everyone's safety—she must be under my command for the next part of my plan to work.”

I growled. “Your plans usually fail.”

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He was not going to put that thing on my sister.

Inarus appealed to Ayla. “Do you want to live long enough to unlock your magic? Help me do what is necessary.”

Unlock her magic?

Ayla held her stature, not giving into Inarus for a moment. “That collar is as demented as your Brand. Souls aren’t yours to claim.”

Inarus sighed. “If that’s the case, I have no choice.”

A wind swept through the room; the fireplace snuffed. Gloom’s slowing presence returned. Except for the gentle glow of Ninti’s flame, the room succumbed to darkness.

There was a stench, and I didn’t need the Underworld to sense it—the Shades. They were coming.

35 | Shades and Generals

Zayne

Ninti’s flames brightened in the dark room. She flickered, casting shadows on Eleanor’s sunken form.

Gloom infected the room, the enchanted fireplace no longer keeping it at bay. My

mind slowed as my Brand throbbed.

“Clear my path to the throne,” Inarus ordered his dark charges.

Ayla reached for her dual swords. Ninti growled, sharp teeth bared. I braced, sword in one hand and shadows in the other. I lowered myself, finding the lens of the Underworld, superimposing it onto the living.

The Shades came fast. There was no time to plan.

Ayla darted forward, striking for Inarus. She lunged with brute logic: take down the necromancer, remove his influence. She struck—and missed.

Instead of Inarus, she destroyed a Shade.

Preternaturally fast, the Shades stormed into the room. One had leaped before Inarus, blocking Ayla’s blade. They turned to billowing ash.

Inarus vanished through the doorway. More Shades streamed into the room.

Through Ninti’s wavering light, the Shades shifted, stilted and swift. They came for us.

I parried and sliced. Ninti’s teeth gnashed around a limb, snapping as the Shade vanished. Ayla struck two at once. Gloom slowed us, and our focus narrowed.

From the Underworld, I could see a bigger picture. Countless and numerous, the Shades could have been infinite. Elsewhere, on the fringe of my awareness, something else... somethingnewwas waking.

“They already fill the hallway,” I warned the others. “If we can give Eleanor more

time... she will rise with the power of a queen.” It was a dire prospect. Facing an army this large, defeat was inevitable.

Only we didn’t have to win. We needed to delay.

Ayla already had a plan. “Push them back to the doorway, make it a chokepoint. They will be forced to enter one at a time.”

We spun into action, facing the Shades already filling the room. Defeating the horde seemed impossible, but destroying a single Shade was easy. We pressed them closer to the door.

I fought with my sword. Inarus’s necromantic threads weaved through the room, informing me. A Shade dashed into Ninti’s blind spot, and I lunged, destroying them.

The Firewolf fought with tooth, claw, and flame. Her bite could destroy, and a swipe did the same. She darted into a cluster of Shades, paused, and magic blasted from her. She became a flaming weapon, and with a single blaze, Ninti toppled countless Shades.

Ayla fought at her side, the two of them falling into sync. With her twin swords, Ayla struck down the Shades twice as fast. She created a pathway for Ninti, giving the Firewolf a platform to launch her stronger attack.

Ninti and Ayla broke through the ranks of Shades, raging toward the doorway. A Shade approached Ayla’s back—

I struck, guided by my preemptive sense. The Shade fell, and Ayla charged forward.

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Step by step, we slew. Ayla cleared a path for Ninti while I watched for blind spots, protecting when they weren't prepared. Ayla grew confident, her attacks increasingly aggressive, and she stormed ahead.

Soon, ash filled the air, vanishing as fast as we could replenish it. Always, there was more.

With a final surge, Ninti raced for the doorway, bursting into flame as she barged forward. Countless Shades vanished, and for a moment the doorway was clear.

Ninti growled, assuming a defensive post at the threshold. Meanwhile, Ayla and I cleared the corners. Destroying a few more Shades, we took control of the throne room.

Ayla's shoulders heaved as she surrendered to a moment of breathy recovery. Sweat beaded on her neck, glinting in Ninti's firelight.

"You're amazing," I said.

She swallowed, her throat bobbing—I caught the fear in her eyes. She saw my fear too. Compared to our threat, this victory felt thin.

"I try," she replied.

Despite our odds, confidence surged through me—courage born of desperation. If this was my final fight, then I would go out ablaze.

She smirked. Even in Gloom, her brilliant mind was already one step ahead.

“You have a plan,” I realized.

“Yes. And you’re not going to like it. I need you to go to the Underworld.”

My stomach pitched. She was right—I didn’t like it. “I would rather protect you.”

“We secured the door. Ninti and I can manage. But you...”

“I can try to take control of the Shades,” I agreed.

She nodded. Ninti and Ayla were better equipped for this type of fighting. We had improved our position, and now my talents were better spent elsewhere.

Only, to claim power in the Underworld, I would have to relinquish my control here. My body would be left behind, unable to protect anyone.

Yet I had to face Inarus in the Underworld. It was the best tactical decision.

My heart throbbed. Now that Ayla was back, I never wanted to let her go. I pressed my hand to my aching heart.

“Trust me,” Ayla insisted.

“I trust you,” I agreed.

Her lips parted, breath catching. Our eyes locked. Would we ever have our chance to dance?

“Ay-la!” Ninti cried, her voice echoing.

“Coming,” Ayla called.

She took a step toward Ninti, but with a turn on her toe, she lunged for me instead. She caught me by surprise—she kissed me. A desperate peck to my lips.

Flushed, she raced to Ninti’s side. Ayla took up her arms and entered the fray.

I pressed my lips together, wishing the kiss would linger. If only we had longer—

We still had the time we could fight for. We had whatever opportunity remained. To give Eleanor the chance to rise, my duty was to descend.

36 | The Deliberate Delay of Death

Zayne

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I didn't need to breathe. Not when I was that deep. It was a depth of the Underworld I understood better in theory than practice. I dove anyhow.

Before, when I'd taken control of the Shades, Inarus had been far away. The long distance made it easier to usurp his commands. This time, I had to face Inarus directly.

The nearby Shades faded in the distance, blurring to become single-minded background noise. Ninti and Ayla faded from view.

It was dark here. Cold, like a void.

One light remained—dark purple with blue hues. It was light that wasn't light, a mimicry of illumination.

Inarus.

I rushed to him, taking a single step to close the distance between us. Distance behaved differently here.

My boot butted against a translucent shield. Inarus sat within the protected bubble, thin legs crossed and eyes closed in meditation.

He held the crystal skull between his palms, a focus for his necromantic work. Thin strands, like marionette strings, bound him to the Shades above.

In the Living Realm, Inarus gave an illusion of weakness, but here, I could clearly see

how the black diamond fueled him. It hovered before his heart, the source of the strange light. It surged with energy, ancient and metallic, countless beams of magic radiating from it. The energy was broken, tainted, and expansive.

A thick conduit connected the diamond to an external source, large enough to carry a flood of power. Smaller energy lines connected the diamond to countless elsewhere. Several strands of power supported Inarus directly.

Everything about the diamond was wrong, only it was off in a way that I couldn't quite grasp. The power of the black diamond was corrupted, and the abuse had damaged Inarus's soul.

Despite my sudden arrival, his eyes remained closed. Inarus trusted his shield completely. My Brand throbbed at the sight of its creator. I countermanded it, commanding it to silence, and focused on the task at hand.

Inarus was vulnerable on two fronts: the crystal skull and the black diamond. And before I could approach either, I first had to remove his shield.

There was a tall jar beside the shield, the same type of vessel the Brand used to trap souls. Only this one was much older—the ceramic surface had faded; cracks had formed and been repaired. Inarus's shield emanated from the jar.

I had read about this technique. Whoever was inside the jar was already dead, but their soul remained as a protector. This soul could guard Inarus from dangers in the Underworld, anchoring him to life. Presumably, the guardian was a soul Inarus had trusted in life.

To remove the shield, I would have to release the soul, sending them deeper into the Underworld, downward to final death.

Who? My hands trembled as I lifted the jar's lid. It was easy to open.

Nobody burst from the jar. Whoever was inside didn't respond like a captive.

"Hello?" I whispered into the vessel.

A voice rose from the tomb. "Zayne?"

It had been a long time since I'd heard her voice. An overly floral perfume pulled me back in time, to childhood.

She stood, a ghostly figure rising from the vessel. My childhood nurse. Sandra.

"Zayne, is it really you?" she asked. "Inarus said you would come."

In some ways, she was like I remembered. Her big brown eyes examined me with curiosity, her kind smile spreading. "You've grown up."

She was smaller than I remembered—or I had grown bigger. Her form frayed at the edges. She seemed tired and weak, nothing like the vibrant caretaker she had been. Once, she had been quick enough to keep up with Eleanor and me. Now she slumped against the edge of the jar, unwilling to rise.

While I had carried guilt like a ghost, she had been trapped here. I choked on my words. "I'm sorry I didn't save you."

"I know."

I examined the jar. Could I break it? "How do I free you?" I asked.

"You tell me—you're the one who trapped me."

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Her words struck like a slap. Sandra's soul was withered, unable to move on—I had done that? I swallowed. “You’ve been unable to move on because of my oath?”

“Your words anchored me.”

“I will save you,” I whispered, reciting the oath. The words of a desperate child. An oath spoken by an unknown necromancer, one ignorant to the shape their magics could take.

There had been consequences, ones I hadn't perceived. I had bound her soul in the Underworld. I had clung to the dead long after they should have passed, and my remorse trapped Sandra here.

“In the aftermath, Inarus found me,” she continued. “He thought I would make the best shield.”

“Isn't a shield supposed to be someone who wants to protect the shielded?” I asked.

“Zayne, you're the only one Inarus ever feared.”

“No—”

“He always knew you were a necromancer. He knew, even then. You're the only one who could confront him here.”

I shivered. My ignorance could have been a favor. All my life, my magic had manifested as simple, common shadow skills. My power ran deep, but I never had a

specialization, not until the Shades attacked me. My ignorance had been comfortable.

“When he bound me,” Sandra continued, “Inarus assumed you could never release me. He thought you were too soft-hearted to break his shield. Prove him wrong and let me go.”

She looked at me with such hope.

Maybe Inarus was right; maybe I couldn’t do this. I had carried my memories of her for years, shaping myself from the narrative of this trauma—I protected Eleanor because I could not lose another.

And after all these years, I had found her. All I wanted was to talk to her again. When I saw her, I felt the nurturing safety of my childhood—I wanted that security again. It was a childish urge.

She deserved to pass on. Releasing Sandra was the right thing to do, the mature thing to do, but... “I don’t know how.”

“Then learn. You can start by forgiving yourself.”

“What does forgiveness have to do with anything?”

“Zayne, it’s not your fault that I died.”

Her words rattled years of regret, weight I had carried so long that I didn’t perceive it. I had created my own burden.

“You cannot save everyone,” she continued.

The words struck my purpose, my duty. A shadow may fade, but it always remains. I

had an entire isle to save.

Yet the throne had been moved. When we rebuilt, we would create something new. There was no returning to the past, no way to reclaim the lives that had been lost.

I could never save them all. The confession ached. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't undo the Collapse. The past had happened. I had a future to embrace, living without the dead.

Tears streamed down my face. I met Sandra's gaze, and she held me steady. She remained patient with me. So patient.

Her ability to wait stunned me; she trusted my ability to grow. After all these years, after all my mistakes, she waited. It was the patience of love. If she could forgive me for my oath, the least I could do was attempt to forgive myself.

I said it within. It's not my fault Sandra died.

"It's not my fault you died," I whispered aloud.

For a moment, the belief flickered and was real. For a moment, I found forgiveness.

And it was enough.

The jar shook, and it broke, splintering into pieces, releasing Sandra's soul. She slid, sinking deeper into the Underworld.

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“Good night, sweet princeling,” she called, the phrase echoing from my childhood.

“Good night,” I affirmed.

She descended, flowing downward. Her departure carried the scent of funeral flowers.

A scent soon overtaken by rot.

Inarus. His shield was down.

Ayla

We defeated them as fast as they arrived, but the Shades kept coming. Ninti and I had developed a method to our fighting.

She burst into flames, eliminating a mob of Shades just beyond the doorway. Her fire attack spent, I ran forward while she stepped back. I slashed the Shades, left to right, taking them down.

When she had recovered, Ninti gave her command, “Now.”

Again, we traded places. Ninti launched her fire attack. I collected my breath and checked my Brand. She nipped and clawed, giving me another blessed second to rest.

“Now.”

She stepped back, and the cycle repeated.

The battle had become a stalemate. Stalemates were won by the side with deeper reserves. We faced an unlimited army; we had no tactical way to win.

But at any moment, Zayne could claim control of the Shades. Eleanor could rise. We were merely the distraction, the protectors in this battle for the throne.

Our potential saviors remained silent. Eleanor was unchanged, sunken into her throne. Zayne had grown pale, his blood cold.

Gloom sapped my hope and strength.

I needed a better plan. My only idea was to somehow access my magic. My conversation with Inarus lingered, more evidence to my potential. If only I knew how—

—boooooom—

The ceiling cracked and the walls shook.

—craaash—

A second blast. The wall tumbled down. The ceiling splintered, and rubble fell at my feet.

The front of the room was gone, and our position became significantly less secure.

Two giant humanoids loomed over us, their fists raised with the intent to destroy. Their hair was long, a mossy green. Their eyes held the same dark, vacant expression as the other Shades.

“Trolls,” Ninti whispered.

They were taller and larger than fae. And incredibly strong—powerful enough to beat down these walls. Trolls were formed from organic materials, such as trees or rocks, their lifeforce derived from the land’s magic.

Petrified wood formed the bodies of these trolls. Undead forest trolls. A different type of Shade, but still under Inarus’s command.

More of the ceiling fell. The trolls stared at nothing, seemingly stunned by their strength.

Ninti and I fell back, dodging the falling debris. Thankfully, Eleanor and Zayne stayed safe, their side of the room remaining intact.

I met Ninti’s gaze, evaluating how we could face this next challenge.

In the lull, I reached for my magic, that well of something lurking within me. I pressed, I pushed. Please, I begged.

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I felt nothing, no spark or spell. Just the same emptiness I had always known. I rammed my frustration against it. “Give me magic or I might die,” I screamed, begging it to save me. The barrier didn’t budge.

Finally, the crashing stopped. The trolls pressed their advantage, lumbering forward. Ninti and I found an advantageous place amongst the debris. We would have to hold this new line together.

I darted forward, attacking the nearest troll. Like the Shades before, I slashed them with my sword...

Clink. I struck its petrified wood body. The troll didn’t turn to ash. Unlike the fae-turned-Shades, these trolls would not be destroyed so easily. My blade had done minimal damage.

Ninti lunged forward, jumping to attack the second troll. She unleashed a burst of fire.

The troll stumbled as she attacked. Slowly, they turned to ash.

They changed too slowly...

The troll roared before they burned. They swiped the Firewolf, striking her with their hand—

Ninti collapsed. With a second strike, the troll shoved her back, and she slid across the floor. The troll vanished, turning to ash, but the Firewolf did not rise.

“Ninti!” I screamed. My chest tightened.

She didn’t respond.

I resisted my urge to check on her—I couldn’t lose ground. One troll remained, and I was our final defense.

I bounced on my knees, my heart pulsing.

The remaining troll stilled and stiffened, shocked they now faced me alone. Their fallen comrade proved they weren’t invulnerable.

It had taken Ninti’s best attack to defeat the other troll. My swords were like toothpicks.

I spared a glance for Zayne and Eleanor, quietly begging for help. Both remained silent as the dead, so I prepared for my final stand.

Zayne

The shield was down, and Inarus was vulnerable. He still didn’t seem aware of his own weakness. His eyes remained closed.

I needed to strike. Somehow.

The diamond was his source of power, but I was afraid. I didn’t want to touch it—I didn’t want to become corrupted like him. If Inarus was a puppet, the diamond was his string.

Or I could seize the crystal skull, his necromantic focus.

In the distance, I heard a crash. My physical body had been shaken. No time to debate.

I seized the crystal skull, clutching it between my palms and pulling it from the necromancer. My mind reached for necromantic strands, struggling to command the power I had so easily captured.

The Gray Generals and their Shade armies were spread across the isle. Some troops lurked beneath the sea, while others hid in caves. The stronghold servants rested while Inarus focused on the battle.

And Ayla. I saw her through the eyes of a troll. She was clearly fatigued, her reactions slowed. Ninti sprawled on the floor nearby. Now Ayla protected us all.

The undead troll aimed for Ayla. They readied a strike—

“Stop,” I ordered. Not just him. All of them. “Do not move.” My command echoed through the ranks of Shades.

The troll followed my instruction, becoming still.

I couldn’t celebrate. Nausea bloomed in my stomach, bile reaching for my throat. My vision pulsed, a headache forming.

I struggled to keep the Shades under my command, and their threads squirmed, becoming knotted. The crystal skull focused my power, but still, I had no experience. I didn’t have the power of the black diamond.

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My body rejected the scope of my necromantic control, my mind becoming hazy.

A few Shades slipped through the cracks of my command. Clinging for control, I focused my attention on the events at the stronghold.

Fortunately, the troll remained frozen. Ayla beat at it, striking with her swords, landing more hits per second than seemed possible. She was slowly making progress.

“You fool,” Inarus said, beside me in the Underworld. “Without my Shades, Gloom will expand. With Eleanor collared, I can extend my work through her. I’ll be stronger! I can send Gloom back! You have no idea what you’re dealing with.”

He was right—I had no idea. I was a child playing with fire. I’d made mistakes at the Rift. Had they risen from the same arrogance Inarus showed with the Shades? In his mirror, I saw my weaknesses.

Unlike him, I would learn from my mistakes. “Your Shades are an abomination,” I gritted. “We have to find a better way, one without collars and Brands.”

Inarus grabbed the skull, his bony fingertips jamming into me. I struggled with the weight of the crystal skull, and he yanked, pulling the skull from my reach. The black diamond fueled him, granting bite to his strength.

“Darkness is inevitable,” he hissed. “So why do you resist?”

Ayla

Zayne had power over the Shades. Presumably.

I struck the troll, my sword reverberating with the sound of metal grinding against wood turned to stone. Ashy dust billowed, fading to nothing. A crack formed, evidence of my progress.

The troll didn't respond. I struck again, hit after hit after hit. I damaged the Shade. It was slow, tedious work, yet I continued. Blow by blow, I had to make the progress while I could.

Zayne's body remained still. I couldn't guess at his circumstances. This pause was my opportunity, and I needed every advantage.

Actually, what I really needed was a fresh source of power. My magic. My body and mind ran on fumes. Gloom weighed on me. Momentum was the only force driving me forward—if I paused, I would collapse.

My mind was fuzzy and my vision tunneled. I was driven by the simple mission of survival. No strength to spare—I could not strategize or awaken blocked magic.

I struck again, fire burning in my exhausted muscles. My attacks were becoming sloppy. My core weakened.

I was alone. So alone.

The troll blinked its black eyes, and I forced my trembling arms to lift the blade again. Zayne's control was fleeting.

Zayne

Inarus seized the crystal skull, the black diamond glowing as it enabled his strength.

As it slipped through my hands, I gave my final commands. Don't attack, I ordered the troll. Back away, I told the Shades. Every second mattered, and I didn't know how many seconds remained.

Eleanor needed to rise. Quickly, I sent a silent plea to my twin, practically a prayer—it was the most I could do for her.

I focused on Inarus. I rammed my will against his, attempting to seize the crystal skull and command over the Shade army. Try as I might, his grip remained firm. The diamond gave him strength.

Inarus ordered his Shades to march forward. From the Living Realm, I heard a grunt and a yell. Ayla. She shouted, the battle cry of a final stand.

Her roar reached me through the depths of death. The sound echoed throughout my being.

Ayla deserved a better fate than this. She lived with vitality, carrying a fire that illuminated the texture of life—even a life of shadows. Since knowing her, my life would never be the same. I had struggled to release my lifelong guilt while helping Sandra, and I couldn't add Ayla's fate to my list of mistakes.

I had to fight harder. Determined, I dared. I reached for the black diamond.

The stone pulsed within my hand, the purple light radiating through my fingers. Inarus tried to shove me aside. My fist burned, but I clutched the stone, desperate to claim the raw power.

The diamond's fire died, becoming warm curiosity. Desperate, I begged, "To save

those I love, I need this power.” It listened, and like a dream within a dream, the Underworld faded, and I entered a new reality.

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“Who are you?” the voice asked. The sound carried the weight of millennia. Vaguely curious, mostly uninterested. They were the indifferent words of an ancient.

I felt light and untethered. My mundane senses faded, useless in a reality formed from pure energy. I remained fae—bound to this isle, formed from its earth. My corporeal form faded as I became my spark of divinity.

I knew this sensation, this detached sense of being. This was how I had talked with Teyr.

“You’ve met with my brother,” the voice continued. “I know his scent, the ashflower, born of fleeting beauty as lava becomes obsidian. Life begets death begets life...”

She wandered off, drifting in her ancient mind.

“Gloom?” I asked.

“I am,” she answered.

The goddess didn’t elaborate. Her energy drifted, expanding and relaxing. She considered me with bored curiosity.

She was linked to the black diamond, like Ayla’s ruby ring to Ninti, but bigger—like I held a single shard, one of many. Pieces that had been broken and abused. Still, it was an artifact powerful enough to communicate with a goddess, to funnel power from Gloom to Inarus.

I shivered.

Divine artifacts belonged in lore, not the modern age of fae goods. Yet as long as the primordial deities remained, so did their influence. The artifacts may have vanished from memory, but they had not been lost.

“How is my brother?” she asked. “We’ve been separated for so long.”

Gloom was not as I’d expected. The cold and dark goddess of stagnation wasn’t hungry to consume. She was lonely.

“Teyr misses you too,” I replied. His detachment had been clear in my last chat with a god.

God. I trembled, realizing what I was doing. I swallowed, forcing down my panic, and focused on the unexpected turn of events. I had been strong enough to speak with Teyr—I could communicate with Gloom.

“Your brother was surprised to learn of your expansion,” I said.

“Expansion?” she asked. A sense of emptiness arrived with her question, reinforcing her words. She didn’t know of the Collapse.

Neither had Teyr. I had explained it to him too.

I reviewed my memories, finding images of Gloom. From the mist’s initial descent, to my hours of study, and finally, an impression of the Isle of Shadow as it had become. I packaged what I knew and sent my knowledge to her—a trick I had learned while communing with Teyr.

Gloom fluttered, her power stuttering. “I didn’t cause this...” she whispered.

She muttered for a long while. Eventually, she stopped speaking, losing herself in thought. I couldn't tell if her mind had wandered elsewhere.

"Then please fix it," I said. "The black diamond I'm holding, it's empowering a necromancer who—"

Another being entered the space. They brought the scent of warm beaches and algae, reminiscent of Mer.

"He lies," the newcomer said. "All is fine." She stepped before the goddess, commanding Gloom's attention with diamond shards of her own. "I am the one you can trust."

Gloom rushed to me. Closer. And closer. She grew, dominating my world. Earlier, she had given me the scarcest of her attention, only vaguely interested in a disturbance. Now she looked at me with awesome strength.

The other figure shifted. They said something. A bright light flashed, and my hand—somewhere far away—burst with pain.

"You've hurt me!" Gloom hissed.

If I had hurt her, why did my hand burn? The other figure had faded.

"Go!" Gloom yelled, her shout vibrating the realm. Her power shook my soul, and I fell away, disconnecting from divinity and returning to Zayne, as I knew myself to be...

The black diamond shattered in my hand. It cleaved and fractured, shrapnel cutting into my soul flesh.

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The pain was psychological. I didn't bleed.

Tethers of power broke and strings snapped. The tendrils that had connected the diamond to vagueelsewhereturned to wisps.

Inarus screamed; he withered and wailed. "The diamond... It sustained me."

He slipped, soul sinking downward. He followed the flow of death. He called up to me, "Zayne, remember: you'll always be a necromancer. In the end, you're the same as me."

I didn't want to pity him. He had killed my parents. His army captured merchants, branding them and killing them in the barn.

He had been my teacher. He had been corrupted. Manipulated. And I still didn't understand why.

I reached for him, and my soul fingers brushed his. He calmed, and a crooked smile claimed his dying face. "Not now. You're not ready." He drifted, fading from sight while his final words lingered. "When it's time for us to talk, I'll find you."

Then he was gone.

The Underworld seemed quiet. Expansive and primed with potential. I returned to myself, retreating to tasks that served the Living Realm.

Layer by layer, I had defeated my opposition. First the shield, and then the diamond.

Now even Inarus had vanished.

Only the Shades remained. The crystal skull focused their necromantic bindings. Steeling myself, I clutched the focus between my palms.

I connected to the countless Shades until their awareness consumed my mind. I lost myself in the madness. Inarus's commands lingered in them like old programming.

"Be still," I commanded the army. Some of them obeyed. There were so many.

Through the chaos, I frantically searched for Ayla.

The Shades whispered, muttering rumors I couldn't hush. I couldn't quite make out what they said, but I heard the phrase, "He has the Brand."

I couldn't find her—not fast enough.

The Shades looked at me, all at once, unified in their previous orders. Their whispered mutters coalesced into words.

"You're one of us," they realized.

They reversed the flow of power. I became a necromancer at the mercy of his horde. Their power surged into me. My chest burst, and with a rush, my Brand consumed me.

"We will control you."

My individuality lashed against their collective, and I dedicated myself to a fight for my soul.

Ayla

With a final slash, the troll turned to ash. I was too exhausted to feel victorious.

For minutes, the Shades had acted inconsistently, sometimes shifting to life and moving toward me. At other times, they were still.

I tried to clear the room, but they crept closer. Now they stumbled over the rubble, less coordinated than before. The horde now moved more mindlessly, but they still moved.

Amidst the inconsistencies, I couldn't tell if Zayne was winning or losing. Something had shifted, like a cold breeze. It gave me goosebumps, made me uncomfortable—I didn't know what it meant. I debated where to pivot next.

“Ayla?” Ninti asked.

I spun around. “Thank Teyr you're okay.”

The Firewolf rolled to her stomach and lifted her head. My fears eased.

Beside her, Zayne's body seemed broken. And was that...The Brand.

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I lunged for his side. His skin had turned gray. As I watched, the blemish trickled upward, reaching his forehead. It already covered his fingertips.

My hand went to my heart, finding my Brand.

Zayne seemed dead. But he wasn't—not really, right? He was only in the Underworld. He had to be alive, he had to be. His Brand...

The satchel of ashflower was still in his hand. I picked it up, unsure of what to do.

“Zayne—is he okay?” The question rose from the throne, the voice sweet and lilting. “Wh-what happened?”

Eleanor sat upon her throne, a queen. She seemed the same, yet all at once different. The root-cuff remained on her wrist, now disconnected from the throne.

The sight should have filled me with awe—but there was no time. She had shadow magic. Zayne needed help. She could help him better than me.

I blinked away tears and shoved the satchel into her hands. “The ashflower, it's for you. Zayne has been branded, and you need to save him.”

38 | Ashflower

Zayne

“Shade's Brand, come to me.” The voice was meek, the sound shallow. So very, very

far away.

I battled an army of Shades eager to shove my soul in the jar, seal me away, and control my body.

I told them to stop. I commanded it. Sometimes they listened—but there were so many that my sway only held for so long.

With Inarus gone, the Shades were sloppy. They would attack and then forget their motivation. They wandered off without warning.

It was like herding cats that hungered for my soul.

Through the chaos, I heard Eleanor, just barely. From here, her command was soft as a whisper.

My sister had no experience with necromancy, no aptitude. Yet she was now the queen, and no form of shadow magic would elude her.

The Shadow Queen. I knew it from the essence of her words. My twin had survived the rite; she had risen reborn. My duty was fulfilled, and I could let go...

The Firewolf's signature of bonfire and cinnamon merged with the lilac of Eleanor's magic. Ninti was safe, but there was no hint of cherry, of spice—no whisper from Ayla.

Worry rubbed my wounds. I was still raw from losing Sandra. If I survived but Ayla didn't, guilt might consume me again.

Fear and grief gripped me, and the Shades played their advantage. They pushed me closer to the jar, closing in. They whispered their dark reminder, becoming a chorus,

“Darkness is inevitable.” I lost my footing, I fell back—

“Shade’s Brand, come to me,” Eleanor said again.

I embraced the words. I held the crystal skull. There was something important I had to do...

There was hope in the little things—the way Ayla grinned when she called me a princeling, the feel of our stolen kisses, and my remaining promise of a dance. I wrapped my memories around my soul, shielding myself against the onslaught of Shades.

I inhaled, inviting the ashflower’s power into me. I exhaled, pushing the Brand away. Again, I breathed. And another time, again.

My battle had three fronts. I guarded my mind against the Shades while commanding them to stay still in the Living Realm. I forced the Brand from my flesh.

The work consumed my mind.

Under duress, I created order. The Shades were easier to command when organized into troops. I assigned my Gray Generals, and my command over the Shades solidified.

My fingers relaxed as I learned to carry the crystal skull without clutching. The work became less resistive, and I steadied in the flow of my power.

I became the Shades’ leader. Their necromancer. As my control solidified, their interest in my Brand waned. My Brand became a remnant of their fallen master, and I became their new commander.

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I prepared for my next task. I strengthened my tether to the remaining ashflower. This was why Teyr had given it to me.

With one sigh, I spent the last of it. I snuffed out the Brand everywhere, destroying the remnants of Inarus's awful binding.

Within the ranks of free souls, I found Ayla.

She had lived. The Brand left her.

I healed her. My oath was met.

She had helped Eleanor save me. Now it was my turn to help her. The Brand left her, and from here I could see her bright soul, finally freed from the deadly weight.

She might have kissed me.

Only my body was far away.

Maybe it was only wisps of ash.

For my final breath, I immersed myself in her essence. Cherry and spice warmed me, making me brave.

My window of opportunity was small. For the moment, the Shades looked to me as their leader. I held a heady power, my control limited and unsustainable.

The army had to go.

“Die,” I commanded the Shades.

They obeyed. Dropping, they tumbled together. Under my command, they fell to their final death.

The Underworld flooded. Falling Shades formed a waterfall, a deluge of mass exodus. The current was strong, and the water pulled me under. Like the ashflower, I withered.

In the descent, I savored my final breath.

Ayla

Zayne’s Brand vanished. Zayne healed. Still, his body faded. I clutched at my chest, reaching for my aching heart. My Brand was gone too.

Zayne had done it. His victory tasted like dates at midnight, the freedom of a starlit night, and the unkept promise of a dance. The wave of peace, an oath kept. I will heal Ayla. By any means.

He slipped. He gasped a death rattle.

“No,” Eleanor breathed. “Zayne, come back. I need your help.”

Ninti’s ears drooped. The truth sank, cold in my stomach, blemishing the victory.

A breeze swept through the room, carrying his essence, cedar and amber and rain.

The remaining Shades fell. All at once, they became ash on the wind. The stronghold

seemed empty. And so did Zayne.

His chest didn't move. He didn't take another breath. I kept staring. Willing him to change.

He didn't move. I gasped.

I kissed his brow. I found myself whispering, "Please, Zayne, don't go. I believed the scariest thing I would ever do was trust again." Tears streamed down my nose, smearing his forehead. "But I was wrong. The scariest thing would be losing you."

Eleanor fell, sitting on her heels as her mouth gaped, failing to form words. Ninti nuzzled Zayne's limp hand.

I kissed his forehead. He still didn't stir.

Desperate, my shoulders heaved. I needed a proper breath, and I leaned closer to his mouth. Inhale. Gasping, sucking in air, I pulled the last tendrils of his scent, his essence, deep into my lungs.

I claimed Zayne's final breath.

His strength entered my lungs, and my spine straightened. Energy waved and writhed. Something opened. Something unhinged.

It began small, a pulse at my tailbone. Then it expanded, becoming an explosion, racing up my spine.

Empowered, my taproot plunged.

First a crack, then a fracture, the barrier fell. Iron broke. Magic welled within me, radiating up my spine. My lungs heaved, my heart thudded, and my shoulders were driven back.

Beyond the shattered ceiling, I faced the sky. Gloom blocked my vision, but I saw beyond. I saw stars.

They glinted. They sparkled and sang, "Hello."

They pulsed in beat with my heart.

I drifted down. Ninti spoke beside me. "Are you okay, Princess?" she asked.

I practiced breathing, struggling in my strange body.

Zayne remained lifeless.

This was magic. My magic, power I didn't know how to wield. My mind and body were exhausted. It would be crazy to use my newfound strength, except...

All I saw was Zayne. All I felt was power.

39 | Her Song

Zayne

“Ooh.”

I heard it from far away.

The distance as long as death.

Ayla? I opened my Underworld eyes.

Surprise, I wasn't dead.

Not quite yet.

I lingered near the end.

This was the death I had prepared for.

I surrendered a long time ago.

An urge... to fall back to sleep...

“Ooh, ahh.”

She woke me up.

My soul trembled.

Ayla.Cherry and spice.

I didn't see her.

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I heard her.

“I reach for you.”

I couldn't reply, “You found me.”

Hope fluttered in my fingertips. I reached out.

There, a tether. It glinted, golden.

I clung to it. I tried to climb.

Too much guilt.

Failed to rise.

Dismantled my regrets.

I attempted acceptance. I can't save everyone.

My guilt didn't vanish.

The load did lessen.

I seized the tether.

And I climbed.

I climbed.

Climbed.

Stumbled.

Released.

Got back up.

And climbed again.

Ayla

My power had long since flickered. My song faded.

The moment had been strange. My magic moved through me, doing what I needed. Surrendering to it, I sang to Zayne's body, reaching out for him. That was hours ago. His deathlike stupor had continued ever since.

A mystery, Eleanor called it, how the magic had flowed through me without any training. Spell singing, she had named my power.

I tried to spell sing a second time, but the song wouldn't flow. Powerless notes rose from me instead. My magic remained stubbornly still, a well of power I didn't know how to access.

I kept a vigil by his side.

Something had happened.

And I held on to the promise.

Eleanor and I had rekindled the throne room's fireplace, keeping Gloom, cold, and darkness at bay. We placed Zayne's body closest to the flame.

Maybe the heat could help him rise. We didn't know. His body was too cold for the living, but he was warmer than the dead. Ninti said those familiar with the Underworld often found final death in strange ways. We waited and hoped.

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The battle had gone on through the day. We watched through the night, the coldest hours. Hours when I whispered to myself that the sun would rise.

Darkness was inevitable, but the sun would rise.

The sun would rise. The sun would rise. I repeated it, again and again, until I lost track of the meaning.

While Eleanor and I waited, Ninti left the throne. She patrolled the stronghold. The Shades were gone. Zayne had succeeded—he destroyed the army, and my Brand was gone.

In exchange, he bordered death.

We needed a plan—to discover what food stores were available and discuss ways to protect the throne.

Instead, heartbreak ravaged me. I couldn't leave Zayne. I couldn't sleep.

Ever since my strange song, I felt bound to him.

As the night wore on, we didn't talk much. There was nothing to say while we shared the long silence.

I felt numb. It was more than the cold. My mind turned silent as time became slippery. I felt nothing and was glad for it.

Eventually, finally, dawn crept upon us, the light sluggish and scattered through the mists of Gloom.

We waited.

We remained.

Moving on wasn't possible.

Moving on meant accepting Zayne was...

I inhaled, that scent.

My back straightened.

In my grief, my nose must have started playing tricks on me. Because I scented cedar and amber.

It made me want to sob, but I held the breath, afraid I would never sense him again.

In my grief, I must have become delusional. My eyes must be deceiving me. Zayne's chest shifted...

—ahh—

He sighed.

That wasn't my imagination.

His chest heaved, lungs sucking in life. He coughed and spluttered.

I lunged forward, pulling him into my arms. “Are you okay? What do you need?” I choked on my tears. “How is this even possible?”

Eleanor teetered behind me.

He glanced at her, but his gaze settled on me. His eyes shone as he answered, “While you held the tether, I climbed from the depths.”

40 | The Ties that Bind

Zayne

The throne room was welcoming, even in the depths of Gloom. Ayla pulled me closer, and I thawed in her embrace.

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I surfaced. Living didn't feel real, not yet. I blinked, finding a broken throne room. The light of dawn muddled by mist.

I had been on a long journey. Sometimes I lost ground. Sometimes the best I could do was hold still. Still, I climbed upward.

Time flowed strangely in death. I didn't know if my ascent had taken minutes or centuries. In my lowest moments, I feared becoming lost to time, the necromancer who climbs death forever.

Yet I wasn't afraid. Ayla stayed with me. She sustained me, waiting, holding the other end of the golden tether. The climb had been mine to make, but I hadn't done it alone.

Ayla's kisses covered my brows, tears cleansing my face. Wisps of hair tickled my cheeks.

I absorbed her scent, amazed by the texture of existence. I marveled at the shifting of my lungs, my beating heart. It felt good to be alive.

Lifting my chin, I planted a soft kiss on her neck. My lips stung, my body struggling with stimulation.

Surprised, Ayla steadied herself, meeting my gaze for a hungry second. She dove forward. We kissed, the needy pressure of confirmation—we had both survived.

We settled with my head in her lap. She combed my hair, unwilling to move her

fingers from me. I savored her touch.

Ninti nosed my tired hand, forcing her way under my arm. She rested against my belly. I petted her awkwardly, stiff from almost-death. The Firewolf's power warmed me, reorienting me in my body.

Meanwhile, Eleanor remained frozen. She stood over us with a hand hiding her gaped mouth. She barely reacted to Ayla's ministrations or Ninti's attentions.

"Zayne," my twin breathed my name. She blinked her dry eyes. Her face was pale, lips taut.

"Your Majesty." I nodded.

"Yes." Her lip trembled. "I'm the Shadow Queen."

She shouldn't have seemed regal. With her worn dress and messy braid, she should have seemed smaller. Something larger sustained her.

"Are the Shades gone?" I asked.

"Yes. You did it." Her voice cracked. Finally, she dropped the refined act, falling to her knees and meeting me at eye level. We rarely touched and never hugged, but now she reached for my shoulder. Her eyes squeezed shut. "I thought I'd lost you."

I lifted a heavy arm and gripped her forearm. "I thought I lost you too."

Eleanor seemed older than before, becoming timeless. Awe filled me, deep as blood. Relief ran with release. Under it all ran a different current, one I struggled to place. An emptiness.

I had been willing to die for this. I had died for this. Now that Eleanor ruled, who would I become?

For the first time since the Collapse, nothing haunted me. In my ascent from death, I had no strength for guilt. I sat up, rising from my would-be grave, knowing I would never be the same.

“It’s done,” Eleanor whispered.

I glanced at Ayla. “It wouldn’t have been possible without help.”

“Yes,” Eleanor agreed, settling on her heels. The softness in her eyes hardened. She glanced at Ayla and pursed her lips. “Thank you, Ayla.”

Whatever had passed between them, I suspected Ayla hadn’t disclosed who she was or what made Ninti special. I hoped Eleanor would come to like Ayla.

This would be the first time either Eleanor or I had been smitten. I suspected Ayla’s appearance would start a common sibling jealousy, and the simpleness almost made me laugh. We might be Shadow Queen and Prince, but we were still an awkward family.

I smiled at Ayla, hoping she was comfortable amidst my sister’s icy demeanor.

“Wait a second,” I said, squinting at her. She looked different. “Your antlers.”

“My what—” Ayla’s eyes grew big. She rushed to run her fingers over the new growth. No longer short and nubby, her antlers had grown a few inches, fully crowning her. Her lips quirked as she examined them. She looked smug.

“To think, you call me princeling. Look who’s full of herself now,” I teased.

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She smirked, caught admiring herself. “With any luck, my antlers will grow longer than your horns.”

I laughed. The great rumble shook through my body. Heat flushed to my fingers and toes. Ayla’s lips twitched.

I wanted to laugh again. “My horns will always be longer,” I replied.

She gave way to a proper chuckle. I joined in, growing louder. Ninti gave a short bark, joining the hilarity. Even Eleanor permitted a cautious titter to cross her lips.

It wasn’t that our jest was funny, but that we shared the miracle of survival. The absurdity of living. With great belly laughs, we reminded ourselves that we lived.

Lost to our noisy chortle, we didn’t hear it, the clink of crystal. We didn’t see it rolling over broken stone and planks. Nobody noticed until it bumped against Eleanor’s feet.

She picked it up. Eleanor cupped Inarus’s crystal skull in her hands.

Ayla

Eleanor went rigid and her eyes rolled back. Her fingertips dug into the skull. Zayne tensed. I wondered if I should help her. Ninti sniffed the air, choosing not to act.

The moment passed. Eleanor blinked. She stumbled, found her balance, and looked down at the crystal skull, tracing her fingers over the smooth surface.

“I spoke with Gloom,” she whispered, calm as ever. She glanced at Zayne. “Gloom said you spoke earlier?”

He nodded slowly. “It was strange.”

“Very strange,” Eleanor agreed. She trembled. “And I learned of our situation. Inarus had mentioned it, but... it’s more dire than I realized.”

My breath hitched. Eleanor was queen. Inarus and the Shades were gone, but this drama—it continued? From the grim line of Eleanor’s lips, more work was needed by the Shadow Court.

As for me, my Brand was gone. Was I...free? Zayne frowned, his chin tightening. I might be free, but he tugged at my heartstrings.

“Gloom didn’t seem aware of the Collapse,” he said.

Eleanor nodded. “Since you got her attention, she’s investigated. Apparently... she’s been tricked. These black diamond shards, like the one Inarus carried, they are her divine artifacts. They connect to her.”

“I thought the one Inarus carried was destroyed—”

“There are more. Many more,” Eleanor explained. “It was once a single black diamond, larger than this skull, Gloom’s divine artifact—and it was shattered. Gloom thought the shards were too small to use, and she stopped paying attention, losing herself in the Divine Realm. She slept until you reached for Inarus’s diamond shard. When you reached for it, you woke her.”

Ninti nuzzled the ring on my hand. I still didn’t understand the power behind the ruby—let alone a larger stone linked to Gloom. I suspected Ninti knew more, but for

now, she stayed silent.

“Now Gloom is aware,” Eleanor continued. “She’s trying to learn more, but since discovering what you’ve done, the other shard bearers have stayed out of her sight. They have learned to access and manipulate her power without her knowledge or consent.”

“I sensed someone else,” Zayne added. “Another shard bearer entered the Divine Realm. Their signature reminded me of the Mer.”

Mer? That seemed familiar.

“Calindra,” I whispered.

Eleanor shot me a sharp look. “What do you mean?”

“There’s a letter from her in Inarus’s apartments.”

Zayne glanced at his sister, and Eleanor shook her head.

“Who is she?” I pressed.

“A dissonant voice amongst the Isles,” Eleanor answered. “Like Inarus, she is frustrated fae goods have helped the Starlit Isle. She is known to be...” Eleanor frowned.

Zayne continued, “Calindra is a lady of the Mer, known for pressuring those within her jurisdiction to develop questionable fae goods. Some are frustrated, but her products are selling. She is starting to have sway within the Court of Mer.”

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“What did the letter say?” Eleanor asked.

“Something about Gloom’s expansion,” I answered. “She’s the one who gave Inarus the collar. Like Inarus, she was trying to stop Gloom’s expansion. She told Inarus to make more Shades if you didn’t become queen.”

Eleanor paled. “I hoped Gloom was mistaken...”

“Why?” Zayne pressed. “What did Gloom say?”

“Someone has most of the diamond shards, and they’re using them to force Gloom to expand. Without Inarus’s Shades, Gloom would have already spread farther south.”

“And now that the Shades are gone, Gloom will expand.” Zayne sighed. “But why? Who wants that?”

“To generate power,” Eleanor answered. “If Gloom is expanded, then something must balance her—Her expansion creates excess vitality. Presumably, this shard bearer is attempting to claim that raw power.”

“Then how are we going to make the isle inhabitable again? What about Scholar’s Island? Mer? Will they succumb to Gloom too?”

Eleanor toyed with the crystal skull. “Now that I’m queen, Gloom thinks I can help. If I commune with the throne’s power, meditating with Gloom... we could influence this.”

“Commune with Gloom? What will that cost you?”

“It’ll take most of my waking hours. Nearly every day.”

Zayne’s brows furrowed. “You can’t do that. We need you as an active queen, not someone trapped in communion with Gloom.”

“Either I do this, or we make Shades again.”

“That’s not an option.”

There was an alternative. “Or we confront these shard bearers,” I said. “We can start with Calindra.”

“We”—Eleanor indicated Zayne—“need to stay with the throne. If you feel so inspired, make it your quest.”

He stiffened as his sister spoke for him.

Eleanor noticed it. “Zayne, I’ll need you here. I’m going to be vulnerable while communing with Gloom. My body needs protection.”

Zayne’s face blanked. The last time he had faced a choice between his twin and me, I had stolen the ashflower and run.

This time, I wouldn’t ask him to choose. “I think my part in this is done,” I rushed to say.

“But—” he objected.

“Zayne,” I continued. “You were willing to risk your life on this crazy mission to

save your sister. We've only known each other a couple of days, and I know it feels like it's been longer, but... I understand that you'll want to stay here."

He shook his head. "After what just happened? Your magic—that tether?"

"A tether?" I had sung without understanding, power streaming from me. I held my vigil in a haze.

He blinked. "You don't feel it?"

"I..." What had I done? "I don't know."

Eleanor took command. "Zayne is staying with me. Brother, I don't understand what has come over you. Why wouldn't you stay with me? I need you."

"She's right," I admitted. The words ripped through my heart. "This stronghold is vulnerable. It needs repair. In the meantime, Eleanor needs protection."

"What about you?" Zayne asked me. "What are you going to do?"

The question surprised me, and I searched for the answer. Where would I go? I wanted to know what was happening in Mer. Rhett waited for me in Port Saundrys.

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What did I really want? I longed to breathe.

Only a week had passed since I escaped my murderous sister. Twice, I had battled Shades. I had survived the Brand and found Ninti.

When I first planned my escape to the Isles of Fae, I had seen myself as a fiddle bar regular. In that fantasy, no Firewolf entered my life and there was no father to be found—these were desires I could surrender. Instead, I would have unlocked common magic and explored a simple life. A part of me still wanted that escape.

Yet now, with my magic, I had found a well of songs. On this quest, I found the courage to stop running. Ninti chose me, and I embraced my power. Did I still want that simple life?

Could I walk away from my feelings for Zayne? He had spoken of a tether. I feared it—I felt it.

“I want to be with you,” I whispered.

Zayne’s lips twisted, torn between a smile and a frown. “You’ve barely seen the Isles. I don’t want to trap you here.” He thought on it another moment. “If we’re staying together, I’m taking you to Mer.”

It sounded wonderful. “I’d like that.”

“Zayne, you’re staying with me,” Eleanor objected. “I order it.”

“No. I want to show Ayla our world.”

Eleanor huffed. “What has happened to you?”

“What has happened to me? Thanks to Ayla, I returned from the dead.”

“She’s the one who used up the ashflower to begin with!”

Zayne faced his sister. “Ayla is also the one who used the Brand to track you. She’s the one who fought the Shades while you completed the rite. Moreover—” he held my gaze “—Ayla has inspired me to live.”

“Live?” Eleanor motioned to her newly claimed throne. “What is life compared to duty?”

Zayne traced his fingers over my hand. “Before Ayla, I was willing to die for our cause. A duty I had inherited. For the first time, I’m inspired. Eleanor, it’s not that I don’t care for you or our people. It’s that I value my life too. Ayla and I can help you by visiting Mer.”

His talk of duty moved me. It was a motivation I lacked, a bastard daughter with no true role to play.

Technically, that wasn’t true.

I was the bastard princess of Valterra, fully aware how fae goods had changed our world. By destroying the Shades and opening the trade route, many would benefit from what we’d accomplished.

I could be proud of that. Was that duty?

“We won’t leave until you’re safe,” I told Eleanor, rushing to say it before my idea scared me. “Zayne and I won’t leave until you’re secure.”

I hadn’t imagined it was possible. A compromise like this. I could travel the Isles while we uncovered the mystery of the shard bearers. Now that Zayne committed to me, it was easier to support his responsibilities.

Because Eleanor was right, she needed protection.

“You have speaking stones?” I asked Zayne. “Can you reach those you trust?”

He nodded.

“Let’s help Eleanor establish herself. Once she’s secure, we will visit Mer.”

Eleanor glanced at me, surprise shining behind her otherwise impassive demeanor. “Can you communicate with Ysandra and Terren?” she asked her brother.

Zayne nodded.

“Ask them to be my personal guards.” She considered another moment. “And if you can reach Indigo, I think his shadow-binding skills will help us rebuild faster.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

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“Very well,” she nodded. “Help me rebuild, and I’ll give you my blessings when you leave.”

“Ayla, you’re brilliant.” Zayne kissed my cheek, and my core warmed. “Together, we will rebuild the Shadow Court.”

Epilogue

Zayne

Ayla slid her hand against the stronghold’s wall, humming as she walked. She practiced spellsinging, using resonance to reinforce the structure.

This was her final pass. We were prepared to leave.

After a month, Ayla’s antlers had grown as long as her palm. The effort of rebuilding grounded her, giving her the chance to understand her magic.

With time, more than her magic had settled. She now radiated a new confidence. More than her playful certainty, she walked with a deeper self-assurance. It was damn sexy.

It had been a necessary month of healing. For her. For us.

Ninti trotted beside her, offering her a steady stream of support. She had trained Ayla well, guiding her fledgling healing magic into a power that could rebuild the stronghold. The Firewolf had been essential in reconstruction, eager to provide an

extra spark of power to whomever needed it.

Eleanor was secure—or at least as safe as possible. Today, we would begin our journey to Mer and unravel the mystery of Calindra's diamond shard.

Taking a step back, I admired our work. Even in Gloom's low daylight, the stronghold appeared transformed. We had repaired the walls and ceiling, cleaning the remaining apartments to make space for our new court.

I had destroyed the barn where fae had been turned to Shades. With countless rites for the dead, I dismantled the ice-blue coffins and liberated ghosts. Last night, I burned the building down.

We had inventoried the other outbuildings. The livestock seemed to thrive under our care.

Gloom remained, slowing our pace, but the oppression diminished. The air remained stagnant but was purged of rot and death.

About twenty of us had gathered here, a fledgling Shadow Court. We grew accustomed to the way Gloom stiffened our minds, and each night we gathered around the fireplaces and celebrated life.

We kept busy. Working, building, and planning. We took care of our queen. At night, we dreamed.

"There." Ayla grinned, appreciating her handiwork. A frown flickered across her lips. "I never thought I would be sad to say goodbye."

I reached for her hand, thankful for her warmth as her fingers entwined with mine.

For a time, this had become our home. Now Captain Vanessa waited for us at the dock, her boat readied for our journey.

Vanessa was now the proud owner of the Umbral Star. While we had remained in Point Bethia, she accepted transportation jobs on Eleanor's behalf, using her newly acquired boat to move passengers and goods.

She had happily accepted my contract for our upcoming journey. Apparently, all the other jobs had been too dull, and she expected 'something far more interesting' from Ayla and me.

"We'll be back," I promised Ayla.

"We will," she agreed. "Should we see if Eleanor is awake?"

"I hope she's ready." Either way, it was time to leave. We had already lingered as long as we could. We hoped to leave Gloom by sunset.

"Rhett messaged me," Ayla said. "He's on his way to Mer. We'll meet him there."

"Good," I replied. We needed all the help we could gather to unravel the mysteries of the shard bearers.

Hand in hand, Ayla and I walked down the long hallway of the stronghold. Ninti at our side, we approached the throne room.

As we passed, I eyed the door of our former apartment. It wasn't much, but for a time, it had been ours. Here we had explored our budding relationship, cuddling at night, intimate with our kisses.

Ayla wasn't ready for more than kissing, not since the incident with the Brand. I

ached for her, and she wanted me, but her body clamped up every time we made sexual advances. She needed more time to heal, to find herself at home in her body.

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I wrapped my hand around her hip, kissing her just below the antler. We celebrated our young relationship, constantly seeking each other's warmth and company—even at the risk of our court's teasing.

Since they were best suited for a queen, Eleanor had claimed Inarus's apartments. At first, she protested, but I cleared the necromantic tools and put everything into storage except for the crystal skull. Eleanor now used the skull as a focus with Gloom.

Inarus's body had become a pile of ash, one of the possible final deaths of a necromancer. Near his body had been a mound of shards, splinters of black diamond. Eleanor now carried them in a pouch at her waist.

Ayla helped clean the apartment. She reviewed Inarus's letters and learned his ciphers, establishing the groundwork of our intelligence.

Calindra had been his primary contact. No one else was named, but others were mentioned in code. The Humble One had provided Inarus with the "unwanted" fae from the underbelly of the cities. The Collector had provided Inarus with supplies and gold. Apparently, they assumed the stronghold would be a secure repository—our new resources ran deeper than expected.

By claiming this space, we had made enemies. Enemies we couldn't even identify.

Eleanor needed friends.

Her work with Gloom was all-consuming. Particular as ever, she kept a tight schedule. She gave the appearance of grace.

Through it all, Eleanor had started a great tapestry. Whenever she sat on the throne, she pulled the starting rows across her lap, allowing the work to drape over her for the duration of her meditation. The border was a motif of raindrops interspersed with ashflower. There would be a larger design, one she hadn't explained, and one day it would cover the wall behind her throne.

Ysandra stood outside the throne room, one of Eleanor's four personal guards.

"Is she...?" I asked.

"She is stirring," Ysandra answered, pushing the door open and motioning for us to step inside.

We no longer burned the enchanted logs in the throne room, allowing Gloom and Eleanor to communicate easily.

Still, the throne room was brightly lit. A roaring fire filled the fireplace, and fae lights illuminated the rest. Finally, we could see the potential of the throne room.

Someone had brought Eleanor's old tapestries, those she had sewn during our exile. They covered the side walls, warming the room with her dreams, stitches depicting a future for our isle.

The throne had grown substantially. Ninti had taken to sleeping at its base, strengthening its roots. The throne now glistened like polished wood. Engravings embossed its sides, shapes of pomegranates and crows.

Eleanor rested on her throne, sipping at tea, the root-cuff still wrapped around her wrist. The crystal skull lay discarded on her lap, wrinkling the tapestry in progress.

My twin sister smiled as we entered. "Glad I stirred in time."

She set the tea on a nearby table, next to a slice of buttered bread and a dollop of jam. We had learned it was best for her to wake slowly. She recovered faster if she ate immediately after waking from her meditative state. She had to stay grounded. She had to keep her strength.

“Gloom wishes you the best,” she said.

“Any word from Teyr?” I asked.

She shook her head. “None, but Gloom is unconcerned. It’s amazing that Teyr could contact me at all considering how he...” Eleanor squinted her eyes at me, appraising. “Anyhow, I don’t expect to hear from Teyr again.”

I nodded. “Teyr was right, you know. About the ashflower. We had enough.”

She laughed. “If his divinations are accurate, he knows far more than Gloom. She thinks we were lucky—and that her brother is pompous.”

That was consistent with the songs about the god. Where Gloom was distant, Teyr was daunting.

“The ashflower is tied to both gods,” Eleanor added. “Something about obsidian—how they both contribute. Life turned to ash turned to life.”

“Hopefully, we’ll never need it again,” I added.

With a glance at Ayla, Eleanor changed the subject. “Now to the matter at hand. We need to say goodbye.”

Ayla approached Eleanor first, dipping her head in respect. Eleanor gave her attempt at a friendly smile. She worked to accept Ayla. Eleanor grieved how our relationship

had changed with Ayla in my life—but my twin knew I would never abandon her.

Unfortunately, they weren't the most natural pairing. Ayla was dynamic where Eleanor was somber.

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Ayla had never confessed her parentage, only vaguely referencing her life on Valterra. I hadn't told Eleanor anything contrary to the image Ayla portrayed. If anybody recognized her as Valterra's bastard princess, they kept it to themselves.

Ninti bounded forward, nuzzling her head against the tapestry in Eleanor's lap. Eleanor scratched the Firewolf fondly, whispering something in her ears. A true smile split her lips.

Next, she turned to me. We gripped forearms in farewell and shared a severe nod. The last time we had parted, she had been a would-be Shade. That day, I began my dangerous quest. Thanks to Ayla, I survived.

Today, we parted ways anew. Our mission was determined. This time, Ayla would be by my side by choice—or at least as much choice as our unspoken tether gave us.

“Stay safe while we're gone,” I instructed my sister.

She motioned we should come closer. “I have a gift.”

She reached into a pocket and pulled forth several embroidered handkerchiefs. “For you. And your crew,” my twin said, unfolding them.

A crow, a wave, a flame, and the symbol of a musical note. Eleanor thought of us all. “They'll protect you, to the best of my ability. Stay safe and take care of each other.”

Ayla

Zayne's hands pinched at my hips, and by Teyr, did I hunger. Cedar and amber clung to him, cleansed by the rebirth of rain.

I longed for the day when I could overcome my body's resistance. My core ached. My desire had been tainted when the Brand tried to trap me.

If Zayne ran a hand under my clothes, I froze.

Our kisses were still warm. The night we met, I had lusted for his lips—back when he had played at the part of a cocky prince and I pretended to be meek. Even through his disguise and mine, I always wanted him.

I darted for his lips as he rushed to mine. Our tongues thrust, racing toward embrace. My core warmed and thighs clenched. I ran my fingers through his hair, finding the place at the base of his horns that made him swoon.

Zayne nibbled at my lip, stroking his tongue against mine. Thrusting and exploring. I wished he could do that to my insides. I was frustrated, but I didn't dare ask for more.

Even safe in his embrace, a wandering hand could unleash my memories, pulling me inward and away from him.

For his part, Zayne showed patience. As soon as I could explain what was happening, he promised he would take it slow. He waited—he was better at waiting than me.

I hungered for him.

He assured me I could be patient too.

One day, I would show him my fire. When our day came, it would be hot as hell. We worked on it together, slowly exploring. For now, we kissed. And I wanted every

damn kiss I could take.

Panting, I pulled away. “Soon,” I whispered.

“Soon,” he promised too.

Our heated kisses slowed, becoming suave and sweet. We cuddled on the Umbral Star’s single bed, waiting for our lust to cool.

“Excuse me!” Vanessa’s voice boomed through the cabin. She giggled. “Hope I’m not interrupting anything, but we’re about to leave Gloom. Thought you’d like to know.”

Straightening our clothes, we stepped onto the deck. Vanessa steered toward Mer, and we neared Gloom’s threshold. Ninti sat near the bow. Zayne stood behind me, arms wrapped around my waist. I leaned against his chest.

Gloom thinned as we left her foggy depths. A breeze tickled my neck, raising goosebumps. Fresh air filled my lungs. I gasped. It had been too long since I’d taken a proper breath.

My new magic moved through me, renewed beyond Gloom’s stagnant depths. My powers seemed to be a healing magic, and beyond Gloom, my power revitalized. I had grown my antlers, and as we left stagnation, I felt whole.

The sun was barely visible, low on the horizon. With each second, it dipped lower and out of sight. The sky turned dark purple where Gloom consumed the western horizon. Stars weren’t visible; they wouldn’t be for hours.

The mood was almost perfect. We needed music.

I turned on the phonograph, and music played, tinny and soft, from the enchanted horn.

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“Once, the sea sought a lover, and so she bedded the sky,” the musician began.

Ninti shifted her weight between shoulders, bouncing to the catchy beat. Vanessa glowed brighter, the ship cutting through the water faster.

Zayne tapped on my shoulder, and I spun around.

“Shall we dance?” he asked.

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “I was waiting for you to ask.”

We drove a heavy beat. Spin and twirl, dart and stomp. We clapped the beat against our bodies, pumping fresh blood.

We danced back and forth. The small deck became an endless dance floor. I chased him, and he caught me. He wrapped me in his arms, lifting me from the ground. I soared. He laughed.

The song grew in a crescendo and then crashed, the release of a wave. Ninti howled, singing to the clear sky.

Facing the dying horizon, we embraced the night.