



Wicked Depths

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Step into a world where villains reign supreme, their darkness irresistible, their passions untamed.

These are not the stories you remember
These are the ones you'll never forget.

Two queens. One deadly bond.

Nyxara, the fierce Dragon Queen, protects her forest with ruthless fire. Vaela, the cunning Sea Witch, weaves deadly deals with devastating consequences. Captured and betrayed, Vaela becomes Nyxara's prisoner—a pawn in a game of vengeance against a king who seeks to destroy them both.

But as hatred turns to desire and passion ignites, their bond could save their world—or shatter it.

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Chapter

One

NYXARA

The forest is crying.

Not with a sound, but with the low, guttural ache that vibrates through the roots of its trees and the veins of its leaves. I can feel it in the ground beneath my feet, the once-vibrant hum of life now twisted with fear and pain. Smoke curls through the air, invading the sanctuary of Varellith, staining the sky with angry streaks of orange and black.

The humans have come again, and this time, they've brought fire.

I stand at the edge of the clearing, cloaked in shadows and the weight of centuries on my shoulders. My hands curl into fists, the tips of my claws biting into my palms. Heat churns beneath my skin, my dragon's fire clawing to be unleashed.

But I hold it back, for now. I don't need to burn just yet.

My emerald-green eyes scan the encampment before me. The stench of human sweat and greed lingers even here, at a distance. Torches line the perimeter, their crude flames casting flickering shadows over tents and wagons laden with stolen goods. A cage hangs at the center, filled with the bodies of the very creatures I swore to protect. Their eyes wide and desperate glow faintly in the dark, pleading for the

salvation I've failed to deliver them.

My teeth grind. This isn't the first time humans have trespassed into Varellith, breaking the treaty that has kept our worlds separate for centuries. But this... this is a violation of the highest order. Aldric, the human king has grown bolder, sending his hunters deeper into my sanctuary, claiming what isn't his. I've warned him before.

Clearly, he didn't listen.

"Nyxara," a low, familiar voice calls, and I turn slightly to see Morrin, my bat familiar, hanging upside down from a twisted branch nearby. His leathery wings fold against his sleek, midnight-black body, the faint shimmer of emerald veins pulsing beneath the surface. His eyes glint like shards of obsidian, sharp and knowing. When he speaks, his voice is a whisper through the night, distorted and eerie, like an echo from something ancient. "They've taken more than creatures this time."

"What do you mean?" I demand, my voice sharper than intended.

"In the largest tent," Morrin croaks, his voice a rasping whisper that seems to slither through the air. "A prisoner. She looks human, but she is not like the others. Her aura... it stinks of magic."

Magic? My lip curls in disdain. Humans have no right to wield magic, let alone imprison someone who carries it. Whatever they intend to do with her, it can't bode well for Varellith—or for me.

"Show me," I command.

Morrin flutters from his perch, his massive wings slicing through the air with an eerie, near-silent grace. His black fur gleams under the moonlight, sleek and spectral. He tilts his head, sharp fangs glinting, then gives a slow, deliberate nod toward the

camp.

Without hesitation, I step forward, my black lace cloak billowing behind me. The fabric clings to my pale skin, intricate patterns of shadow weaving through its folds.

Each step I take toward the encampment feels like a reminder of who I am and what I was forged to protect. My horns, curving gracefully from my head like obsidian crescents, are not just marks of my heritage but symbols of the power that courses through my blood, power that I inherited and earned. The weight of it presses against my shoulders, familiar and relentless, a mantle I never asked for but have come to embrace.

I was born in shadow and fire, a child of the ancient Bloodline of Drakara. A lineage whispered in hushed tones, feared and revered in equal measure. My mother, Queen Lysara, was a force of nature, a ruler who commanded the loyalty of the forest and its creatures with unyielding strength. She was fire embodied, her power so immense it felt like the forest itself bent to her will. And yet, even she was not invincible.

When the humans broke the first treaty centuries ago, my family paid the price. My father fell in battle, defending Varethorne and the creatures who sought refuge behind its walls. My mother followed soon after, her death a fiery blaze that consumed an entire army but left the forest scarred and me alone. I was just a child then, barely old enough to understand the weight of what had been passed to me. The crown of Drakara was thrust upon my head before I could even grow into it. The forest accepted me as its queen, its magic weaving into my soul, but I had to fight to keep it.

The humans saw my youth as a weakness, testing me with incursions and hunts, each one more brazen than the last. They thought they could conquer what was left of my family's legacy, but they underestimated the fire that flows through my veins. It wasn't enough to inherit my mother's power though.

I had to master it.

Years passed in solitude, the forest my only companion. I trained relentlessly, honing my magic, growing stronger with each battle I fought and won. My claws became sharper, my Dragonfire hotter, until the humans learned to fear me as they had feared my parents. The whispers of my name spread far and wide, not just as the Queen of the Forest but as a force of nature, untouchable and unyielding.

The Dragon Queen.

Now, centuries later, I stand alone at the edge of this war once again. The weight of my lineage still rests heavily on my shoulders, but it is no longer a burden. It is a weapon, one I wield with precision and purpose.

I am the last of my line, the sole protector of Varethorne and all who live within the realm surrounding it. My parent's sacrifices echo in every step I take, every flame I summon.

I will not fail them.

I cannot.

The trees whisper as I pass, their branches trembling as though eager to aid me. They know me. They trust me. I am their queen, their protector. The air around me crackles with the promise of fire, my magic coiling beneath my skin, ready to strike.

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I was born of shadow and flame, forged in loss and vengeance. And tonight, the humans will remember why the Bloodline of Drakara is never forgotten.

The camp is chaotic and poorly organized, with a scattering of guards barely paying attention to their surroundings. Their laughter grates on me as they drink and boast of their so-called triumphs. The creatures they've captured—a mix of dryads, sylphs, and a terrified nymph—lie bound and bruised, their once-brilliant forms dimmed by iron chains and despair.

They'll be freed before the night ends, but it's the tent Morrin spoke of that holds my attention right now. Its canvas is larger and reinforced, standing apart from the others as if its contents require special care. Two guards stand outside the tent, their armor dull and streaked with soot, catching faint flickers of firelight. I slink closer, keeping to the shadows, the forest cloaking me as I listen.

"Did you hear what she said to the captain?" one of them mutters, his tone low and uneasy.

"Yeah," the other snorts, shifting his weight. "Going on about how we're all gonna pay. That she'll drag us to the depths when she gets loose. Creepy as hell, but what do you expect from a sea witch?"

The first guard scowls, his lip curling. "She wasn't just saying it to scare him. You saw the way she was looking at him—batting those eyes, whispering all sweet-like. She wanted it. Could see it clear as day in the way she moved."

The second guard lets out a harsh laugh. "You're an idiot. She's the Sea Witch.

That's her thing—luring men with the promise of a good time before she drags them under. She doesn't want anything but to see you dead, your soul locked in one of those creepy-ass pearls stitched to her bodice."

"Still doesn't mean she's not a hell of a sight," the first one counters, his voice dipping into something darker. "That hair, those eyes... and that body. Damn shame to keep her all chained up. She's got that dangerous kind of look, you know? Exotic, like she could ruin your life, but you'd thank her for it."

"Yeah, right before she guts you and strings you up as her next trophy," the second sneers. He shakes his head, adjusting his grip on the spear. "She's not some woman you can have fun with. She's a monster. Pure and simple. And if you're dumb enough to fall for her tricks, you deserve what you get."

"Maybe," the first says, a smirk creeping across his face. "But what a way to go."

The second guard rolls his eyes, muttering under his breath as they fall silent. Their words hang in the air, twisted with both disdain and perverse fascination.

My claws twitch at my sides as I absorb their words, my fury simmering just beneath the surface. These men are cowards, fools blinded by their desires and their hatred. They think themselves safe behind their weapons and numbers, but they've clearly forgotten the price of stepping into Varellith. And as for their prisoner... their fascination, their fear—it all tells me what I need to know. Whoever is inside that tent is more than just bait or leverage. She's dangerous and powerful and has already started playing her games. I smirk, my fire curling at my fingertips. If these men think they're in control, they're about to learn how wrong they are.

A prisoner with a spine. Interesting.

Morrin lands beside me, his wings brushing my shoulder. "She's strong," he

murmurs. “But there’s anger in her magic. It feels... ancient.”

Ancient magic. My curiosity deepens, and so does my resolve. Whoever this prisoner is, the humans are desperate to contain her for their precious king. That makes her valuable and dangerous.

It also makes her mine.

I step out of the shadows and let my fire unfurl. The moment I do, everything erupts into chaos. Half a dozen guards whirl to face me, their torches and steel clattering together in a frantic attempt at defense. It’s already too late. A searing green blaze floods my palms, racing across the ground in a crackling wave. Their armor warps and melts like wax under the heat, filling the air with the sickening stench of burnt flesh. Panicked screams echo in the clearing, but I don’t flinch. My fire is precise, sparing the large canvas tent behind them even as the rest of the encampment scorches under my wrath.

To my right, I hear wings beating furiously. Morrin dives in from above, shrieking as he rakes his tiny claws across an unsuspecting guard’s eyes. The man howls, stumbling backward, only to be swallowed by the edge of my inferno. Another guard charges at me from behind, sword raised high, but I spin on my heel and rake my claws across his chest. He drops with a guttural groan, the glow of my Dragonfire licking at the corners of my vision.

A trio of soldiers rush in, trying to overwhelm me with sheer numbers. I take a step back, inhaling a deep breath of night air laced with smoke and fear. My lips peel back in a snarl. I exhale, and Viridian Wrath explodes from my throat in a torrent of emerald flames. They hardly have time to scream before they’re reduced to silhouettes collapsing in the blaze. The fire wreaths my body like a living thing, dancing along my arms, trailing from my horns. It’s intoxicating—raw power demanding to be unleashed.

“Morrin!” I shout, my voice cutting through the crackle of flames. My bat screeches in acknowledgment, swooping low across the camp. “Free the others! Get them out of here!” He flutters toward a series of crude cages stacked against a wagon, where frightened dryads, a trembling nymph, and two wounded sylphs huddle in terror. His wings beat urgently, and I can hear the frantic chittering of his attempts to gnaw or claw at the locks.

One last guard dashes forward, adrenaline fueling a desperate swing of his axe. I sidestep easily, planting a clawed hand against his back and shoving him face-first into the dirt. My fire pulses, surging along my arm, and I release a burst of heat that engulfs him in an instant. The smell of scorching leather and singed hair tangles with the haze of blood and ash swirling through the camp.

Stepping over the charred remnants, I leave the bodies behind and set my sights on the tent. Morrin’s screeches echo from somewhere behind me, punctuated by the clanging of cages. I allow myself a fleeting sense of satisfaction at the sound of splintering wood—he’s making progress. The creatures will be free in moments.

Turning back to the tent, I rip through the singed canvas with a single slash of my claws. The air inside is thick and stagnant, almost suffocating. But I feel the hum of magic pulsing through it, calling to me like an unspoken challenge. I may not know much about this sea witch or the true extent of her power, but there’s a reason she’s chained so tightly.

I intend to find out precisely why.

Inside, the first thing I notice is the glow. Pearls, dozens of them, gleam faintly from where they’re stitched into the bodice of the woman sitting in chains. Each pearl pulses faintly, as if alive.

Then I see her.

Her opal-toned skin shimmers under the faint illumination, catching every stray flicker of light and refracting it like moonbeams on still water. The subtle gleam along her arms and shoulders suggests a fragile elegance, yet there's a quiet, hypnotic power within that luster. Her eyes—icy white-blue and unwavering—are twin shards of arctic crystal, daring anyone to look away first. Threads of silver hair cascade over her face and shoulders, braided with tiny pearls that gleam like constellations. Petite though she is, she carries herself with cool confidence, even as thick chains coil around her slender limbs. The pearl-encrusted bodice clings to her curves like a regal shield, each pearl reflecting the mysterious radiance that seeps from her very being, hinting at a tide of power waiting to break free.

“So,” she says, her voice as smooth as the sea, “the dragon queen graces me with her presence.”

I stiffen. “You know who I am?”

Her lips curl into a faint smile. “Who doesn't? Your reputation precedes you, Nyxara.”

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Hearing my name from her lips sends a strange thrill of curiosity through me, though I bury it beneath my disdain. “And who are you?”

Her smile widens. “I am Vaela.”

So the sea witch who conjures dread in mortal hearts has a name after all. Vaela. The moment she speaks it, curiosity flutters within me, interwoven with caution. I only just learned of her existence, yet seeing her in the flesh, I sense the dark power that has made her a whispered legend.

“What are you doing in my forest?” I demand, stepping closer.

“Your forest?” she echoes, her tone mocking. “How quaint. I was brought here, dragon. Against my will, I might add.”

I narrow my eyes. “Why does the king want you?”

“You’ll have to ask him yourself,” she replies, her voice dripping with false sweetness. “Though I doubt he’ll be in the mood to answer once he learns I’ve escaped.”

“Escaped?” I laugh coldly. “You’re in chains, siren.”

Her eyes flash. “And yet, you’re the one who walked into my trap.”

Before I can react, the air around us shifts. Water pools at her feet, dark and shimmering, and her tentacles erupt from the depths, lashing out toward me. I leap

back, fire blazing to life in my hands. But even as I prepare to strike, I can't help but admire her audacity.

"Enough!" I roar, unleashing a wall of flame. It doesn't harm her, but it forces her magic to recede. Her tentacles retreat, leaving only the chains that bind her.

She smirks, leaning back against the post behind her. "Mmm. Fiery. I like that."

My claws twitch with the urge to silence her, but something holds me back. There's a fire in her eyes that mirrors my own, a defiance that refuses to be snuffed out. She's dangerous, yes. But she's also... compelling.

"You're coming with me," I say, stepping forward, my voice cold as steel.

She tilts her head, shifting in her chains with a calculated sway that's half mocking, half seductive. "Oh? And where might we be going?"

"To my castle," I reply. "You're my prisoner now."

She laughs, the sound rich and derisive. "Careful, dragon queen. You might find it hard to let me go."

Her words are laced with that dangerously alluring tone, but I see the spark in her eyes. She hurls herself toward me with surprising speed, tentacles flaring. Heat and cold magic collide in a violent, crackling clash—my Dragonfire snarling against the crushing pull of the tide. She nearly slips from my grip, but I twist free at the last moment, driving the hilt of my blade into her temple.

She staggers, eyes flickering. There's a final, vicious glare of defiance before her legs buckle. I seize her chain, hauling her unconscious form upright. As I drag her from the tent, the forest around us seems to shudder, its magic pulsing in time with my

own.

I've made my move. Now, it's only a matter of time before our deadly game truly begins.

Chapter

Two

VAELA

I wake to the scent of ash and magic, thick and cloying in the air. My wrists ache from the enchanted chains digging into my skin, their cold bite keeping my power at bay. The faint hum of magic embedded in the metal irritates me, like an itch I can't quite scratch. My fingers flex against the bonds, but they don't yield. Of course, they don't. Humans are dull creatures, but their fear of what they do not understand has made them surprisingly skilled in black smithing.

I open my eyes slowly, the world sharpening into focus. The dim light in the chamber reveals high, vaulted ceilings carved from stone, glowing faintly with runes that pulse in time with the magic coursing through this place. A castle, then. Gothic and unwelcoming. It reeks of power and pride.

Fitting for a dragon.

The irony isn't lost on me. One prison to another. One captor exchanged for a more dangerous one. Only this time, I'm not surrounded by fumbling humans with dreams of conquest. No, this time, my captor is something far more formidable. The Dragon Queen. Nyxara. The name rolls through my mind like a whispered curse.

"You're awake," a voice drawls, smooth and cold as the chains holding me.

I tilt my head toward the doorway, and there she stands—Nyxara. Obsidian horns sweep upward from her brow, forming a stark, regal crown that proclaims her more than human. Moonlight from a high window gleams against her emerald eyes, revealing a gaze as sharp and unyielding as the blade at her hip. Her cloak, a deep ebony hue, shifts around her like living smoke, accentuating her tall, commanding figure. Every sinew in her lithe frame seems primed with restrained violence, as though she could strike at any moment.

I loathe her immediately.

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“Do you watch all your prisoners sleep?” I reply, my voice laced with false sweetness. “Or should I be flattered?”

She steps closer, her boots clicking against the stone floor. “You’re quick with your tongue for someone in chains,” she says, her tone colder than the air between us. “Tell me, Vaela—why is the king so eager to keep you alive?”

Hearing my name on her lips makes my jaw tighten. It sounds too familiar, too invasive like she’s testing how easily I can be unraveled. I narrow my icy white-blue eyes and force a slow, deliberate smile.

“You tell me,” I say, leaning my head against the wall behind me. “You seem to have all the answers, Dragon Queen.”

Her claws twitch at her sides, so slight a motion I doubt she intended to reveal it. Interesting. She’s careful, but there’s a flicker of heat beneath her composure—a temper I file away for later use.

“I’ll ask again,” she says, her voice low and dangerous. “Why does the king want you?”

A soft laugh leaves my lips, echoing off the chamber walls. “Because he’s an ambitious fool. He thinks I can grant him the power he needs to crush everything in his path. He wants me for my magic—to make him unstoppable. Humans,” I add with a scoff, “always overreaching.”

Her emerald eyes narrow. “So he believes you’ll simply hand that power over to

him?"

I tilt my head, letting the chain rattle as I shift, the sound sharp in the heavy silence.

"He thinks he can own me." The words drip with disdain. "That he can force me to do his bidding, bend me to his will like some desperate fool begging for a favor."

I let my gaze drift to the pearls sewn into my bodice, their soft glow pulsing like tiny hearts. None belong to the king—not yet.

"But that's not really what he wants," I continue, my voice smooth, edged with amusement. "The king isn't after a single bargain. No, he wants something far greater. He wants to wield my power as if it's his own. To strip it from me, to carve it out piece by piece until he can take what he needs without consequence."

My fingers ghost over the largest pearl near my collarbone, my nails tapping idly against its cool surface.

"He doesn't just want my magic," I murmur, lifting my gaze to Nyxara's. "He wants to consume it. To harness it. To make himself something more—something that can rival even you."

I smirk, slow, deliberate. "Kidnapping me was his first step, I suppose. But you ruined that little plan when you stole me from his men."

A pause.

I watch her carefully, waiting for the realization to settle, for her to understand the weight of what I'm saying.

The king doesn't just want power.

He wants to use me to take hers.

"He'll find another way," I say finally, my voice soft, almost thoughtful. "If he's determined enough."

And he is.

Nyxara's gaze hardens, her thoughts clearly aligning with her own vendetta against the humans. She is dangerous, that much is clear. But I've dealt with monsters and men before. One more threat doesn't scare me.

"And what about you?" I ask, lifting my chin. "Why snatch me from the king's soldiers if you don't trust me? Surely you don't think holding me here will keep him from trying to lay claim to your realm."

She steps closer, towering over me, her presence an unspoken command. The air between us tightens, thick with something unnamed—something dark, something sharp.

"No, of course not. I took you because you're precious leverage," she says, her voice low, dangerous. "Keeping you here might not stop him, but it will force him to tread lightly. Aldric's army may be vast, but without you and your power he does not stand a chance of claiming my lands."

I tilt my head, a slow, amused smile curling my lips. "Your lands," I echo, my tone dripping with mockery. "How territorial. Are you certain they're yours, or do you merely borrow them from the magic that birthed them?"

Her claws twitch, curling as if she's debating whether or not to remind me of exactly whose domain I now stand in. I half expect her to strike me. Part of me almost wants her to.

Instead, she reaches for the chains.

The sharp click of the lock unfastening sends a slow thrill down my spine. The heavy weight around my wrists vanishes, leaving raw, aching flesh in its wake. I don't move, don't rub at the bruises, don't give her the satisfaction of seeing any weakness.

Her fingers brush my skin as she unhooks the last shackle. It's the barest touch, fleeting and unintentional, but it lingers. A whisper of heat. A warning.

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My wrists fall free, and I exhale, rolling them slowly, stretching out the stiffness.

She doesn't step back.

She stays close, her emerald eyes boring into mine, her breath a slow, measured thing. She wants me to understand that freedom is not what she's just given me. That I am still caged, even without the iron.

"Careful, little siren," she growls, her voice like embers in the dark. "You're in my domain now, and I intend to keep you indefinitely."

I meet her stare, unblinking. My pulse is steady, my smirk unwavering.

Let her think she holds the power here.

For now.

Nyxara holds my gaze for a lingering moment, her emerald eyes shadowed with something unreadable. Then, without another word, she turns on her heel, the black lace of her dress trailing behind her like a whisper of darkness. The soft click of her boots echoes in the chamber as she strides toward the door, every movement precise, controlled—calculated. She doesn't glance back. She doesn't need to.

When the heavy door groans shut behind her, the chains around my wrists pulse faintly, a cruel reminder of my confinement.

I close my eyes and inhale deeply, summoning the rhythm of the ocean that still

thrums in my veins. The humans might have dragged me from the sea, stripped me from my throne, but they can't sever my connection to it.

Not entirely.

My fingers flex, reaching for the one thing still tethering me to my power.

The basin of water in the corner of my cell shimmers under the dim light, its surface smooth, undisturbed. Small, insignificant to an outsider. But to me? A lifeline.

As long as I have water, I am not powerless.

The wards may dampen my magic, suppress it, bury it beneath layers of Nyxara's enchantments—but they cannot silence me completely. Water is my conduit, my anchor. It will always answer my call.

I dip my fingers into the cool liquid, sending a faint ripple across its surface. Magic stirs beneath my skin, faint but familiar, curling around me like a whisper of home.

"Come," I whisper, my voice soft but commanding.

The water responds instantly, the ripple deepening, darkening—and from the shadows of the chamber, a faint glow emerges.

Luma.

My jellyfish drifts forward, his translucent body pulsing with soft blue light, casting a faint luminescence against the cold stone walls. He hovers near me, his tendrils brushing gently against the chains as if testing their strength.

A moment later, another flicker of light sways through the dark, followed by the

familiar hum of energy.

Neridia.

She floats beside Luma, their presence weaving a quiet reassurance through my bones.

I let out a slow breath, my fingers trailing idly through the basin's water. The connection is weak, fragile beneath the weight of these wretched wards, but it's there.

A piece of the ocean, even in this desolate place.

A reminder that I am not broken.

Not yet.

For a moment, the weight of the chains fades, and I'm back beneath the waves—my power unrestricted, my dominion absolute.

The humans fear me for good reason. They know I am more than a woman. I am the tide itself. The storm. The abyss. And no matter how far they drag me from the depths, the sea will always answer when I call.

Even when I am a prisoner in a castle of stone and flame.

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I glance at the pearls on my bodice, my fingers tracing the smooth surface of the largest one. It hums beneath my touch, a silent promise of what's to come. It remains unclaimed—for now. But soon, it will belong to someone.

King Aldric may not be trapped within it—yet—but I know he wants to be. Or rather, he wants my power which of course, does not come freely. He needs me to win this war, to rip through Nyxara's lands and claim them as his own. And Nyxara—well, she hasn't admitted it yet, but she'll need me just as much if she hopes to keep her realm from falling beneath the weight of his armies.

It all comes down to the same thing: who has the better bargain?

Because I don't care who wins. Who sits on a throne, who rules the land—none of it matters to me. My kingdom lies beneath the waves, where neither dragons nor men have any claim. I own the sea. The tides bow to me alone. This war is not my concern.

And yet, here I am—the prize neither side can afford to lose.

The irony makes me smile.

Each pearl on my bodice holds a story, a life, a debt. Some begged for wealth, others for love or power. They all thought they could outwit me.

Fools.

I was born in the abyssal depths of Nythos, the endless black sea where light fades and the currents whisper forgotten names. My mother was a siren queen, my father

something far older—a creature of deeper magic, something dark and unrelenting. I never knew his face, only the power he left in my blood. The ability to weave fate like strands of kelp, to whisper promises in the tides, to take from those who would dare take from me.

My mother called me a gift. Others called me a curse.

Even among my own kind, I was feared. The kingdom of Aqueira, a vast underwater empire ruled by sirens and sea-dwellers alike, regarded me with unease. They admired my beauty, envied my power, but never trusted me. A siren should lure, should entrance—but I did more than that.

I bound. I bargained. I took.

It started small, a whispered offer to a desperate merchant who had ventured too far into the depths. I can guide you home, if you promise me a year of your life. He agreed. They always do. And when he tried to run, to break the bargain, I plucked his soul from his chest and sealed it away—my first pearl.

The power tasted good.

The more I took, the more I learned that mortals never truly want what they bargain for. They ask for riches and find them hollow. They ask for love and discover it isn't enough. Power, beauty, immortality—none of it ever fills the void in them. And when they realize it, they always try to go back on their word.

So I learned to make sure they couldn't.

With every deal struck, my name spread. Sailors whispered of me in dark taverns, their voices hushed in fear. The land-dwellers spoke of the Sea Witch, the woman who could grant any desire—for a price. And in the royal courts above the waves,

kings and queens took notice. Some sought me out in secret, wanting what no god would give them. Others, like the one who now wages war on Nyxara's land, plotted to take my power for themselves.

But unlike the fools who came before him, the king has not yet made his move. He has not yet stood before me, desperate and arrogant, trying to barter his soul for power. No, this time, he meant to capture me first. To force me to serve him.

And Nyxara stole me before he had the chance.

Though not out of kindness.

No, she wants leverage, wants a bargaining chip to keep the king at bay. She may not have spoken the words yet, but I see the truth lurking behind her sharp emerald eyes. She may hate me, may keep me in her stone-and-fire cage, but sooner or later, she'll realize she needs me.

They both do.

And until the right offer is made, I remain the prisoner in this little game of thrones. How amusing.

I roll the unclaimed pearl between my fingers. Soon, I think, letting the smooth surface press into my palm. This one will belong to either Nyxara or the king.

But I don't know which of them yet.

The ocean still hums in my blood, its pull as relentless as the tide. Even here, surrounded by ancient stone and runic wards, I am not severed from it completely. They did not take everything.

Luma and Neridia are proof of that. They shimmer beside me, glowing softly in the dim chamber, their tendrils drifting lazily through the air. They are my tether, my reminder that no matter how far I am from the sea, the depths will always be mine to command.

But for now, I wait.

And I watch.

Because soon, the tides will shift.

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And when they do, I'll be the one deciding who truly owns this war.

Chapter

Three

NYXARA

The scent of charred wood and blood clings to the air, thick as the rage simmering in my veins. Varellith groans beneath my boots, the land's magic thrumming weakly in response to the devastation the humans have wrought. The once-verdant forest—ancient and untouchable—now bears the scars of their fire and steel. Blackened stumps stand where towering trees once whispered with the wind. The soil is scorched, stripped of its life, the creatures I swore to protect driven deeper into the shadows, terrified and displaced.

The king did this.

He dares to take what is not his. To burn, to pillage, to claim dominion over a land that does not belong to him. A land that belongs to me.

I press my palm to the wounded earth, magic coiling in my veins. A faint green glow flickers at my fingertips as I channel energy into the ground, trying to soothe the land's suffering. The forest's magic stirs sluggishly, like a wounded beast reluctant to rise. It will take time to heal, time I no longer have.

A rustling sound draws my attention, the whisper of brittle leaves against scorched

earth. From the remnants of a once-mighty oak, a dryad emerges—barely holding together.

Her form is fragile, her bark-like skin cracked and splintered, the deep brown of her body charred in places where the fire touched her. Golden sap seeps from the wounds like blood, dripping sluggishly to the ground. Her hair, once a cascade of emerald leaves, hangs in brittle, burned strands. Her limbs creak as she steps forward, her glowing amber eyes dull with pain.

"They are pushing deeper," she rasps, her voice as brittle as wind through dead branches. "More soldiers. More machines. More fire."

A growl rumbles in my chest, low and dark. The humans grow bolder. They break the ancient treaties as if they were nothing more than forgotten words on parchment. My hands clench into fists, my claws digging into my palms.

"How many?" I demand.

The dryad sways slightly, barely holding herself upright. "Too many." A pause. "And they do not fear the magic of this land as they once did. They carry weapons that bite through the roots, machines that tear through the trees. They carve roads into the forest, not caring what they destroy in the process."

My rage simmers hotter.

They are claiming the land as if it belongs to them. As if they have already won.

"They seek to take what is mine," I murmur, voice cold as the wind that moves through the blackened trees.

The dryad nods weakly. "The king... he marches with purpose. He seeks something

beyond conquest. There is intent behind his war. A hunger for more than land."

The realization slams into me like a sudden storm.

Vaela.

The king never intended to simply pillage and burn pieces of my forest. No, he means to destroy it all. To tear every root from the earth, to wipe out every creature that calls this land home, to reduce Varellith to nothing but smoldering ash and lifeless ruin. But he cannot do it alone. No mortal—king or not—would stand a chance against me. Not without power. Power he could gain from the Sea Witch.

My lips curl in a slow, wicked smile.

But now, I have her. And just as he sought to use her to take my realm, I will use her to destroy him and his army before they ever touch what is mine again.

"Go back to the others," I command the dryad, my voice like iron. "Tell them to retreat into the deeper groves. Tell them I will handle the humans."

The dryad hesitates. "And if they come again?"

I lift my gaze toward the distant horizon where the smoke of burning wood still lingers.

"Then we will bury them in the roots of this land."

She bows her head—with what little strength she has left—and fades back into the remains of her dying tree.

I rise, the folds of my black cloak swirling around me. Vaela is the missing piece in

this game. She is the key to all of it. With one last glance at the ruins of my forest, I turn and step into the shadows. The magic bends around me, pulling me through the dense wilds at unnatural speed. It carries me straight to my castle. And straight to my prisoner.

To my weapon.

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The heavy iron door swings open with a slow, deliberate creak.

Vaela doesn't flinch.

She lounges on the stone bench near the far wall, far too comfortable for a prisoner, her legs crossed, her pearlescent hair cascading over her bare shoulders. The dim torchlight flickers across the glistening pearls encrusted in her bodice, each one pulsing faintly with the remnants of the unfortunate souls she has claimed.

She lifts her gaze slowly, her lips curving into a knowing smirk.

Mocking.

"You're back so soon?" she muses, tilting her head. "Miss me already?"

My fingers twitch at my sides, nails sharpening into claws before I will them still.

"You think yourself amusing," I murmur, stalking closer.

She hums as if considering. "Not think, Dragon Queen. Know."

I stop just short of her, towering over her smaller frame. Her icy white-blue eyes gleam with mischief, cool and assessing. I see the way she watches me—calculating. She's testing me, just as I'm testing her.

"Enough of your games, little siren," I say, voice low and edged with warning. "Now that we have established that the king wants your power, you are going to give it to

me instead."

Vaela doesn't flinch, but the slight flicker of interest in her gaze tells me she's waiting to see what I will do next.

"We know he needs your power to take my lands," I continue, stepping even closer. "To burn Varellith to ash, to wipe my kind from existence. But now I have you, and you, Sea Witch, will give me the power I need to ensure that doesn't happen."

Her lips part slightly, a whisper of laughter escaping as she leans back against the cold stone wall. "Will I?"

I narrow my eyes. "Yes. You will."

She drags her fingers along the smooth pearls at her bodice, her nails grazing the largest one near her collarbone. "And what, exactly, do I gain from this arrangement?"

"You gain the luxury of keeping your life," I say, voice smooth as silk, yet laced with warning.

Vaela clicks her tongue in mock disappointment. "Now, now, Nyxara. I thought you'd know better than to try and threaten me into a bargain. That's not how this works."

I grip the edge of the bench beside her, claws digging into the stone, leaning in until our faces are a breath apart.

"You will give me what I ask, Vaela. Or I will take it from you."

She exhales, slow, unbothered. "Oh, you could try, Dragon Queen. But magic like

mine is given...never taken."

She lifts a delicate hand, one finger tracing lightly up the inside of my wrist. A teasing touch. A taunt.

I don't move. I don't flinch. But the air between us crackles, thick with tension. I hate the way she looks at me. Like she already knows the outcome of this exchange. Like she's already won.

"You're bold," I murmur, my voice dangerously smooth.

"And you're impatient," she counters, her voice a dark caress. "If you truly want my power, Nyxara, you know what must be done."

I glare down at her, knowing exactly what she wants to hear.

She wants the bargain. A real one. The kind that binds us both. I want to deny her. To rip the words from her lips before she ever has the chance to speak them. But I cannot afford my pride. Not when my kingdom is at stake. Not when the humans are closing in. I need her power.

"Fine." The single word falls like a blade between us.

Vaela's smirk deepens. She knew I would say it.

She shifts, leaning in, her breath warm against my lips. "Say it properly, Dragon Queen."

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The heat curling low in my stomach is anger, I tell myself. Nothing more. My claws tighten against the bench, stone dust crumbling beneath my grip.

"Vaela of the Abyss," I growl, my voice dark with unspoken fury, "give me the power to destroy the king. To protect my lands. To crush my enemies beneath my feet."

Her lashes lower, half-lidded, predatory.

"And what will you give me in return?" she whispers, her voice like a slow tide pulling me under.

The words I should speak are simple. A debt to be paid. A price to be named. But I am not a fool. I can make this bargain. I can take her power, use it to end this war.

And then?

Then I will keep her here. Hold her prisoner until the end of time if I must. Then I will never have to pay.

"Name your price," I say instead, voice cool, unreadable.

Vaela's smirk widens, wicked and knowing. The air between us shifts, magic thickening, the deal settling into place like a second heartbeat. She lifts her hand, pressing two fingers against my chest, right over my heart.

"You," she murmurs.

A spark ignites beneath my skin.

I keep my expression blank. "Elaborate."

Her nails trail downward, slow and deliberate. "I don't just give my magic away, Dragon Queen. You will be bound to me as much as I am to you."

Something dark and twisting curls inside me. She is trying to trap me. But she underestimates who she is dealing with.

I let my lips curve into a slow, wicked smirk. "Then do it, little siren. Bind us."

I lean in, closing the space between us until our breaths tangle—hers, slightly uneven, mine controlled. Her scent is salt and shadow, dark and intoxicating. I watch the flicker of challenge in her icy-blue eyes, the way she waits, expecting me to hesitate.

I don't.

"But know this," I murmur, my voice dipping into something low and lethal. "Even after I have what I need, you will never be free of me."

A sharp gleam flares behind her smirk—not fear, but something darker, something eager.

"Careful, Dragon Queen," she purrs, tilting her chin up in defiance. "That almost sounds like a promise."

I let my claws trail along her jaw, slow and deliberate, savoring the way she stills beneath my touch.

"It is."

The magic settles between us, thick and oppressive, wrapping around our bodies like an unseen tide. It pulses, ancient and hungry, demanding to be sealed.

Vaela exhales, slow and satisfied, as if she had already won.

She hasn't.

A sudden surge of power crackles between us, and a contract appears.

The parchment is not made of ink and paper—it is woven from the very magic that binds our deal. The words glow an eerie silver, shifting like liquid across the dark surface, written in a language older than kingdoms, older than the sea itself.

Vaela lifts a delicate hand, tracing the glowing letters with her fingertip. Her magic lingers in the air, coaxing, waiting. "Sign it, Dragon Queen," she murmurs, her voice a dark, velvety command. "Or are you afraid of what happens when you're bound to me?"

I huff a low, mocking laugh, reaching for the dagger at my hip. "I fear nothing, siren."

With one smooth motion, I press the tip of the blade to my palm and drag it across my skin. Green fire seeps from the wound instead of blood, the raw essence of my magic pooling at the surface. Vaela watches, enraptured, her breath catching just slightly.

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I press my palm to the contract.

The moment my skin meets the swirling magic, it surges to life, wrapping around my wrist, climbing up my arm in glowing silver script before vanishing into my skin—a brand, a mark, a binding.

The magic seals itself into my bones. The contract burns bright, then fades into nothing, absorbed into the very air around us.

It is done.

The deal is struck. I step back, dragging my eyes over Vaela's smirking lips, the way she tilts her chin, victorious. Let her think this bargain will end when the king is nothing but a pile of bones beneath my feet. Let her believe that I will honor my side of this agreement.

She is mine now.

And I have no intention of ever letting her go.

I wave a hand, magic curling around my fingertips, and the heavy chamber door creaks open.

Morrin sweeps in, his onyx wings flaring slightly as he lands, a woven basket clutched in his talons. Inside, fresh fruit glistens like scattered gems, alongside a jug of water, the finest I allow within my walls.

Vaela lifts a brow. "Generous."

I smirk, stepping past her, my cloak brushing against her bare shoulder as I go.

"I won't have you dying before you've fulfilled your end of the deal, little siren."

Her gaze follows me, sharp and unreadable.

I stop at the door, glancing over my shoulder, my voice a whisper of fire against her skin.

"Rest well. You will need your strength."

Then, without another word, I leave her to the silence of my castle.

I stride through the dimly lit corridors of Varethorne, my boots striking against the ancient stone, the sound swallowed by the vast, empty halls. Shadows coil in the corners, creeping along the towering obsidian walls, shifting in time with the flickering sconces that barely keep the darkness at bay.

This castle has stood for centuries, carved from the very bones of the mountain it rests upon, its black stone infused with old magic. The vaulted ceilings stretch impossibly high, adorned with jagged iron chandeliers dripping with candlelight. Gothic arches frame the long hallways, their twisted designs resembling ribs, like the castle itself is a slumbering beast.

And the Sentinels guard its heart.

They stand in the periphery of my vision, silent as death, cloaked in the very shadows that birthed them. Their presence is felt rather than seen, their movements like a whisper of wind through the corridors. The faint glint of steel beneath their dark

hoods is the only indication they are real—watching, waiting, always vigilant.

One steps from the darkness as I pass, inclining his head in a subtle, measured movement, his violet eyes glowing faintly beneath the heavy fabric of his hood. Another lingers at the next archway, standing motionless, a living shade carved from the void.

They do not speak.

They do not need to.

They are bound to this place, tethered to the castle's magic as much as I am to its throne.

And they are waiting for my command.

Varethorne is not a place of warmth. It never has been.

It is a fortress. A throne of fire and shadow.

And it is mine.

I move swiftly, weaving through its winding corridors, past heavy iron doors that guard rooms filled with ancient tomes, enchanted artifacts, and things no one else should ever awaken.

It is too quiet.

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Even the air is thick with magic, heavy with the lingering weight of the bargain I just struck.

Morrin lands beside me with a whisper of wings.

"Stay with her," I say, my voice cold, commanding. "Watch her. Do not let her slip through the cracks of this castle."

He ruffles his wings, his glowing amber eyes narrowing. "You think she will try to escape?"

I smirk, but it is humorless. "She wouldn't be the sea witch if she didn't."

Morrin tilts his head, considering, then dips into a low bow of compliance. "As you wish, my queen."

He disappears into the darkness, a shadow among shadows, and I continue forward. Varethorne feels heavier tonight. Maybe it's the weight of my own thoughts. Maybe it's the ghost of what this place once was. I reach the grand staircase leading to my private chambers, my fingers trailing the cold iron railing as I ascend. The moment my boots hit the next step, a flash of memory grips me like a phantom hand on my throat.

The torches burn brighter—not with fire, but with Viridian Wrath, my mother's magic licking at the sconces, casting green light down the hall.

Laughter echoes from the throne room, deep, rich, and full of life. My father's voice.

Steady, unshaken.

"They think themselves bold," he muses, standing at the head of the long black-marble table, his arms crossed, his crown tilting slightly from his dark curls. "The humans always do." I was young then. Still learning, still watching. My mother stood beside him, her emerald eyes gleaming with something unreadable. Power incarnate.

"What should we do with them, my love?" she asked, tracing a clawed finger down the length of his arm. My father smirked. The same smirk I wear now.

"Burn them," he said.

The memory fractures.

Flames. Screams. The scent of blood.

The heavy weight of the crown placed upon my head. Varethorne silent beneath my reign. I shake the memory loose. That was another life. Another time.

I do not dwell on ghosts.

I push open the doors to my private chambers, stepping into the vast room beyond. Dark, towering bookshelves line the walls, filled with tomes as ancient as the castle itself. A massive fireplace dominates the far wall, green flames curling and twisting unnaturally, casting eerie light across the black-stone floors. The air carries the scent of burning cedar, dragon smoke, and old parchment.

A four-poster bed sits near the arched window, draped in deep emerald silks, the fabric shifting with an unseen breeze. The bed is vast, too large for one person—but I have never let anyone occupy the space beside me.

Above me, an intricate chandelier of wrought iron and dark crystal hangs like a suspended cage, the dim candlelight barely reaching the vaulted ceiling.

I shrug off my cloak, letting it pool at my feet, my shoulders rolling as the tension coiled in my muscles begins to unwind.

But my thoughts do not settle. I step onto the balcony, throwing open the towering glass doors. The wind rushes past, carrying the scent of rain, of earth, of war. My home still stands, but for how much longer?

The king's war is pathetic now—a desperate man grasping at an unwinnable fight.

But I do not expect him to surrender.

No.

He will come for her.

He will come for the power he so desperately craves.

Power that now belongs to me.

Magic churns in my blood, searing through me as I let go of my human form.

My bones shift, stretching and breaking, twisting into something far larger, far deadlier.

Black scales ripple over my flesh, spreading like liquid obsidian. My hands twist into talons, my wings unfurl, vast and endless, their leathery expanse catching the night air. My tail lashes against the stone, sending shattered debris tumbling into the abyss below.

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The change is effortless. It always has been. I exhale, and a burst of Viridian Wrath—green fire that burns hotter than any earthly flame—spills from my maw, curling into the night. The sky welcomes me as I launch into the air, my wings slicing through the darkness. From above, the world lookssmall. The castle, the forests, the borders where human filth dares trespass. And somewhere beneath it all, in the heart of my keep, a little siren waits.

Unchained.

But neverfree.

I smirk, banking hard to the right, the roar of my wings shaking the sky. She thinks I will pay her price. That she has power over me. That she can win.

But she forgets...

Ialwayswin in the end.

Chapter

Four

VAELA

Savage - Bahari

Iwake to the sound of scurrying.

Tiny claws scraping against stone, the faint rustling of fur brushing the floor. Rats.

A flicker of irritation curls through me as I roll onto my side, the lumpy excuse for a bed doing nothing to soften the stiffness in my limbs. I blink against the dim light, taking in the scattered droplets glistening on the uneven stone floor. A dark stain spreads from where my basin once stood, its contents wasted.

The little vermin knocked it over.

A slow, steady breath hisses between my teeth. I push myself up, my movements fluid despite the stiffness in my muscles. The shadows skittering along the edges of the room pause, beady black eyes watching me warily.

"You little pests," I murmur, voice thick with disdain. One of them lets out a high-pitched squeak. I move faster than they expect, sweeping my foot forward, sending one of the creatures tumbling. The rest scatter, disappearing into the cracks of the walls. I let out a slow sigh, rubbing a hand over my face.

I feel... weaker.

Not helpless—never helpless—but diminished. My magic is still there, coiled inside me like a serpent waiting to strike. But it is muffled, smothered by the enchanted walls of this cursed place. And now, with no water nearby, my connection is even thinner, fraying like a thread stretched too far.

Still, I have to try.

I kneel beside the darkened stone, pressing my palm against the cool surface where the water once pooled. The droplets that remain pulse faintly in response, trembling beneath my touch.

Come on.

I close my eyes, inhaling deeply, letting my magic stretch outward, pushing against the weight of the wards. The pressure is suffocating, thick as the ocean depths, but I have learned to navigate through pressure, through restraint.

A flicker of power stirs.

The dampness lifts, curling up my fingers in a delicate tendril, barely more than a whisper of water.

Pathetic.

But even the smallest drop can become a storm in the right hands. I learned that long ago. The memory rises, unbidden—a flicker of the past pushing through the present. I had been young, too young to understand that magic was something to be feared. I remember the first time my mother tested me.

We stood in the throne chamber of Aqueira, my home beneath the waves, where the coral spires twisted like frozen flames and the bioluminescent glow of the deep pulsed against the glassy walls. The sea churned above us, heavy and vast, a kingdom that stretched far beyond sight.

She had been watching me closely that day. Too closely.

"Summon it," she had said, reclining against her throne of woven kelp and carved pearl.

I had barely been past my first century then, my power still raw, untamed. The water stirred at my command, sluggish but obedient, rising in soft, uncertain waves.

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"Not like that." My mother's voice had been clipped, cool. Impatient. "The ocean does not wait. It does not whisper. It takes." Her eyes, silver and sharp, locked onto mine. Waiting. Expecting.

"Try again."

And I had.

I had clenched my fists, let the tide of my magic crash against me, and pulled. The water had leapt to my call, twisting, clawing, surging, rising in violent, spiraling tendrils. The pressure of it had been exhilarating, the power a song in my blood.

For a moment, I had felt unstoppable.

Then I had lost control.

The waves had shattered against the chamber walls, cracking the coral, flooding the throne room. The force had sent me crashing backward, my own power turning against me, drowning me in its grip.

And my mother?

She had simply watched.

When the water finally stilled, leaving me gasping, she had knelt beside me, gripping my chin between her fingers.

"You are not a siren," she had whispered, her expression unreadable. "You are something else entirely. And something like you..." Her nails had dug into my skin. "Must never beg for power. You take it."

The words had carved themselves into me. And I had never forgotten. Even now, as I sit trapped in a dragon's castle, my power restrained, my strength weakened, I refuse to forget. I smirk, letting the thin tendril of water dance along my skin, curling up my arm like a living thing. The wards are strong, but they cannot fully silence me.

They can weaken me. Not stop me.

"That's cute."

The voice is smooth, edged with amusement, but there's a warning beneath it.

I don't jump. Slowly, I lift my gaze to the doorway.

And there she stands.

Nyxara.

A vision of shadow and sin.

She leans against the doorframe, arms crossed, exuding the kind of effortless authority that demands submission—or defiance. Her emerald eyes gleam, sharp as cut glass, holding thinly veiled irritation beneath their striking depths.

She looks unimpressed.

But gods, she's stunning.

She's clad in black lace and onyx-studded fabric, the delicate weave clinging to every curve of her tight, toned body. The bodice of her gown is adorned with glistening obsidian and deep violet stones, cut low enough to draw the eye to the swell of her breasts, barely contained beneath the intricate lace.

Her long, midnight-dark hair cascades past her waist, thick and silken, moving with the soft sway of her body. Strands catch in the dim green torchlight, glinting with a subtle sheen, as if woven from the night itself.

Her lips—full, sculpted, tempting—press into a thin line, irritation warring with amusement. The sharp planes of her cheekbones, the regal arch of her brow, the way her claws tap idly against her arms—she is a study in controlled violence, barely leashed power, and ruthless, dark beauty.

Heat coils low in my stomach.

Oh, this is going to be fun.

"Good morning, Dragon Queen," I purr, letting the water collapse harmlessly back onto the stone.

Her expression doesn't change.

But I see the slight tightening of her jaw, the subtle flare of her nostrils—small, telling signs that she's not nearly as indifferent as she pretends to be. Then, with a flick of her wrist, the lock on my cell shudders, the metal glowing faintly before clicking open.

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No keys. No struggle. Just raw power.

Her heeled boots click softly against the stone as she steps inside, her movements measured, deliberate, predatory. Like a beast entering its den, knowing it has already won.

"You're toying with things you shouldn't," she says, voice low, controlled.

I tilt my head, feigning innocence. "Am I?"

Her gaze flicks to the damp floor before settling back on me.

"You think I wouldn't notice?"

I let my lips curl into a slow, knowing smile. "I was merely testing my accommodations. You wouldn't want me to be uncomfortable, would you?"

Her wings twitch at her back, just barely.

Interesting.

She moves—fast.

One second, she's across the room. The next, she's in front of me, towering over me, her claws grazing the inside of my wrist. Heat radiates from her skin, her magic pulsing like a living thing, barely contained.

"Try that again," she murmurs, voice like silk wrapped around steel.

My pulse flutters. Not in fear. Never in fear. But in something else. Something far more dangerous.

I tilt my chin up, smirking. "What exactly are you going to do, Nyxara?"

Her claws trail lightly over my skin, just enough to send a shiver down my spine. Her power lingers in the air, thick and commanding, pressing in from all sides, daring me to submit. So, naturally, I do the opposite. I inhale slowly, gathering the last traces of moisture left in the air, willing it into something more. My power stirs, sluggish but still obedient—and I use it. My skin tingles as the shift happens, the summoning effortless, natural. Thick, smooth tentacles unfurl from the air around me, coiling languidly at my sides.

Nyxara stills.

I let my smirk widen.

One of the pearlescent limbs slithers forward, curling around her thigh, slow and teasing. Her claws dig into my wrist—not enough to break skin, but enough to warn.

"Careful, little siren," she growls, voice like embers in the dark. I hum, tilting my head, watching her carefully.

"Why?" I murmur. "Are you afraid you might like it?"

Her pupils flare.

A slow, sweet thrill rolls through me.

But before I can push further, a sharp gust of air sweeps through the room. I whip my head to the side just in time to see Morrin swoop in, talons latching onto the metal basin, yanking it from the floor.

I jerk as the last drops of water are ripped from my reach and immediately, the strain on my magic worsens. It dulls, as if someone has closed their fingers around my throat, pressing, squeezing. I snarl, stepping back, tentacles retracting as I fight the sudden weakness. Morrin flaps to Nyxara's shoulder, his black wings rustling, the basin clutched tightly in his grip.

"Slippery thing, isn't she?" he muses, his voice low and knowing.

Nyxara doesn't smile.

But she doesn't need to. I feel her victory like a physical thing in the air between us. I exhale sharply, rolling my shoulders, forcing myself to appear unfazed.

Fine.

She's won this round. But the game is far from over. Nyxara steps closer, reaching out, and before I can react, she grips my chin between her claws. Her touch is cold, sharp, demanding attention. Her emerald gaze burns into mine.

"You think you're clever," she murmurs, voice low, dangerous.

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I smirk, slow and deliberate.

"I know I am."

A muscle feathers in her jaw. Then, just as quickly, she releases me, turning sharply, her cloak billowing behind her as she strides toward the door.

"Stay in line, Vaela," she says, her voice calm, measured—a command, not a request.

I lick my lips, tilting my head as I watch her turn, her cloak billowing behind her like a storm cloud.

A slow, taunting smile curves my lips. "And if I don't?" I murmur, my voice silken, dripping with defiance.

She pauses.

Just for a second. It's quick, barely noticeable, but I see it. The tension in her shoulders, the subtle twitch of her claws. She doesn't turn. Doesn't reply. She just vanishes into the shadows of her castle, leaving behind the ghost of her magic, thick in the air—a lingering pulse, a phantom touch.

I inhale slowly, rolling my shoulders, stretching my limbs despite the dull ache of my dampened power. My lips curve into a smirk, because we both know I won't behave.

And something tells me... she doesn't really want me to.

After all, I know women like her. Strong, untouchable, believing themselves to be above the pull of desire, above the mess of need. I've had my fair share of women—queens and commoners alike, hands tangled in my hair, lips parted in breathless pleas, their thighs trembling beneath the slow, deliberate drag of my tongue.

And unlike men—men with their fumbling hands, their arrogance, their incessant need to take and take without knowing how to give—women are a storm to be unraveled.

Women are shameless in their pleasure, not seeking conquest, but demanding worship. And gods, do I love to worship.

And Nyxara?

Oh, she may pretend she's different, above it all, but I see the way she looks at me. The way her claws twitch and her dragon fire burns when I get too close.

She's fighting it.

And I can't wait for the moment she stops.

Chapter

Five

NYXARA

I should kill her.

I should have killed her the moment I found her chained like a prized offering in the

humans' camp, before her siren's voice slithered into my thoughts, before her tentacles curled around my thigh, before her icy white-blue eyes locked onto mine with that knowing smirk. She is dangerous.

Not just because of her magic, but because of the way she wields it. Vaela doesn't use power like a blade. She uses it like a promise. A whispered lure meant to unravel even the strongest of us.

And I am not weak.

Yet when I walked away from her, when I felt her gaze lingering on my back, taunting, luring, I knew it then. She will be my undoing.

But not today.

The scent of human filth lingers on the wind, thick with sweat, iron, and the acrid stink of torch smoke. I move silently through Varelith's shadows, the forest whispering around me, its ancient magic pulsing in time with my own. These human men do not belong here. Their very presence is a violation, an insult. They crush roots beneath their boots, disturbing a land older than their pathetic kingdom.

I perch in the crook of a withered yew, my talons curling into the bark, wings partially extended to steady myself. Below, a scouting party of six moves through the underbrush, blades unsheathed, their movements stiff with tension. They are nervous. They should be.

Their leader steps forward, a grizzled man with a jagged scar cutting down his jaw. He raises a hand, signaling the others to stop. He senses something.

Good.

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I watch as they adjust their grip on their weapons, eyes darting through the shadows. They are looking for me. They will not find me.

I move.

I drop from the tree, the wind curling around me, my claws unsheathing, my black lace cloak billowing like a shadowed omen. For a moment, they don't realize. Then the nearest soldier turns, his eyes widening—

Too late.

My claws slice through his throat in a clean arc, a wet gurgle escaping his lips before he crumples. The hot spray of blood spatters against the leaves, the scent of iron thick in the night air. The others whirl toward me, their shouts shattering the silence. Their blades rise, but I am faster. I strike the second soldier before he can lunge, grabbing his wrist mid-swing. His sword clatters uselessly to the ground as I twist. His bones snap like brittle twigs, the sound drowned beneath his scream. I release him, letting him stumble back, clutching his ruined arm.

The leader does not hesitate.

He swings his longsword in a wide, practiced arc, forcing me to step back. The others fan out, circling me like a pack of starving wolves. They think numbers will save them. They are wrong.

The leader sneers, his grip tightening on his sword. "The beast herself," he mutters, voice dripping with contempt. "Never thought I'd have the honor."

Honor. The word tastes foul.

"You were dead the moment you entered my land," I say coldly, eyes locked onto his.

One of the younger soldiers shifts uneasily beside him, his knuckles white around the hilt of his sword. He is afraid.

The leader snaps his head toward him, scowling. "Stay sharp. Remember why we're here."

The younger man swallows hard, glancing briefly at his fallen comrades. "We can still turn back." His voice wavers. "This isn't—this isn't right."

The leader scoffs, his grip tightening on his sword. "You think turning back will save you? You think she'd let you?" He spits onto the ground, eyes burning with hatred. "Creatures like her don't leave men alive."

I let a slow, deliberate smile curve my lips. "You're right," I murmur. "I don't." The young soldier flinches.

One charges.

I sidestep, my wings flaring, catching the wind. I let the momentum carry me into a spin, my claws slicing through the exposed flesh of his stomach. His body folds in on itself, spilling onto the earth in a mess of blood and entrails. A fourth man lunges from behind. I sense him before I see him, but his blade is fast, too fast. A sharp sting burns across my ribs as the steel bites into my skin.

I snarl.

Pain ignites across my side, the wound warm and wet, but it is not enough to stop me.

I pivot, grabbing the fool by the throat, my claws digging deep into his flesh.

"You dare spill my blood?" I hiss, venom curling around each syllable.

His fingers claw at my grip, his pulse hammering wildly beneath my claws.

I tighten my hold, lifting him off the ground. His face turns red, his legs kicking. Pathetic. I turn my gaze to the last two men—the leader and his final soldier. Their faces are masks of horror, their bodies trembling as they watch their comrade suffocate beneath my grasp.

The young soldier's voice shakes. "This—this isn't what I signed up for—"

"Shut up!" the leader snaps.

I squeeze.

The soldier's neck crushes with a sickening snap. I let his body drop. The leader does not run. I expected nothing less. He grips his sword tighter, shifting into a defensive stance, his breath even. A seasoned warrior. A fool all the same.

"You're making this difficult," I muse, tilting my head. The wound in my side throbs, warm and wet, but I push the pain away. The soldier beside him, however, is shaking. His fear is so thick I can taste it.

"Leave," I tell him, my voice smooth, edged with warning. "Run back to your king. Tell him his army is next."

He hesitates. The leader does not.

"You think you can scare us?" he growls. "We've faced worse than you."

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I arch a brow. "Have you?"

He lunges.

I exhale. And I burn him. Viridian Wrath erupts from my lips, spiraling toward him in a violent blaze of searing emerald fire. His armor warps, the metal twisting like melted wax. His screams shatter the night, raw and desperate—until his flesh peels away, curling into nothing but blackened bone. In seconds, there is nothing left but ash. The last soldier does not waste time. He flees into the trees. He will carry my message.

My vision blurs at the edges. The wound is worse than I thought.

I press a hand to my ribs, breathing heavily, my fingers slick with blood as the warmth seeps through the torn fabric. The wound isn't fatal, but it's deep, and every breath sends a sharp pulse of pain through my side. Annoying. The scent of burning flesh lingers in the air, clinging to my skin, mingling with the iron tang of my own blood.

I grit my teeth, forcing my wings to unfurl, the motion tugging at the gash in my side. I don't have time to linger. More will come. They always do.

With a powerful beat of my wings, I launch into the sky, the force of it sending a gust of wind howling through the charred clearing. The air is cool against my fevered skin, biting at the open wound, but I push higher, away from the wreckage, away from the stench of human filth.

Pain burns through me with every movement, each wing stroke jarring the torn flesh, but I don't stop. I can't. Below, Varellith sprawls in all its ancient, wounded beauty, the trees whispering beneath me, their magic faint, weakened from the encroaching war.

The king is pressing harder.

His forces are growing bolder.

And this is only the beginning.

I push forward, forcing my wings to cut through the wind, ignoring the fire burning in my side. Varethorne looms ahead, its obsidian towers reaching toward the night sky, its silhouette sharp against the moonlight.

I descend swiftly, the effort dragging a pained snarl from my lips, my landing harder than it should be. My claws scrape against the stone as I stumble, catching myself against one of the castle's great pillars. I swallow the pain, straighten, compose myself.

I will not collapse here.

I will make it to my chambers, and I will tend to this wound.

Gritting my teeth, I push forward, forcing my legs to move, though each step sends a fresh wave of pain searing through my side. The grand doors of Varethorne loom ahead, towering and unforgiving, their dark stone slick with rain.

With a sharp flick of my wrist, the doors groan open, the ancient hinges protesting as I step inside. The dim green torchlight flickers against the polished obsidian walls, casting long, jagged shadows that stretch and shift as I pass.

The corridors feel endless, the stone beneath my boots suddenly too uneven, the air too thick. My vision wavers for half a breath, the edges darkening.

I stumble.

One hand snaps out, catching against the wall, claws scraping over the rough stone. A snarl curls from my lips, frustration warring with pain.

I refuse to fall here, bleeding and weak within my own halls.

With a steady breath, I push forward, dragging myself through the corridors toward the one place I can gather my strength.

A sharp rustle of fabric makes me pause. I lift my gaze. Vaela leans against the doorway of her cell, her head tilted in mock sympathy.

"Well, well," she purrs, voice like silk dipped in poison. "The mighty Dragon Queen bleeds just like the rest of us."

I bare my teeth. "Silence, siren."

She steps closer to the gate, her icy gaze flicking to the wound, her smirk widening.

"You're not looking so invincible now, Dragon Queen."

I straighten, squaring my shoulders despite the throbbing pain radiating from my side. "I've suffered worse," I bite out, voice cold, dismissive.

She hums, unconvinced, tilting her head. "Have you? Because from where I'm standing, you're bleeding all over the floors of your pretty little castle."

I clench my jaw. The wound is deep, annoyingly so, but I do not need her.

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Her smirk sharpens. She sees the hesitation. The reluctance.

"You need me," she says again, softer this time. Certain.

"I need nothing from you," I snap.

She steps closer, slow and deliberate, her presence tauntingly calm as her fingers skim the pearls embedded into her bodice. "Oh, but you do," she purrs. "You burn. I heal. I think that makes us... useful to each other."

I narrow my eyes. "You?"

She sighs, rolling her shoulders. "The sea isn't just destruction and power, Nyxara. It gives life, just as much as it takes. I may not be able to call forth my full strength from within these walls, but I can mend. I can take that nasty little wound and make it disappear." She leans in slightly, her voice dropping into something dangerously smooth. "Unless, of course, you'd rather bleed out on your own floors out of sheer pride."

I inhale sharply through my nose, hating every word that leaves her lips—because I know she's right. But letting her touch me? Letting her use magic on me? I don't trust her. Yet my fingers twitch, blood slick between them. I can already feel my body growing heavier, the edges of my vision flickering.

She notices. Of course she does.

Vaela watches me, eyes gleaming with something unreadable. "Admit it, Nyxara,"

she taunts. "Just this once, you need me." My fingers curl at my sides, my claws biting into my palms. I should refuse. I should let the wound knit itself together in time, should push her away and let her rot in that cell where she belongs.

But if I collapse here, I will die.

And I am not ready to die.

I exhale sharply through my nose, lifting a hand. The barrier shatters, the magic dissipating like mist, the air thrumming as the wards unravel. A sharp click echoes through the chamber as the lock on the door releases, the heavy chains slipping free, falling away like dead weight.

Vaela steps forward, slow, deliberate, like a predator scenting fresh blood. I don't stop her when she brushes cool fingers against my ribs, her touch featherlight, almost reverent. I grit my teeth, suppressing a snarl as pain flares hot and sharp through my side. My vision wavers for a fraction of a second, and I hate that she sees it.

Her smirk widens. "Tell me where your chambers are, Dragon Queen."

I bare my teeth. "I can make it myself."

She clicks her tongue, mock sympathy lacing her voice. "Oh, of course you can. That stumble back there was purely for dramatic effect, I'm sure."

I don't dignify that with a response. Instead, I push forward only for my knee to nearly buckle beneath me. Vaela doesn't lunge to catch me. No, she waits. Watches. Lets me struggle. I snarl under my breath. Hating this. Hating her. Hating that she's right.

"East wing," I grind out, jaw tight. "The highest tower."

Vaela hums, tilting her head. "A tower? How brooding of you."

"Shut up and move."

She laughs, a slow, decadent sound, but she steps closer, slipping an arm around my waist as I begrudgingly lean into her.

Her touch is cool against my fevered skin, steady and sure, and I loathe the way my body relaxes slightly beneath it.

"You're heavier than you look," she muses, voice mocking, teasing.

"Or perhaps you're weaker than you think," I counter, though the words come out rougher than I intend.

She grins. "Oh, I like you injured. You're easier to deal with."

"Keep talking, and I'll find a way to burn you with what little strength I have left."

Her chuckle is dark, pleased.

We push through the corridors, my pace slow, forced. Every step sends a fresh pulse of pain through my side, but I refuse to stop, refuse to let my weakness become another thing for her to toy with. At last, we reach my chambers, and Vaela kicks open the door with an amused little smirk. She guides me inside, then steps back just as I begin to sway.

"Sit, Nyxara," she murmurs, her voice like the pull of the tide.

A command. A dare. A challenge. I hesitate for a moment longer, but the exhaustion pressing against my bones is winning. So I sit. She kneels beside me, reaching for the

jug of water left on the nearby table, likely placed there by one of the castle's unseen servants. Practical. Convenient. Lifting it with ease, she pours the cool liquid into a basin, her fingers trailing through the water as it ripples at her touch. Magic thrums in the air, faint but undeniable, responding to her call. She dips her fingers into it, the liquid glowing softly, wrapping around her hands in tendrils of silver-blue light. Magic hums in the air, thick, charged. I inhale sharply as the water seeps into my skin, pulling the wound closed, knitting flesh together.

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Cool, soothing, intimate. She glances up, her breath ghosting over my collarbone.

"Careful, Dragon Queen," she murmurs, her voice like velvet and sin. "You might enjoy this."

I should push her away.

I don't.

Her nails trail lightly down my abdomen, teasing, just enough to make my breath catch, just enough to make something coil low in my stomach.

"You swore to help me defeat the king," I say, my voice rougher than I intend.

She nods, slow, deliberate.

"And when that's done..." She leans in, her lips inches from mine, her breath cool against my skin.

"I'll claim my reward."

A warning rumbles in my chest, low and edged with something almost dangerous.

"Try anything, siren, and you'll regret it."

Vaela laughs, soft, husky, taunting.

"Oh, Nyxara," she purrs, her voice slipping through the air like silk laced with poison. Her nails trail lightly over my ribs, the barest touch, but it's enough to make my breath hitch. Not from pain. From something far more treacherous.

I keep my face blank, but my body betrays me.

She notices. Of course, she does.

Her icy white-blue eyes gleam with amusement, catching the flickering candlelight, reflecting it in a way that makes them look almost unnatural. Ethereal.

She is beautiful. Dangerous.

Something otherworldly, crafted from the abyss itself. Her luminous, pearl-like skin catches the dim candlelight, reflecting a soft, iridescent sheen that makes her look almost unreal—otherworldly, as if sculpted from the ocean itself. The cool undertones shimmer faintly, shifting with every movement, as if her very skin holds the whisper of the tides. The pearls laced through her hair shimmer like stars caught in the sea, glinting every time she moves, every time she breathes.

My jaw tightens.

I have never been drawn to someone before. Not like this. Not with this slow, creeping pull that coils in my gut and tightens with every brush of her hands against my skin.

I tell myself it's the siren's magic.

Her kind was made for seduction, for deception, for luring unsuspecting prey to their doom.

And yet—there is something different about this. She tilts her head, watching me like she knows exactly what I'm thinking, exactly how my body betrays me in ways my mind refuses to accept.

"Do you think so little of me?" she muses, her fingers tracing just outside my wound, pressing lightly into my skin as she maps the ridges and dips of my body.

I swallow hard, ignoring the way her touch sends a slow trickle of heat pooling in my stomach.

This is nothing.

This is her magic.

This is—

"We made a deal," she continues, her voice as smooth as the water she bends to her will. Her hands drift lower, exploring, teasing, lingering at the sharp edges of my hips as though she has every right to touch me.

She doesn't.

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"We are bound," she murmurs, her lips so close, I can feel the ghost of her breath against my skin.

Her nails graze my ribs again, slow, deliberate.

"If I were to harm you," she continues, her voice a dark whisper, "I wouldn't be keeping up my end of the bargain." She leans in, and for a fleeting moment, I wonder what it would feel like to have her hands roaming the places no one else has ever dared touch. To feel those cool, delicate fingers against the hottest, most heated parts of me.

The thought burns through me like a slow, consuming fire.

She smirks.

She knows.

Her gaze flickers to my lips, then back to my eyes.

"And I," she says softly, "always collect what I'm owed."

The weight of her words settles between us. A small relief, knowing she is bound by the same magic I am. That some part of her—no matter how wicked, no matter how cunning—cannot betray me.

But it also means something else.

It means avoiding my own end of the bargain may be harder than I thought. I let my head rest back against the pillows, masking the war in my thoughts behind a slow smirk.

"Then let the games begin."

Chapter

Six

NYXARA

Pain lingers, dull and stubborn, despite Vaela's touch having soothed most of the damage. The magic she wielded was unlike anything I had ever felt before—cool and fluid, yet sharp, like the push and pull of the tide. Even now, as I lie in my chambers, propped against silk pillows, I can still feel the ghost of her fingers tracing over my ribs, healing me, teasing me, unraveling me in ways I refuse to name.

She sits across from me, perched on the edge of the chaise near the hearth, watching. Always watching. Her luminous, pearl-like skin glows in the dim candlelight, her silver hair tumbling over one shoulder, a contrast of softness against the sharp, knowing gleam in her icy icy-blue eyes. She has not stopped studying me since she pulled the wound from my body, since she ran her fingers over my skin, teasing power from me in a way I both loathed and—

No. I shove the thought away.

"What?" I snap, my voice rougher than intended.

Her lips curve into a slow, wicked smirk. "You're unusually quiet, Dragon Queen. I thought you'd be more... grateful."

I roll my eyes, shifting against the pillows, feeling the pull of the wound that is no longer a wound. She healed me. She gave me something I needed. And I hate it.

"I already thanked you," I say, dragging a clawed hand through my hair before letting it rest against the arm of the chaise. "That should be enough."

She hums, tapping a finger against her knee. "Gratitude isn't the only thing I expected."

I arch a brow. "Then what?"

She tilts her head, her silver hair catching in the firelight. "Tell me about you."

I narrow my gaze. "Why?"

Vaela leans forward, elbows braced against her thighs, voice teasing but curious. "You act as if the world should already know. As if your existence is a legend we should all worship. But I want to hear it from the Dragon Queen herself. Who are you really, Nyxara? What made you this way?"

I exhale slowly, the scent of rain drifting through the open balcony doors. "That is not an easy question to answer."

"Try me."

I hesitate. I should shut her out. Should keep my silence. But something about the way she watches me—curious, but not entirely unkind—makes me relent.

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"The king is not the first to wage war against my realm, and he won't be the last," I say, my voice quieter now, but edged with something raw. "Long before this human king claimed his throne, his ancestors built theirs on the bones of creatures far older than their fragile kingdoms."

Vaela's expression shifts, the amusement fading, replaced by something else. "Explain."

I exhale sharply. "When the first men crossed into these lands, they were weak. Vulnerable. They were nothing but flesh and bone, unarmed against the magic of the wilds. They knew they couldn't conquer it—not as they were. So they did what humans always do. They stole. They harvested the power of the beings who came before them, using blood and fire to fuel their rise." My fingers curl against the chaise, the sharp tips of my claws digging into the upholstery. "Dragons were among the first to be hunted. My ancestors were slaughtered for their bones, their scales, their fire. Our power turned into weapons against us."

Vaela doesn't speak, but her fingers toy with the pearls on her bodice, something thoughtful in the motion.

I continue, the words bitter on my tongue. "Even now, with their castles and their armies, they are still afraid of what they cannot control. The king wages this war not just to expand his empire but to rid the world of what he sees as a threat. He sees magic as something unnatural, something that must be either bent to his will or destroyed."

A beat of silence stretches between us.

Then Vaela laughs, soft but laced with something sharp. "And yet, he sought me out. He wanted magic for himself."

"Because he is human. And humans are hypocrites."

She nods, a slow and deliberate gesture. "And what about you, Dragon Queen?" she muses. "You see them as nothing more than vermin, don't you?"

"They have given me no reason to see them otherwise."

She exhales through her nose, shaking her head. "I was born in the abyssal depths of Nythos, where the light fades, and the sea is nothing but an endless black void. My mother was a siren queen, my father something... older. Something darker. I never knew him. Only his power." She lifts a pearl between her fingers, rolling it in her palm. "The first thing I learned was that power is never given freely—it is taken. And I took mine."

Her voice is light, but there's something weighted beneath it. A memory she is not giving me. I study her for along moment, the tension between us shifting into something heavier. Something unspoken, but undeniable.

Her fingers drift to her pearls again, a slow, absent caress. "You care for this land," she muses, voice lilting, teasing. "For the creatures that call it home. You fight for them. Bleed for them. Does that mean you'd bleed for me now, too? After all, I am a magical creature in your realm, am I not?"

I stiffen, her words curling around me like smoke, thick and suffocating. She leans closer, just slightly, enough that the warmth of her breath ghosts against my skin. I feel the shape of her lips hovering near mine, the smallest shift away from something dangerous. My pulse thrums, unbidden, betraying me.

I don't answer. Can't.

She exhales a soft, knowing laugh. "Speechless, Dragon Queen? How rare."

Before I can snap back, she straightens, stretching her arms lazily overhead, her silver hair catching the firelight. "Get some sleep, Nyxara. You're no good to anyone if you collapse."

Then, with a playful smirk, she turns toward the door and strides out, slipping into the corridors of my castle like she belongs here.

I exhale, dragging a hand through my hair. My body still aches, but it is not the wound that lingers in my mind.

It is her.

And that infuriates me more than anything.

A flutter of wings draws my attention. Morrin perches on the edge of the balcony railing, his dark eyes gleaming in the candlelight. He watches me with that knowing, infuriating gaze of his.

"You're brooding."

I scowl. "I don't brood."

Morrin flaps his wings, unimpressed, before hopping down onto the back of the chaise. He has been with me for years, since the night I found him—broken, bleeding, left for dead in the ruins of my childhood home. A hatchling then, barely clinging to life, his wings torn, his tiny body frail. I had hesitated before reaching for him, before pressing my hands against his fragile frame, whispering power into his veins. He

shouldn't have survived. But he did. And when he rose again, stronger, darker, his wings spreading into the night like the shadows themselves, I knew.

He was mine, and I was his.

We were bound, not just by magic, but by something deeper. Something unspoken. He has been at my side ever since, my only constant in a world that has taken everything else from me. "How are you healing?"

"Fine." The answer is clipped, but he doesn't push. He knows better.

His head tilts slightly, sharp ears twitching. "And the sea witch?"

I inhale slowly, my jaw tightening. "She is... tolerable."

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Morrin snorts. "That's not what I saw."

I glare at him, but he's unfazed. "You're drawn to her."

I scoff, shifting against the pillows. "She's a siren. It's her magic."

I go still, my grip tightening around the silk of my robe.

No.

That can't be. I have only felt this once before. And it nearly destroyed me.

Long ago, when I was younger, more foolish, I let someone in. A man I thought understood power, understood me. A king—not the one who sits on the throne now, but his father. He was cunning, ambitious, and he knew exactly how to weave his way into my trust. We shared something I thought was real, a connection forged in whispered secrets and quiet promises. He swore he would protect magic, protect me, that we would rule together.

And then he betrayed me.

It was a slow unraveling at first—little things. Hesitations. Questions about my power. Then, one night, the truth came to light. He never wanted me. He wanted my fire. My strength. My throne. He lured me in only to try and break me from within.

I remember the moment his blade found my side, the shock of it. The cold, calculated look in his eyes as he stood over me, believing he had won. But he underestimated

what I would do to survive.

I ripped his heart from his chest and let his blood spill into the streets before his people, a lesson they would never forget.

I have not let anyone close since.

Yet now, here I am, fighting a war alongside a siren whose touch lingers longer than it should, whose voice makes something dangerous stir in me. And worst of all—I do not know if it is magic that calls me to her, or something worse.

Something real.

But the thought lingers, burrowing beneath my skin, refusing to be ignored.

Morrin watches me for a long moment before clicking his tongue. "Be careful, Nyxara. She may be bound to you, but that doesn't mean you can control what she makes you feel."

I close my eyes, inhaling deeply, willing the tension away. But it remains, thick in my veins, coiling deep in my chest. And I hate that.

Chapter

Seven

VAELA

It's been nearly a week since I healed Nyxara, and I'm still here, which, frankly, is impressive.

I expected her to slit my throat in my sleep by now—or at the very least, toss me back into my cell and pretend I don't exist. But instead, she's done something far more frustrating.

She's ignored me.

For days, I've wandered these endless stone halls, making myself at home in my gilded prison. I've studied the way the enchanted staff moves around me, noting how they hesitate slightly before entering a room I occupy, how their eyes dart toward me, calculating, wary but never outright afraid.

Smart.

Even with my powers bound, I'm still a threat, and they know it.

I run my fingers absently over the pearls sewn into my bodice, the smooth surfaces warm under my touch. I haven't created a new one in quite some time, but perhaps that will change soon.

My lips curl.

Nyxara has been avoiding me, but I know she's watching. She's keeping her distance, but I feel her presence like a storm on the horizon, waiting to strike.

Good.

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I like it when my prey gets close enough to sink my teeth into.

The heavy doors creak open, and I don't bother turning. I already know who it is.

"Good morning, Dragon Queen," I purr, stretching luxuriously on the chaise, the dark silk of my gown sliding higher up my thigh as I shift. "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten about me."

She doesn't respond right away, and that alone intrigues me. When I finally glance over, my smirk deepens.

She's watching me, eyes dark with something I can't quite name. Her usual armor of black lace and shadows is different today—more fitted, the bodice laced with emerald stones that glow faintly in the dim candlelight. The neckline plunges scandalously low for someone who claims to be all sharp edges and steel.

She's gorgeous. A predator wrapped in silk and wickedness.

"You seem comfortable," she says, her voice a measured calm, but there's a note of irritation beneath it.

I smirk, shifting slightly. "Should I not be? You've given me a castle to roam, servants who don't tremble in my presence, and a rather breathtaking view of your moody little kingdom. If this is imprisonment, I must say, I'm quite fond of it."

"You remain a prisoner," she says, voice flat.

I hum thoughtfully, tilting my head. "And yet, I don't feel like one."

"Perhaps I should remind you."

A delicious little threat. I rise from the chaise slowly, deliberately, letting the firelight catch the shimmer of my pearls.

"Tell me something, Nyxara," I muse, stepping closer. "Is it easier to pretend you despise me than to admit you might actually enjoy having me here?"

Her emerald eyes darken, the air between us charged with something heavy, something dangerous.

"You assume too much," she murmurs.

I smile, slow and knowing. "Do I?"

Her claws flex at her sides, a tell, but she doesn't strike. Not yet. "You should tread carefully, little siren," she says, voice lower now, like a warning wrapped in velvet. "I am not a patient woman."

"Then tell me why I'm still here," I press, stepping close enough that our breath mingles, close enough that I can see the flicker of something she tries to hide.

"You are bound to me. That is enough."

"Is it?" I whisper.

For a moment, just a moment, something in her wavers.

Then—

The doors slam open. Morrin.

The bat swoops inside, his wings cutting through the air before landing on a high-backed chair. His black eyes flick between us, unimpressed.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Nyxara is the first to move, stepping back sharply. The distance returns.

Damn.

"No," she says, her voice clipped, but I don't miss the way her jaw tightens.

Morrin clicks his tongue. "Good, because we have a problem. Movement in the eastern wood. Scouts. They're testing the borders."

The shift in her is immediate. Gone is the cold amusement, the restrained composure. Nyxara turns toward the door.

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I push off the chaise. "I'm coming with you."

She stops, looking over her shoulder.

"No."

I blink. "No?"

"You will stay here."

I scoff. "I will not."

Nyxara's glare sharpens. "I will not waste time keeping you alive while I fight."

I lift my chin, voice a quiet challenge. "Then don't waste time at all."

Her claws twitch. "This is not a game, Vaela."

"Oh, but it is," I counter, stepping forward. "And we are playing it together, remember?"

Her eyes flash with something close to rage. "I will not be responsible for your death."

"You won't have to be. I can take care of myself."

She lets out a sharp, humorless laugh. "You think I'll risk you using this as another

attempt to escape?"

"You truly don't listen, do you?" I take another step, my voice dropping lower, softer but no less dangerous. "I can't leave. I won't break our bargain. I gave you my word. Do you doubt me already, Dragon Queen?"

Her jaw clenches.

I press the advantage. "How am I supposed to help you win this war if you refuse to let me leave the castle?"

Silence stretches between us.

"Fine," she bites out.

Satisfaction curls through me. I follow her out of the chamber, down the winding halls, through the open doors to the courtyard. She exhales slowly, bracing herself. Then, her form shifts.

The sound of cracking bone, the rush of heat, the surge of magic.

Black scales ripple over her skin, spreading like liquid obsidian. Her body stretches, twisting, growing. Wings unfurl, vast and powerful. Emerald eyes blaze with fire and hunger. Talons scrape against stone, and her tail flicks, powerful and deadly.

She is magnificent.

Nyxara lowers herself.

"Get on." Nyxara's voice commands in my mind.

I don't hesitate. The moment I climb onto her back, her wings beat hard, lifting us into the sky. The castle vanishes beneath us, the trees a blur of green and shadow. The wind whips against my skin, the scent of rain thick in the air. I grip the ridges of her scales, exhilaration thrumming in my veins. Below, the forest stretches vast and endless.

I lean forward, pressing against the warmth of Nyxara's body.

"Let's hunt."

She tucks her wings and dives.

The air howls around us, whipping through my hair as we plummet toward the earth. I press myself tighter against the scaled ridge of her back, my arms locked around her as the speed steals the breath from my lungs. Below, the vast sprawl of Nyxara's realm stretches endlessly in every direction, an untamed, hauntingly beautiful expanse of deep, mist-draped forests and rolling black hills. The rivers carve silver veins through the landscape, glinting beneath the pale light of the moon feeds into vast lakes that shimmer like obsidian glass.

It's breathtaking—wild and vast, untouched by human greed. A realm ruled by magic. By creatures of legend. By her. And yet, humans have dared to trespass.

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Nyxara's muscles coil beneath me, her power thrumming like a living pulse as she spreads her wings wide, catching the wind just before we reach the treetops. The force of it pulls at me, my grip tightening instinctively as we glide low over the forest canopy. Shadows stretch long beneath us, shifting with the movement of the trees.

I spot movement ahead—a cluster of figures near the base of a crumbling ruin, their torches flickering against the encroaching dark. My eyes narrow. Human scouts.

Morrin had been right.

Nyxara tilts her wings, angling toward them, her body coiling with the promise of destruction. The heat of her magic thrums through me, sharp and electric. She's ready to burn them from existence. But something makes me hesitate.

I tap my fingers against the ridges of her scales. "Take us lower. I want to see them."

She doesn't respond right away. I feel her annoyance ripple through her like a second heartbeat.

"There's no need for a closer look," she growls. "They're vermin."

"Perhaps." I lean forward, pressing my lips close to her ear. "But vermin often scurry from something larger. We should make sure this is only a scouting party and not the tail end of something bigger."

She exhales sharply, a hot rush of irritation, but she obeys.

We descend, silent as shadows.

I scan the camp as we circle. There are six of them, all armored in the king's insignia—red and gold emblazoned across tarnished steel. They're speaking in hushed tones, voices barely audible over the rustling trees. I can't make out the words, but their body language tells me enough. They're nervous.

One of them, a younger man, keeps shifting on his feet, his hand hovering near the hilt of his blade. The leader—a broad-shouldered brute with a thick scar bisecting his cheek—paces near the fire, his fingers twitching like he's waiting for something.

Or someone.

I frown.

They're expecting reinforcements.

“We need to—”

The snap of a branch.

My breath catches.

The younger soldier turns suddenly, eyes lifting—Shit. The alarm barely has time to spread across his face before Nyxara moves. She tucks her wings and dives. The world tilts, gravity pulling hard as we drop into the clearing like a vengeful storm. The men barely have time to react before her fire erupts around them.

Viridian Wrath.

The flames are alive, a searing green inferno that ignites the trees in a wave of

unnatural heat. The scouts scramble, shouting orders, unsheathing weapons, but it's already too late. Nyxara's talons rake through one of them mid-scream, his body crumpling before he can land a single blow.

I leap from her back as she tears into another, rolling into a crouch as I hit the earth. The ground is dry, brittle from the fire's heat, but there's still water beneath the soil—I can feel it. It calls to me, desperate and eager.

I reach for it, pulling.

Droplets coil around my fingers like sharpened daggers as I rise. A sword whistles toward me.

I twist, barely avoiding the strike, my tentacles unfurling in response. They lash out, wrapping around the nearest soldier's wrist before he can bring the blade down again. He grunts, fighting against the unnatural hold, but I only smile.

"That's not very nice," I murmur, voice dripping with venomous amusement.

He thrashes, trying to break free, but my grip tightens, twisting his arm at an unnatural angle. He screams as the bonesnap. Two more soldiers charge me. I move fast, letting the water guide my motions. A flick of my wrist sends a sharp arc of liquid slicing through the air. One man stumbles, clutching his face as the water sears his skin like acid. The other swings at me. I duck, my tentacles snapping forward. One coils around his ankle, yanking him off his feet. He crashes to the ground with a curse, but before he can rise, Nyxara is there.

She doesn't give him the chance to beg.

Her talons rip through his chest in one fluid motion, leaving nothing but ruin in their wake. The remaining soldiers falter, exchanging panicked glances. They know

they've already lost.

"Run," I offer, voice lilting. "Or don't. It makes no difference to me." One of them takes off, stumbling into the trees. The last one—the leader—doesn't. Instead, he lunges for me, his blade catching the moonlight.

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For a split second, I don't react fast enough.

I see the glint of steel, the sharp downward arc of the strike—

A roar sounds, followed by a blur of black scales.

Nyxara moves faster than thought, intercepting the blow before it can land. Her tail sweeps through the clearing, striking the man mid-swing. He barely has time to scream before he's flung through the air like a broken doll, crashing into the jagged remains of a ruined pillar.

I exhale sharply, my heart hammering. That... was too close.

Nyxara lands hard beside me, shifting mid-step, her dragon form dissolving into flesh and shadow.

She's breathing heavily, her eyes blazing as they scan me, sharp and assessing. She steps closer, her talons brushing my arm, tracing the space where the blade almost struck.

"You're reckless," she snaps.

I smirk, shaking off the lingering rush of adrenaline. "And yet, here I stand."

Her talons linger. I should pull away. She should. Neither of us do. Her touch is warm, her gaze smoldering with something unspoken. For a moment—just a moment—I think she was scared. For me.

Interesting.

The thought sparks something deep, something curious. Something dangerous.

I glance up at her, letting my lips curve into a slow smirk. "Careful, Dragon Queen," I murmur, voice silk and smoke. "You might make me think you care."

Her jaw tightens. I expect her to snap back, to deny it, to pull away—she doesn't. She only holds my gaze, something unreadable flickering in the depths of her emerald eyes. The silence between us stretches, thick and charged, until a groan is heard.

I whip around, scanning the ruined camp. One of the men is still alive, coughing up blood as he tries to crawl away. He's the last one. Nyxara moves before I do, closing the distance in a few short strides.

The man gasps, blood bubbling at his lips as he claws weakly at the blade buried in his stomach. His eyes are wide, frantic, pleading—not for mercy, but for the chance to keep breathing, to keep fighting.

Nyxara offers him neither.

She grips the hilt and twists.

A wet, sickening gurgle rips from his throat as steel grinds against bone, his body jerking violently. His hands scrabble against her wrist, weak and useless, his mouth shaping a wordless plea.

She leans in, her voice a whisper of fire and death. "You will never see your homeland again. You die here, nameless. Forgotten. Like the rest of them. For that is the cost of crossing into my realm."

Then, with a brutal yank, she rips the sword free.

His body convulses, blood spilling in a dark torrent, soaking the earth beneath him. His last breath escapes in a shuddering exhale, his eyes already glassing over before his corpse crumples at her feet.

Nyxara steps over him without a glance, her blade still dripping, her rage still burning.

Let the rest of them come.

Let them choke on the ashes of their own arrogance.

She releases him, shoving him back onto the dirt. The man scrambles to his feet, stumbling into the night. I exhale, watching as Nyxara straightens, shoulders rigid with lingering fury. That was mercy. And I'm not sure if I should be surprised. I step closer, my power still humming beneath my skin. Nyxara turns to me, watching. Her expression unreadable and for a moment, it feels like she's about to say something.

Instead, she exhales sharply, shaking her head. "We're leaving."

She shifts back before I can push her further, her form stretching, growing, becoming something monstrous and magnificent all over again. I smirk, running a hand through my hair before climbing onto her back.

She takes off, and I don't look back.

Chapter

Eight

NYXARA

The scent of damp earth lingers in the air, the remnants of an early rain clinging to the stone walls of Varethorne. I stand at the edge of the balcony, watching as mist curls over the treetops, stretching like ghostly fingers toward the castle. The battle from the night before still lingers in my mind—not the fight itself, not the smell of scorched flesh or the rush of adrenaline.

No.

Her.

The way she moved. Fluid. Calculated. Unfazed.

The way my body reacted when she was nearly struck down.

I protected her before I could even think.

And now, the knowledge of that sits deep inside me, gnawing like a festering wound.

Morrin flutters onto the stone railing, his dark eyes sharp. “You’re thinking too much.”

I scoff. “I wasn’t aware thinking was a flaw.”

The bat stretches his wings lazily. “For you? It is.”

I roll my eyes and turn, striding into the depths of my castle. The halls are dim, the ever-burning sconces casting long shadows along the stone. I find Vaela exactly where I expect her, lounging in the dining hall like she owns it.

And she is barely dressed.

My steps falter for the briefest moment, but I mask it quickly, my expression smoothing into one of indifference.

The sheer white robe she wears drapes loosely off her shoulders, gossamer fabric clinging to the curves of her body. The deep plunge of the neckline leaves little to the imagination, the faint shimmer of her pearl-toned skin catching in the firelight. The slit in the robe reveals the smooth length of her thigh, shifting slightly as she crosses her legs, entirely at ease in her own damn audacity.

My mouth is dry.

She watches me knowingly, her silver hair tumbling over one shoulder as she lazily lifts a goblet of wine to her lips. “You look tense, Dragon Queen.”

I grit my teeth, my eyes dragging—unbidden—over the delicate swell of her breasts, the sheer fabric teasing what lies beneath. The way her fingers toy absently with the rim of her goblet, as if she knows exactly what she’s doing.

The urge to burn the robe from her body just to rid myself of the distraction is infuriating.

I force my gaze back to her face, my voice smooth and unaffected. “Cover yourself properly before my staff mistakes you for a wandering courtesan.”

She smirks. “Oh? I wasn’t aware your castle had guests in need of entertainment.”

I exhale sharply through my nose. “Put something else on, Vaela.”

“Come now, Dragon Queen.” She leans forward, the movement deliberate, the thin lace slipping further off her shoulder. “You don’t like what you see?”

I should ignore her.

I should turn on my heel and walk away.

Instead, I say, “We need to discuss our strategy.”

Something flickers in her gaze—interest, intrigue—before she hums and rises with a slow, unhurried grace. The fabric of the robe shifts around her, sheer and weightless, clinging to the dip of her waist.

It takes every ounce of my willpower to not let my eyes follow the movement.

She tilts her head, feigning innocence. “Strategy? My, how serious. I thought you enjoyed handling things with sheer brute force and fire.”

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I shoot her a glare. “The king will not stop sending men into my lands. If we want to end this, we need to plan.”

She taps a finger against her lips. “Ah, so now you need me.”

I resist the urge to throttle her.

Instead, I turn sharply on my heel and stride down the hall, not bothering to check if she follows. Of course she does. She’s too curious not to.

I lead her through the winding corridors, past the great stone archways and into the war chamber. The room is large, its walls lined with shelves of aged tomes, stacks of parchment detailing past battles, old maps marked with the scars of previous wars. At its center, an imposing blackwood table stretches the length of the chamber, an intricate map carved into its surface—one that shifts and pulses with magic, constantly updating with the state of my lands.

The kingdom of Varellith spreads across the table, an enchanted rendering of the forests, rivers, and mountains. The castle stands at the very heart, its obsidian spires gleaming under the illusion of a sunless sky. To the east, the king’s territories loom in shades of burning red, steadily encroaching, pressing closer with each passing week.

Vaela approaches the table slowly, her fingers tracing the carved rivers and valleys. “Impressive,” she murmurs. “It’s... alive.”

I cross my arms. “It updates in real time. If the king moves his forces, we’ll see it here first.”

She studies it, her brows furrowing slightly. “And you’ve been fighting him alone?”

I don’t answer.

Because the truth of it is—it hasn’t been just him. Humans have always sought to take from me. This war is nothing new.

Vaela presses her palms against the table, leaning forward, studying the flickering sigils marking recent skirmishes. The robe slips slightly again, teasing another bare inch of skin. My eyes betray me, dragging downward, taking in the long line of her spine, the dip of her waist, the curve of her hips.

I clench my jaw, forcing my gaze back to the map.

Vaela hums. “We can’t just keep killing scouts. It delays him, but it doesn’t stop him.”

I exhale, fingers tapping against my arm. “Then what do you suggest?”

She looks up, her eyes sharp with calculation. “We let them come.”

I blink. “You want me to invite an army into my land?”

“Not an army,” she corrects. “Just enough of them to think they have the advantage. We feed them just enough confidence to send a proper force—one we can crush in full. If we destroy a larger force in one strike, he’ll have no choice but to hesitate.”

It’s... a solid plan.

A dangerous one.

But perhaps, so is she.

I exhale slowly, watching her closely. She's cunning—calculating in a way that is entirely different from me. Where I strike with fire and fury, she coils like the tide, waiting, watching, striking when the enemy least expects it.

We are different.

And yet, the same.

I tilt my head slightly. “And you're willing to fight for my realm, just like that?”

She smirks, tilting her chin up. “A deal is a deal, Dragon Queen. I never break my word.”

Her voice is light, but I don't miss the way her fingers graze the pearls at her bodice—the weight of her own past pressing just beneath the surface.

I lean forward, just slightly. “And what will you do when this war is over, little siren?”

She exhales a soft laugh. “That depends.”

“On?”

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She looks at me.

Holds my gaze.

Then, slowly and deliberately, she reaches out, tracing a single, featherlight touch over the edge of the table, close to where my hand rests. Not quite touching.

Not quite not.

I feel the heat of it, the teasing whisper of something that shouldn't be there.

The tension between us stretches, tight and coiling.

And then... she steps back.

That damned smirk plays on her lips again. "You'll just have to wait and see."

I watch her as she turns, slipping toward the exit, the sheer fabric of her robe trailing behind her.

She's toying with me.

And the worst part?

I think I like it.

Sleep does not come easily.

It never has.

When I finally close my eyes, I am dragged under—not into rest, but into memories.

The past rises like smoke, curling around me, thick and suffocating.

I am standing in the ruins of the first war, the air thick with the scent of ash and iron. My people—my kin—lay in heaps, their scales blackened, their wings torn. The battlefield stretches endlessly, bodies scattered like broken dolls, their golden eyes staring lifelessly at a sky that has forsaken them.

I remember this place.

The valley where my mother fell. Where my father's last roar shook the heavens before he was brought down by a rain of steel.

Where I became queen.

I turn, and he is there—the first king.

The man who swore he would stand beside me. The man who traced fire over my skin with his lips, who whispered oaths of devotion into the hollow of my throat. The man who made me believe, for the briefest moment, that I could trust a human.

That I could love one.

The memory shifts.

His face is close to mine, his hands gripping my waist with practiced familiarity. “We could end this together, Nyxara,” he murmurs. “We don’t have to fight.”

Lies.

I know now that every touch, every whispered word, was designed to tame me. To make me his.

And when that failed—when I refused to become some docile creature he could leash—he drove a blade into my ribs.

I feel it again, the cold kiss of steel splitting through me. The betrayal in his eyes when I did not fall.

He did not know what I was.

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What I would become.

His blood still stains the stones of his palace.

The vision fractures—twisting, breaking.

And suddenly, I am standing in the burning wreckage of a city, his corpse at my feet, his crown cracked in two. The humans cower before me, their fear delicious, but my rage is hollow.

Because no matter how many of them I kill, it will never be enough to undo what was taken.

What was lost.

I wake with a sharp inhale, my pulse a thunderous rhythm in my ears.

The room is dark, the air cool against my damp skin. My fingers are clenched in the silk sheets, my breath uneven.

It has been decades since that war. Since his betrayal. Since I stood in that city, my body dripping in the blood of the man I once believed could be mine.

And yet, it haunts me.

I rise swiftly, shrugging off the remnants of sleep, my body tense with restless energy. The memories coil in my chest, suffocating, and I need

something—anything—to quiet them.

Without thinking, I move.

I find myself outside her chambers before I fully register my own actions.

The door is unlocked.

Of course it is. She knows I'll come to her.

I step inside, and the sight before me is enough to still my breath.

Vaela is draped across the chaise near the fire, her body partially hidden beneath the same sheer white robe she had been wearing earlier. The firelight flickers over her pearl-toned skin, casting shadows across the delicate lines of her form.

She looks utterly at ease.

But her eyes find mine, cool and knowing.

“I was wondering when you'd stop pacing the halls,” she muses, voice laced with amusement.

I scowl, stepping further inside, letting the door click shut behind me. “Don't flatter yourself. I was merely ensuring you hadn't wandered where you shouldn't.”

She smirks. “Of course. And here I thought you might have missed me.”

I exhale sharply, ignoring the heat curling low in my stomach. “You assume too much.”

She hums, tilting her head. “Then tell me, Dragon Queen, what has you so unsettled?”

I hesitate.

It is not often I am at a loss for words.

But there is something about her—about the way she watches me, as if she sees past the steel and fire, past the rage and the crown.

As if she sees me.

I hate it.

I hate that I do not turn and leave.

Instead, I step closer.

The fire casts a golden sheen over her, illuminating the silver strands of her hair, the deep, endless blue of her eyes. She is beautiful—undeniably, infuriatingly beautiful.

And she knows it.

I sit in the chair across from her, stretching out my legs, feigning nonchalance.

Vaela studies me, eyes flicking over my body, lingering on the tension in my shoulders, the stiffness in my posture.

“You’ve been shifting too much,” she murmurs. “Your body must be sore.”

I arch a brow. “I heal quickly.”

She tsks, swinging her legs over the chaise, sitting up. “That doesn’t mean you don’t feel it. You’re strong, but you’re not immune to your own muscles tearing.”

Her gaze drops, scanning the taut line of my shoulders. Then she lifts her hand, beckoning me forward with a teasing smile.

“Come here,” she says, voice like silk. “Let me ease the ache.”

I snort. “I think not.”

Her smirk deepens. “Are you afraid I’ll have my hands on you, Dragon Queen?”

My jaw clenches.

She is insufferable.

But the ache in my muscles is very real, and no matter how much I will my body to relax, the tightness remains.

Vaela shifts, patting the spot in front of her. “Just sit. I won’t bite.” I give her a sharp look, and she grins. “Unless you want me to.”

Goddess above, this woman will be the death of me.

With a sigh, I roll my shoulders and move toward the chaise, lowering myself onto the edge.

Vaela shifts behind me, close enough that I can feel the warmth of her body.

Her hands press against my shoulders, and I have to resist the urge to tense. Her touch is cool, firm, but not unpleasant.

Then she begins to knead.

A breath hitches in my throat before I can stop it.

Her fingers are skilled, tracing over the ridges of my muscles, pressing deep into the knots that have formed along my back.

For a moment, I almost resist.

Then she finds a particularly tight spot at the base of my neck and presses her thumbs into it, rolling slow, steady circles.

A low, pleased sound escapes me.

Her hands still.

“You purr?”

I freeze.

Her laughter bubbles out, soft and delighted, and I feel her breath against my ear as she leans closer.

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“Oh, I’m never letting you live this down.”

I growl, but it lacks bite. Her fingers move again, her palms smoothing down my back, her nails just barely grazing my skin through the thin fabric of my nightclothes.

The tension I’ve been holding for days slowly begins to slip away beneath her touch.

I close my eyes, inhaling deeply.

She shifts again, closer, her legs pressing against my sides. “See?” she murmurs, voice dropping lower. “Not so bad, is it?”

Her thumbs slide up my spine, tracing along the edges of my shoulder blades.

I swallow hard.

Goddess help me.

I let my head tip back slightly, exhaling.

And for the first time in a very, very long time...

I allow myself to relax.

Chapter

Nine

VAELA

The almighty Dragon Queen is in my bed.

Inmybed.

I lean against the doorframe, arms crossed, watching the Dragon Queen sprawled across the silk sheets, her dark hair tangled over my pillows, her body half-covered in the thin blanket. The robe she'd been wearing last night has slipped from her shoulder, exposing the pale curve of her collarbone, the dip between her breasts.

She looks soft like this.

Peaceful.

Relaxed in a way I've never seen her before.

Not that I blame her.

After all, I was the one who worked those knots from her shoulders, coaxed those low, sinful noises from her lips, felt the tension unravel from her body beneath my hands. And now, here she is, utterly lost to sleep, her breath even, her body lax.

I grin.

Dragons purr.

Oh, I willneverlet her forget that.

But for now, I have other matters to tend to.

With one last lingering glance at the slumbering queen, I turn, padding silently toward the center of my room.

A large stone bowl rests atop the war table, filled to the brim with water—a necessity for someone like me, kept in a land of fire. The castle’s servants had placed it there at some point in the night, likely assuming I’d want it to drink or bathe.

Fools.

They had no idea what a gift they had given me.

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I move toward it, my fingers trailing lightly over the rim.

The water pulses beneath my touch, answering my call before I even summon it.

My magic stirs, restless. Eager.

It has been too long since I've used it freely. Since I've felt the full force of my power surge through me.

And now, with this?

I could do more than just pull at the droplets in the air, more than just whisper to the tides beneath the earth.

I could reach beyond.

Beyond these walls.

Beyond this world.

I exhale slowly, rolling my shoulders as I place my hands in the water bowl, fingers sinking into the cool, liquid silk. The moment my skin meets the surface, a shiver ripples through me, a connection forming like a tether snapping taut across an infinite distance. The magic of my realm stirs, sensing me.

I close my eyes and inhale deeply, summoning the power that thrums in my veins.

Deeper.

I whisper to the sea, to the abyss that has always obeyed my call, the home that is stitched into my very being. The water shifts beneath my hands, but I don't just draw from the small, stagnant pool before me—I pull from the ocean itself, from the tides that still remember me.

The air thickens with power, tingling against my skin.

Stronger.

The water swirls, stretching beyond the confines of the bowl, twisting into spirals of liquid silver. The currents expand, bending space itself, forming more.

A ripple. A tremor.

Then—

The portal erupts to life.

It does not appear within the bowl, too small and insignificant to contain it. Instead, the air before me cracks open, the sheer force of it shuddering through the room. A vortex of shifting water swirls across the far wall, an expanse of glowing blues and deep violet, bioluminescent streaks pulsing like veins through the portal's surface.

A direct tether to my world.

I feel it immediately. The weight of the sea pressing against the threshold, whispering to me, begging me to step through.

To return.

But I do not need to leave.

I only need to reconnect.

I press my hands deeper into the water, exhaling as I let it wash through me, filling me.

My magic recharges. Strength bleeds back into my limbs, rushing through me like a tide breaking free from its dam. It's intoxicating—the raw pulse of my realm's power, surging through me like lightning, like a siren's song calling me home.

I breathe it in. Let it fortify me.

I am not stealing, not taking as I always have.

I am receiving.

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Something freely given.

The thought unsettles me.

Because I do not give freely.

I have built my power through bargains, through exchanges. Magic is never free.

And yet...

I think of Nyxara, her strength, her kingdom, the creatures that look to her for protection, the fire in her veins, the unyielding determination in her emerald eyes. The more I learn of her, the more I understand her—the more I want to help her. Not just because of our bargain. Not just because of the power she could give me in return. But because something within me wants her to win.

I have never felt such a thing before. The idea of giving—of offering my magic with no price, no cost—is foreign, unfathomable. And yet, as I kneel here, siphoning power from my realm into my own being, I do not think of what I could take. I think of what I could offer her. The realization is dangerous. It curls deep inside me, unfamiliar, shifting my very foundation. But I do not resist it.

I let it settle.

A flicker of heat brushes my senses. A presence, stirring at the edge of my awareness. I do not react at first, my focus still tethered to my magic, still pulling, still receiving. And then, sharp and abrupt—

"Vaela!"

A crack sounds through the chamber, and the world shudders.

I gasp as the portal collapses.

The glowing vortex flickers violently before shattering, the bioluminescent light snuffing out, the currents snapping back into the void like a wave receding too fast.

I lurch forward, my hands gripping the edge of the table to steady myself as my connection to the sea is ripped away. A clawed hand seizes my wrist, yanking me back before I can regain my balance. I blink, dazed, my mind still caught between realms.

Nyxara.

Towering over me, hair still tousled from sleep, robe hanging loose over her shoulders.

She is all fire and fury, magic curling in the air around her like a storm barely held in check.

Her eyes burn.

"What," she hisses, voice rough with sleep and something sharper, "the hell do you think you're doing?"

I blink at her, my breath still heavy from the exertion, my body still thrumming from the rush of magic. "Good morning to you too, Dragon Queen."

Her claws dig into my wrist, her grip unforgiving. "You were opening a portal."

“Brilliant deduction,” I muse, regaining my breath. “Shall I award you a prize?”

She growls, low and threatening, the sound reverberating between us. Her body presses closer, the heat rolling off her like a wildfire.

“You think this is a joke?” she snaps. “I trusted you.”

That catches me off guard.

I narrow my eyes. “You thought I was escaping?”

She doesn’t answer.

Oh.

Oh, that is rich.

I laugh, sharp and humorless, but beneath it, something else stirs—annoyance. Frustration.

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Because of course she thinks that.

After everything. After I have fought with her, after I have bled for her, after I have healed her—she still doesn't trust me?

It's a slap to the face. A burn that lingers.

I wrench my wrist from her grasp, stepping closer, pushing into her space until she is forced to tilt her head down to meet my gaze. "If I wanted to leave," I murmur, voice low and sharp, "I would have." My lips curl, taunting. "If I wanted you dead, you would be."

Her jaw clenches.

"You distrust me so much that even now, when I am at your side, when I have done nothing but help you, you still think I would betray you?" I tilt my head. "You wound me, Nyxara."

Her nostrils flare, but she doesn't pull away.

"I have been loose in this castle for weeks. I have walked its halls, dined at your tables, slept in your bed"—I smirk as her pupils dilate—"and yet, I am still here. Bound to you. Bound by choice."

I shake my head, exhaling sharply. "I was not trying to run. I was siphoning energy from my realm. Refueling. How do you expect me to help win your war if you won't even let me access the magic I need to fight beside you?"

A muscle ticks in her jaw.

She knows I'm right.

And that only makes her angrier.

"I do not need your help." The words are cold. Dismissive.

And I snarl.

I shove against her, not enough to move her, but enough to make my point. "Liar."
My voice is venom, dark and sharp. "You do need me. You bound yourself to me because you knew you couldn't do this alone. And yet, you refuse to trust me. Why?"

She stiffens.

I see it then. The flicker of hesitation in her eyes.

I exhale, forcing myself to calm.

Forcing myself to understand.

There is more to her fear than just my power.

I shift tactics.

My voice drops into something softer, something deadly. "Or," I hum, tilting my head, my lips grazing the shell of her ear, "are you afraid of what I might do with that power?"

Her breath catches.

Ah.

That's it, isn't it?

My lips curve into a slow, knowing grin.

Her claws twitch against the table, her fingers flexing, like she's seconds from either shoving me away or pulling me closer.

I reach for her, trailing my fingers lightly down the inside of her wrist, slow and deliberate.

“Tell me, Dragon Queen,” I whisper, voice like smoke. “What is it you truly fear?”

Her pupils blow wide.

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She tries to hide it, but I see it—the truth lingering just beneath the surface.

She's not just afraid of my power.

She's afraid of me.

Afraid of how much she wants me.

Afraid of what it means.

I don't give her time to think.

I let my magic slip between us, a tendril of water slithering along her thigh, teasing beneath the folds of her robe, a cool contrast to the heat radiating from her.

She shudders.

Fucking hell.

I revel in it.

Her breathing turns sharp, uneven, and I watch as her control frays, watch the tension coil in her shoulders, in the delicate clench of her jaw.

I lean in, pressing my lips against her jawline, trailing slow, teasing kisses down the curve of her throat, feeling her magic coil beneath her skin, struggling for control.

She trembles.

My tongue flicks out, tracing the hollow of her collarbone.

"Do you want me to stop?" I murmur, voice dark, taunting, lips grazing the swell of her chest.

A sharp inhale.

Her nails bite into my arms, a snarl curling at the edges of her breath.

Then—

Heat.

A burning grip on my hip, the crash of her mouth against mine.

She devours me, all teeth and fire and rage.

I moan into her, my fingers threading into the wild lengths of her hair as my tentacles explore, teasing beneath the silk of her robe, curling against the soft heat between her thighs.

She gasps, her back arching.

I take advantage.

My tongue flicks over the peak of her breast, teasing, testing, before I close my lips around it, sucking just enough to feel the sharp inhale of her breath, the way her fingers tighten around my shoulders, like she's losing herself to this.

To me.

Her magic flares in response, wild and furious, licking at my skin like flame, but I do not pull away.

I want the burn.

I want the sting.

I want her.

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I shift lower, trailing my mouth down the flat of her stomach, my hands gripping her thighs, spreading her just enough—

She rips away.

Chest heaving. Eyes wild.

"Enough." Her voice is wrecked, her pupils blown, but her fingers curl into the table behind her, desperate for something to hold onto.

I grin, licking my lips, tasting her skin.

"If you ever do that again," she rasps, voice wrecked, "I will chain you back in the warded cell myself."

A thrill dances down my spine.

I let my gaze rake over her—her kiss-bruised lips, the flush along her throat, the way she still trembles.

My smirk widens.

"I'd like to see you try."

Chapter

Ten

NYXARA

I wake with a start, the weight of last night pressing against my skin like a phantom touch.

I should not have let her touch me. I shouldn't have let her mouth ghost over my skin, her tentacles tease and stroke, drawing sounds from me that I should never have given. I should not have let myself crave her.

The air in my chamber is thick, laced with the remnants of her magic, the scent of salt and dark waters lingering even though she is no longer here. I exhale sharply, raking a hand through my hair. I need to leave.

I rise, silk sheets slipping from my skin, the cold morning air licking against the heat still lingering from last night. My jaw tightens as I shove the thought away and move toward the grand armoire against the far wall.

I pull out a gown, black as midnight, the fabric shimmering faintly in the dim morning light. The corset top cinches my waist, lace curling over my ribs like creeping vines, the plunging neckline revealing just enough to tempt, but never invite. I slide my arms through the fitted sleeves, the delicate material clinging to my skin, shifting like shadow when I move.

The skirt flows in soft layers, sheer in places, parting high up my thigh, the long slit allowing freedom of movement. I step into thigh-high boots, the sharp heel clicking against the stone floor as I stand, rolling my shoulders, feeling the power settle back into me.

At the ornate vanity, its surface carved from polished obsidian, I trace a fingertip over the vials of perfume and kohl scattered across it. I line my eyes with kohl, darkening the edges, sharpening them into something lethal. My lips, full and soft, are painted a

deep plum, a stark contrast against the pallor of my skin.

Satisfied, I push back from the vanity, running a hand through my thick black waves, letting them fall unbound down my back. The weight of it is familiar, the strands smooth beneath my fingers, a reminder of the power that runs through my veins.

I turn toward the balcony. The great doors swing open at my command, the wind rushing past me, cool and fresh with the scent of the forest below.

The morning air is crisp, carrying the scent of damp earth and distant rain. From my balcony, Varelith stretches before me, bathed in the golden haze of sunrise. The towering silver-barked trees sway in the wind, their iridescent leaves catching the light like shards of amethyst and emerald. The rivers carve through the land, dark as ink, winding toward the vast lakes that glisten like obsidian glass under the rising sun. It is beautiful. Wild. Mine.

And soon, war will come to it.

Below, the valley stirs with life. A herd of shadow elk moves through the trees, their inky black coats flickering like smoldering embers as they step between light and darkness. Their leader, a massive stag with twisted silver antlers, lifts his head toward the castle, nostrils flaring as if sensing my gaze. They know what is coming.

Further along the riverbanks, a trio of Naiads rise from the shallows, their translucent bodies shimmering like liquid opals, hair tangled with dark kelp, eyes like deep water. They whisper to one another in their ancient tongue, watching, waiting.

Near the cliffs, perched on the jagged rocks overlooking the valley, a griffin stretches its wings, feathers shifting between hues of sapphire and gold. Its sharp gaze sweeps across the land, always watching, always guarding.

Even the smaller creatures move differently today. The wisps flit between the trees, their glowing bodies leaving streaks of pale fire in the air. The Shadewalkers remain unseen, but I know they are there—watching, listening.

They all feel it.

King Aldric is pushing deeper. His men are growing bold. If I do not act soon, they will come for all that I protect.

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A sharp flutter of wings disturbs the silence. I don't turn as Morrin lands on the balcony railing, his talons curling against the stone. He watches me for a long moment before speaking.

“You should go to them.”

I exhale through my nose, fingers tightening against the balustrade. “They know I am here.”

“They know, yes. But they need to see you,” he counters. “Your presence reassures them. And reassurance is what they need now.”

I glance at him, arching a brow. “Since when do you care for diplomacy?”

His beady eyes gleam. “I care for survival.”

A low hum settles in my chest. He's right. The creatures of this land need more than whispered promises. They need to know that I will fight for them, that they will not be left to suffer beneath human greed.

It is time I remind them who I am.

With a sharp turn, I stride through my chambers, pushing open the heavy doors that lead to the courtyard. The castle gates loom ahead, the winding stone path stretching beyond them into the dense heart of the forest. As I walk, my magic presses outward, curling through the trees, stirring the rivers. I hear them respond in turn.

The moment I step past the tree line, the whispers start.

The wind rustles through the ancient oaks, carrying with it voices—soft, fleeting, urgent.

Wisps drift between the trunks, their delicate, glowing forms floating like embers caught in a breeze. They speak in fragmented emotions, brushing against my mind, their presence like fingertips trailing over my skin. Warnings. Human feet defiling sacred ground. The king's reach pressing closer.

I walk deeper, the foliage thickening around me. The air grows heavy, rich with the scent of damp moss and blooming nightshade vines, their luminescent petals curling in the underbrush, feeding off the latent magic that seeps from the rivers of Varellith.

By the time I reach the river, the waters are already stirring. They ripple in anticipation, the current twisting unnaturally, drawn to my presence. I step forward, my power brushing over the surface. A tremor. A pulse.

Then, the water parts.

Lirien emerges, her translucent form rising from the depths like something pulled from the marrow of the world itself. Water drips from her glowing skin, her seaweed-dark hair fanning around her like ink bleeding into water. Her moonstone eyes lock onto mine, piercing, unreadable.

She has seen centuries of war, and she knows another is coming.

"Dragon Queen," she murmurs, voice like the tide, steady and unyielding. "You have been absent."

"I have been preparing."

"For war?" Her gaze flickers, unreadable.

"For survival."

Silence stretches between us, the river lapping softly against the shore.

Then, she turns her eyes to the distant mountains. To the lands beyond the rivers. To the crumbling ruins that mark the edges of human-controlled territory.

"He gathers more soldiers. More weapons. He will not stop."

I already know this.

The king is growing desperate. I slaughtered his scouts, but that was only the beginning. He will send more. He will not stop until he has torn this land apart.

"I will not let him take Varellith."

Lirien's lips curl, but it is not amusement. It is something closer to pity.

"And yet, you harbor one of his greatest weapons within your own walls."

My body stiffens. She means Vaela.

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"She is bound to me."

"Is she?" Lirien hums, stepping forward, the water shifting around her ankles, swirling in a slow, deliberate spiral. "Or are you bound to her?"

A muscle ticks in my jaw.

"Enough." My voice is a blade, sharp and cutting. "Tell the others to retreat to the deep waters. When the war comes, they must be hidden."

She watches me for a long moment, then inclines her head. "As you command." Then, she is gone.

The river settles. I exhale, turning from the water, my thoughts still snarled. The path through the forest winds ahead, leading me to another sacred place. A grove where the trees whisper secrets, where the veil between realms thins.

The Titanforged await.

Their massive forms rise from the earth, bodies hewn from obsidian and iron, veins of molten gold pulsing beneath the jagged cracks of their ancient skin. They are not men. Not fully of this world. They are relics of a time before kingdoms, before war—giants molded by the gods, bound to the land itself. They do not serve, nor do they kneel. But when they rise, when they move, the earth trembles beneath their weight.

One steps forward—Rhyzan.

He towers over me, his form carved from stone and fury, his molten eyes burning like twin suns. His presence alone could drive lesser men to their knees, could break bones with the sheer weight of his existence. His voice, when he speaks, rumbles through the trees, vibrating in my ribs like a fault line waiting to break.

"You have come."

"I need your aid."

The others shift at my words, their bodies grinding like mountains moving, the weight of their presence pressing against the very air. They listen, silent as the deep earth, as old as the roots beneath our feet.

"War is coming," I continue, meeting Rhyzan's molten gaze. "The humans will not stop. I need your strength at the borders. Watch them. Inform me when they cross into our lands, so that together we may end this before it begins."

The stillness that follows is vast. Then, slowly, Rhyzan tilts his head. The golden fissures in his body pulse, the runes carved into his chest flickering with ancient power.

At last, he speaks. "The Titanforged do not serve." His voice is the deep groan of shifting stone, the weight of the world condensed into sound. "But we protect. We endure. We were here before men, and we will be here when their bones turn to dust. We will guard your borders. We will wait. And when the time comes, we will break them beneath our feet."

I incline my head in acknowledgment. One by one, they sink into the mountain, their massive forms melting seamlessly back into the rock, watching, waiting—their presence now nothing but a whisper in the wind.

Only Rhyzan lingers.

His molten eyes hold me in place, burning, unrelenting.

"She has changed you," he says, his voice lower now, more thoughtful—a landslide waiting to happen.

I do not move. "Who?" I ask, though I already know the answer.

He exhales, a sound like cracking stone. "The siren."

"She has not."

A slow, rumbling hum—disbelieving. "Lies do not suit you, Dragon Queen."

Then, with a great shudder of earth, he is gone, his body vanishing back into the mountain, leaving only silence in his wake.

By the time I reach the castle, dusk has fallen, casting long shadows over the black stone walls, the glow of torches flickering along the battlements. The creatures of my land prepare, retreating, hiding themselves away in the deepest parts of the forests, beneath the lakes, within the mountains.

The war will come.

And we will be ready.

But my mind is still tangled in the words of the river guardian, the knowing stare of Rhyzan, the lingering feel of Vaela's hands on my body.

I push open the heavy doors, stepping into the great hall.

And there she is.

Waiting.

Perched on the edge of one of the large dining tables, her legs crossed, silver hair cascading over her shoulders, her sheer robe clinging to every curve, leaving little to the imagination.

Temptation incarnate.

She tilts her head, a smirk curling at the edges of her lips. "Avoiding me, Dragon Queen?"

I step forward, my presence swallowing hers, letting her feel the heat, the power thrumming beneath my skin.

"I have been handling more important matters than your games, siren."

She clicks her tongue, pushing off the table, the movement making the delicate fabric shift, exposing the soft swell of her breasts, the long lines of her legs.

My gaze flickers—too briefly.

She notices.

Her smirk deepens, wicked and knowing. "Strange. After last night, I'd have thought there'd be little room in that sharp mind of yours for anything but me."

I step closer, the space between us shrinking. "Do not mistake this for something it is not."

She leans in, lips ghosting my jaw, a taunting whisper. "And what exactly is it, Nyxara?"

I exhale sharply, forcing away the temptation she so carelessly dangles in front of me. My grip tightens around her wrist, unyielding. "It is war, Vaela. And you will fall in line, or you will be useless to me."

Her smirk doesn't falter, but I feel the subtle shift in her breath, the way her body reacts to my command despite her endless need to test me.

"Now, come," I order, yanking her forward. "If you wish to stand at my side in this war, then you will learn the cost of it."

And with that, I pull her with me—into the heart of battle preparations.

Into the truth of what is coming.

Chapter

Eleven

VAELA

I have been many things in my life. A queen in my own right. A goddess to those foolish enough to worship me. A nightmare draped in moonlight and the whisper of the tide.

But never—never—have I been a mere observer.

And yet, as I stand here in the war chamber, watching Nyxara call forth her generals, I feel as though I have stepped into something ancient, something far older than myself.

The room is vast, its high ceilings lost to shadow, the carved onyx war table flickering under the dim blue-green flames of enchanted sconces. The land of Varelieth is etched into the table's surface, each mountain, river, and valley meticulously rendered in silver and gold, a testament to the kingdom's history.

But my attention is not on the table.

No, it is on the creatures that step out of the darkness.

At first, I mistake them for shadows—shifting, swirling things that move like liquid night. But then I feel them. See them.

The Sentinels.

They emerge from the edges of the room, tall, hooded figures, flickering between corporeal and ghostly mist, their violet eyes glowing beneath their hoods. Their armor—if it can even be called that—is woven from the fabric of shadow itself, shifting like living darkness, molded to their spectral forms. They do not make a sound, their movements fluid, unnatural, as if they do not belong to this world at all.

Because they don't.

I stiffen. "What in the abyss—?"

Nyxara doesn't look at me. Instead, she watches as the Sentinels take their places around the war table, standing at silent attention. Only then, does she speak.

"They are the last of their kind," she says, voice smooth, clipped. "They swore fealty to my father when he fell protecting them."

I raise a brow, crossing my arms. "Fealty?"

"They were once men," she continues, trailing a claw over the edge of the table. "Once flesh and blood, warriors who fought at my father's side in the first war against the humans. But when he fell, when Varelieth burned, they made a choice," she glances at me, emerald eyes dark, "to remain."

A slow, eerie smile unfurls beneath Rhyzan's hood, his violet eyes gleaming as he tilts his head at me.

"We are bound to the crown." His voice is like the wind through dead leaves, an echo from another time. "And so long as Varelieth stands, we shall never fall."

Something cold brushes over the back of my neck.

I've heard of ancient magics that bind warriors to the land, of creatures who exist between life and death. But I have never stood so close to them.

Nyxara turns back to the table, her expression unreadable. “Rhyzan and his warriors will hold the borders. They will ensure the king’s forces do not move beyond the eastern cliffs.”

I drag my nails over the table’s edge, watching the Sentinels with new curiosity. “And you trust them?”

She lifts her gaze, sharp and unwavering. “With my life.”

For once, I do not taunt her.

Because I believe her.

The room stills, the weight of their presence thick, suffocating. Nyxara steps forward, placing her hands on the war table. The flickering light from the sconces casts deep shadows across her face, accentuating the sharp line of her jaw, the fury simmering just beneath the surface.

She taps a claw against the carved landscape. “The eastern cliffs will be where we strike first. The humans will expect us to hold Varethorne, to defend, but we do not wait for battle to come to us.”

I arch a brow. “So you plan to take the fight to them?”

A slow, wicked smile curves her lips. “We strike before they are ready.”

The Sentinels murmur their approval.

I trace my fingers along the carved rivers, my gaze sharp. “The king’s men know the risk of entering your lands, but they’ll expect you to be holed up in your castle, guarding your precious captive. They won’t suspect that you’ve made a deal with

me—or that I'll be the one fighting at your side.”

I glance up, a slow smirk curving my lips. “And they certainly won't expect the full force of the sea to rise alongside your fire. Let them come thinking they have the advantage. Let them believe they hold the upper hand. When the tide crashes down and the flames consume, they'll realize too late just how wrong they were.”

Nyxara doesn't respond immediately.

Because she still doesn't trust me.

I see it—the subtle shift in her posture, the tension tightening her shoulders, the way her claws tap, tap, tap against the war table, a controlled display of frustration. A hesitation she doesn't want me to see. But I do.

I roll my shoulders, sighing, letting the exasperation slip into my tone. “Tell me, Dragon Queen, how exactly do you expect me to aid you if you refuse to let me fight?”

Her eyes snap to mine, sharp as steel, but beneath that glare, something flickers. Annoyance? Or reluctant acknowledgment?

She exhales slowly, her emerald gaze shadowed by thought, assessing me with the same intensity she does the battlefield. Like I am a piece in her war. A risk she isn't certain she should take.

I watch her, studying the way the candlelight glows against her skin, illuminating the high slant of her cheekbones, the firm press of her full lips. Her hair, dark as the depths of the abyss, cascades over her shoulders in thick waves, still damp from her bath. Strands cling to her collarbone, trailing over the exposed skin where her gown dips low. The sight makes something coil deep in my stomach, a slow heat licking at

my ribs.

She's fighting it. Fighting me.

Fighting herself.

And I?

I'm enjoying every second of it.

“You’re thinking awfully hard, Dragon Queen,” I murmur, tilting my head. My voice dips into something softer, something teasing, laced with the pull of my magic. A gentle, beckoning tide. “I wonder what troubles that sharp, calculating mind of yours.”

Her claws twitch again, a flicker of restraint.

She’s cracking.

Slowly. But surely.

“I told you,” she says, voice low, “I do not need—”

“You do.” I step closer, close enough that my presence brushes against hers. “I am bound to you, am I not? I swore an oath, did I not? Yet you still hesitate.” My lips curve, sharp and taunting. “What are you so afraid of?”

Her claws flex.

The Sentinels watch.

I push further.

“If you want to win this war,” I say, “you need me at my full strength. You need me to be the force they do not see coming.” I tilt my head, my voice a low whisper now. “Or is this truly about the war at all?”

Nyxara’s jaw tightens.

And then, finally—finally—she exhales, sharp and furious.

“Fine.”

I smirk.

Nyxara levels me with a look so sharp it could cut through steel, her emerald eyes dark with warning. Her claws press into the wood of the war table, slow, deliberate. A silent threat.

Then, she gestures toward the large stone bowl of water at the center of the room, her voice low and dangerous.

"Do it."

She steps closer, each movement controlled, predatory. "But know this, siren—if you betray me, if you so much as think of turning that power against me, against my realm, I will burn you from the inside out. I will reduce you to nothing but steam and memory, and I will not hesitate."

The air thickens with the weight of her magic, fire curling in the space between us, licking at my skin without truly touching me. A promise of what she will do if I make the wrong choice.

I let the silence stretch between us, savoring the tension, the weight of her fury, of her threat. Then, slowly, deliberately, I tilt my head, my lips curving into something wicked.

"Oh, how terrifying," I purr, trailing a lazy finger along the water's surface. "Shall I start trembling now, or would you prefer I wait until after I've drowned your enemies?"

Her jaw tightens. I see the flicker of irritation in her eyes, the way her claws flex at her sides as if resisting the urge to strike.

She expected me to cower. To take her words as the warning they were meant to be.

But I am not afraid of fire.

And I love watching her burn.

The Sentinels remain silent as I dip my hands into the water.

A pulse.

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A shift.

The air thickens as my magic awakens. The water surges, swirling violently, expanding outward as I pull. The portal forms along the far wall, glowing with bioluminescent light.

I exhale, power rushing through me, curling like a serpent beneath my skin, my tentacles unfurling, stretching, rejoicing.

And when I turn back, Nyxara is watching.

Watching too closely.

I grin. And then, slowly I trail a single hand down the chest of the Spectral standing beside me.

His body flickers, violet eyes gleaming as I hum in approval. “Strong hands,” I muse, my fingers grazing his armored wrist. “I do hope they are put to good use.”

Nyxara goes still.

The Sentinels do not breathe.

The room is silent.

Her voice is low. Dangerous. “Everyone. Leave.”

The room empties. The door slams shut.

And then, Nyxara is on me.

She slams me against the war table, the impact rattling the carved pieces that mark her realm. Her hands grip my wrists, pinning them hard against the cold wood, claws pressing just enough to make my pulse quicken.

Her breath is hot against my skin, her body a furnace of fury and something far more dangerous. The embers of it crackle between us, waiting, begging to ignite.

"If you wish to play games, siren," she growls, voice dark, possessive, furious, "do not be surprised when you get burnt."

I shudder, but not from fear. No, I shudder because she is so close, because her body fits against mine like a threat, because her rage tastes like desire.

But I do not yield.

Instead, I smirk, tilting my head just enough for my lips to ghost along the corner of hers, barely touching, a taunt more than a kiss.

"And what if I'm waiting," I murmur, voice slow, silken, dripping with challenge, "to feel that heat lick against my skin?"

Her grip tightens.

Her pupils dilate, the deep emerald swallowed by something darker.

Her claws press, just shy of breaking the skin.

"Careful, little siren," she breathes, her voice like velvet over steel. "You do not understand the fire you toy with."

I hum, feigning thoughtfulness. "Mm, don't I?" I shift beneath her, arching just slightly, enough to let my body drag against hers. "Because from where I stand—or rather, where I'm pinned—it seems to me that you're the one burning."

Her jaw clenches. I can feel the tremor in her fingers, the way her body tightens, her restraint a leash she is seconds from snapping.

"You're insufferable," she hisses.

"And you feel something," I counter smoothly, my smirk widening, watching the way her pupils darken, the way her claws twitch as if resisting the urge to dig into my skin.

She growls low in her throat, her grip shifting so suddenly that I gasp. She releases one of my wrists only to press her palm flat against my throat—not squeezing, just holding, just testing. Just reminding me who holds the control.

I suck in a breath, pulse hammering beneath her touch, but I do not fight her. I do not pull away.

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"You think yourself untouchable," she murmurs, her voice like the edge of a blade, honed and dangerous. "You think this is a game."

I arch a brow, lips parting in mock surprise. "Oh? So you don't deny it, then?"

Her nostrils flare, a warning, but I am far past heeding those.

I tilt my chin up slightly, pressing just enough against her hold to test her. "You can tell yourself whatever you need to, Nyxara, but I know what I feel." I lower my voice, letting it drip with amusement, with something sharper. "And what I feel—what you feel—isn't something that just goes away."

Her grip tightens—not enough to hurt, but enough to remind me she could. That she is holding herself back.

"You overstep," she warns, voice low, sharp.

"And yet, you don't move," I hum, leaning in, letting my breath tease against her lips. "You hold me here, but I wonder—are you keeping me in place, or are you keeping yourself from running?"

Her claws flex, her magic crackling between us. For a second—just a second—I think she might give in. That she might pull me closer, let the tension break into something real, something consuming.

But then she snarls, ripping herself away from me as if I've burned her.

I don't miss the way her fingers twitch, the way her breath comes sharp, the way her magic flares unbidden before she reins it back. The way she refuses to look at me for more than a second.

I laugh, smooth and slow, pushing off the table, flexing my freed wrists as I turn to face her fully.

"Fascinating," I drawl, tilting my head. "For all your talk of fire, it seems you're the one afraid of getting burned."

Her eyes snap to mine, sharp as a blade's edge, fury swirling in those emerald depths.

"You mean nothing to me," she hisses, voice cold, controlled, but there's something else beneath it. Something raw.

I drag a slow, knowing smile across my lips, reaching out, trailing a single finger along the war table's surface.

"Liar."

Her lips part, a sharp retort on the tip of her tongue but she doesn't speak it.

Instead, she turns, her cloak snapping behind her as she strides from the room, a storm barely restrained.

I watch her retreat, my smirk widening.

Yes.

This will be fun.

Chapter

Twelve

NYXARA

Rage is a dangerous thing.

It fuels me, feeds me, coils in my veins like a living thing, demanding violence, destruction, vengeance. And right now, it is all I can see.

I stand in the war chamber, my claws digging into the edge of the stone table, the carved ridges of Varellith pressing into my palms. The pale morning light beams in through the large gothic windows along the wall. The map before me is littered with markers, each one a reminder of how close the human king is creeping into my lands.

The torches flicker violently in their sconces, feeding off my fury.

Then I hear it.

The shifting of shadows, the ripple in the air. The scent of frost and midnight steel.

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The Sentinels stir before I see them, their presence a ripple through the chamber's dim glow, a whisper of movement barely caught by mortal senses. The air shifts, thick with their unseen forms pressing against the edges of the room. A flicker of something more solid emerges—a figure materializing from the shadows beside me, their voice little more than a breath against the cold stone walls.

"Dragon Queen," one murmurs, their tone a hollow echo. "Rhyzan waits beyond the doors. He reeks of blood and iron. He wishes to speak with you."

I inhale sharply, tasting the scent now that it has been spoken into existence—iron, sweat, and something darker.

I straighten, flexing my claws against the stone table. "Let him in."

The Sentinels vanish in an instant, the heavy doors groaning open as they pull them apart from the inside. A cold draft sweeps through the chamber as Rhyzan steps forward, his broad frame cutting through the dim torchlight, the molten gold of his eyes sharp, unreadable. His armor is streaked with blood—some his own, most not. His movements are careful, measured, but I do not miss the tension in his shoulders, nor the exhaustion etched into his face.

He strides toward me, silent but certain, the doors slamming shut behind him.

I brace myself.

This will not be good news.

The Sentinels step aside as he approaches, their forms flickering between solid and incorporeal. Ever watchful. Ever silent.

"They breached the borders," Rhyzan says, his voice rough like gravel.

The fire in my gut roars.

I flex my claws, exhaling slowly, forcing myself to stay calm. Think before you burn.

"How many?" I ask.

His jaw tightens. "Too many. They sent trained hunters, men who knew what they were doing. We killed most of them, but not all. Many of my warriors fell. The ones who survived are gravely wounded."

I close my eyes for half a second, long enough to taste the bitterness of it.

The king sent assassins into my land. Trained men. Killers. They came to slaughter my people, to spill the blood of those who swore their loyalty to me.

And I let it happen. My body tenses with the urge to destroy. Before I can respond, a voice cuts through the room.

"If they need healing," Vaela says smoothly from the doorway, "then we should go to them. I can help them."

I turn, my eyes narrowing.

She stands with her arms crossed, radiating effortless confidence, draped in the same pearl bodice she always wears—lustrous and fitted, the gleaming shells forming delicate curves that frame her body. Chains of gold drape over her shoulders,

catching the candlelight, thin strands cascading down her arms like the remnants of a siren's song turned to metal. Small shell accents glisten along the edges, a mark of her realm, of the deep, unknowable power she wields.

Below, the flowing skirt of deep seafoam silk moves like water, split high along her thigh, teasing flashes of smooth, toned skin with every shift of her weight. It should not hold my attention as long as it does, but my gaze lingers, unwilling, tracing the soft sheen of her skin, the way the light reflects off the pearlescent undertones that seem even more pronounced now that her magic has fully returned.

Her silver hair spills freely down her back, thick and glossy, strands twisted and pinned back with tiny, iridescent shells and stones that gleam like opals. There's a glow about her, something untamed, something deeper than power. Something that makes her seem untouchable.Divine.

But it's her eyes that hold me captive.

They burn with something I don't recognize. Something dangerously close toanger.Vaela does not get angry. She taunts, she teases, she manipulates. But this? This is different.

She isfurious.

"Take me to them," she says, stepping forward.

"You assume I will allow that," I murmur, my voice dangerously low.

Her lips curve. "You assume you have a choice."

A muscle ticks in my jaw. Sheknowsshe's pushing me. I should refuse. But my people are dying. And as much as I hate to admit it—I need her.

I exhale sharply. "Fine."

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Her smile is slow, knowing, victorious.

"But if you betray me," I growl, stepping closer, letting my magic coil around us both, "you will not live long enough to regret it."

She laughs.

And it fucking infuriates me.

The wind howls as I fly over the forest, the night air crisp with the scent of damp earth and distant rain. Vaela clings to my back, her body warm against my scales, her silver hair whipping behind her as we soar.

Below us, the land stretches wide and endless, silver-barked trees gleaming beneath the moonlight, their iridescent leaves shifting in waves of violet and green.

The moment we land, Ismellit.

Blood.

The clearing is littered with bodies—human and not. The air is thick with the remnants of battle, the scent of blood clinging to the damp earth, mixing with the pungent burn of steel and sweat. The ground is soaked in iron and death, darkened soil churned from the chaos.

Rhyzan's remaining warriors stand guard, their weapons still drawn, their armor splattered with gore. They are weary, battered, but their stance remains rigid,

prepared for any lingering threats. Among them, other creatures of my realm have come forward—those who survived, those who could not stand idly by while their land was attacked. A towering centaur kneels beside one of Rhyzan's men, his thick fingers pressing against the wound on the warrior's side, muttering something under his breath. Near the edge of the tree line, a dryad weaves strips of glowing vine around a gaping injury in another soldier's chest, the soft luminescence dimming with each pulse of healing magic.

And then there are the sounds.

The groans of the wounded, the ragged breathing of those barely clinging to life. The hushed, hurried voices of those trying to mend the damage. A guttural cry splits the air as a man writhes on the ground, his leg barely attached, his pain thick enough to taste in the atmosphere.

I stiffen, my claws flexing at my sides. This is not the first time I have seen my people suffer. It is not the first time I have seen them bleed for me, for my realm. But it does not sting any less.

A rustling of silk pulls my attention.

Vaela slides from my back, her bare feet pressing into the earth. She takes one look at the wounded and steps forward without hesitation.

The river nearby stirs as if sensing her presence.

The water darkens, then glows, a faint, eerie bioluminescent blue creeping along its surface, winding through the current, reaching for her like a creature desperate for its master's touch.

She lifts her hands.

The river answers.

The water surges forward, splitting into delicate tendrils, writhing through the air like living veins of power. It moves toward the injured, curling around them, seeping into wounds, stitching together torn flesh with liquid grace. The wounded gasp, their pain twisting into stunned relief, their bodies shuddering beneath the weight of the magic that now fills them.

I watch her work, my throat tightening, my magic curling at the edges of my skin like a restless storm.

She is power.

A force as ancient as the tides. A goddess among mortals. And yet, she is here. Healing my people. But what's shocking the most, is she does not hesitate. She does not falter. For the first time, I do not know whether to hate her for it or be grateful.

My people do not fear her.

They revere her.

Even Rhyzan watches her with something unreadable in his molten-gold eyes. Not reverence, not yet but something close. Something that unsettles me.

A whisper in the trees.

My body stiffens, instincts flaring. The scent of sweat and steel—wrong, human—snakes through the air, sharp against the damp, moss-laced scent of the forest.

I hear the rustle before I see the movement.

I turn too late.

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A figure bursts from the shadows, sword raised, his form nothing but a blur of tarnished armor and desperation. His eyes lock onto Vaela, wild and alight with something terrible, something triumphant.

I snarl, moving before thought, my body coiling, fire surging at my fingertips—

But Vaela is faster.

She exhales, a whisper of power spilling from her lips, her magic curling toward the soldier, winding around his legs like living chains. Water surges from the river, snapping up his limbs, dragging him back. He thrashes, gasping, the liquid tendrils climbing higher, wrapping around his throat, his fingers clawing at the unyielding grip of the tide.

His sword clatters to the ground, useless.

I breathe deep, watching the river answer her command, watching the fear that bleeds into his eyes as the water begins to pull him under, the depths opening to swallow him whole.

Then a flash of gold at his throat.

I go rigid.

An amulet, pulsing faintly beneath his armor.

The water hesitates.

His lips curl into a smirk.

Vaela falters—just a fraction, just enough—

And then he moves.

A hidden dagger glints in his grip, his body twisting, using the momentum of the water's pull to hurl himself forward. His blade slices through the air, aimed for her throat.

Rage sears through me, a wildfire igniting in my veins.

I lunge.

My claws tear into him before the dagger can strike true.

His breath leaves him in a choked wheeze, his eyes widening in shock as I slam him to the ground. Blood splatters, hot and thick against my skin, my talons sinking deep into his chest, shredding through flesh and bone as if he were made of parchment.

He sputters, his lips parting, but no sound escapes.

I bare my fangs, twisting my grip, feeling the frantic, fading beat of his heart beneath my claws. “You dare,” I snarl, voice shaking with barely restrained fury, “raise a hand against what is mine?”

His body convulses once then stills.

I let him drop.

The clearing is silent.

Only the ragged pant of my breath remains, the remnants of my rage curling through the air like smoke. My magic surges, begging for more, demanding more, but the battle is already over. The corpses of the humans lie scattered across the clearing, the river still swirling with the last traces of Vaela's power.

I turn to her, my claws still dripping with blood.

Her eyes are wide, her chest rising and falling in sharp, shallow breaths.

Not with fear.

No.

Something else.

Something that makes my already-burning blood run hotter.

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I grab her wrist, my grip tight, possessive, dragging her away from the others, away from the prying eyes of the wounded, away from the lingering ghosts of war.

She doesn't resist.

Doesn't speak.

Not until I slam her against a tree, breath ragged, fury burning in every inch of my body.

Her silver hair spills over the bark, her lips curving in something infuriatingly smug.

"Careful, Nyxara," she purrs, her voice smooth as dark water. "If I didn't know better"—

I growl, my claws pressing into the rough bark beside her head, caging her in— "I'd think you cared." She smirks.

Damn her.

I shift, my form stretching, scales rippling over my skin. My wings unfurl, dark as the void, as I lower myself before her, growling.

"Get on."

She smirks but obeys.

And together, we take to the skies.

Chapter

Thirteen

VAELA

The flight back to the castle is silent.

Tense.

And utterly delicious.

Nyxara doesn't speak a word, her wings slicing through the night air, each powerful beat reverberating through my body where I straddle her back. The warmth of her scales seeps through my thighs, but it's the tension in her frame, the rigid coil of fury beneath my hands, that makes me grin.

She's seething because of me.

Because of the way I teased that soldier. The way I let my fingers linger on his armor, let my lips curl just enough to tempt. I hadn't done much, not really. A smirk, a look. A whisper of possibility. But it had been enough to make the Dragon Queen burn.

I feel it now, radiating off her in waves, her anger barely contained.

She wanted to kill him.

She wanted to burn him alive.

Not because he was a threat. No. It was because I was the one toying with him. Because I had looked at someone else the way I sometimes—unintentionally—look at her.

And that, I think, is what she truly hates.

That she cares.

I run my fingers along the ridges of her scales, dragging them deliberately slowly. A taunt. A reminder that I sit atop her now, that she let me, that she carries me through the night like something precious.

The second we land in the castle courtyard, she shifts beneath me, forcing me to jump off or risk being crushed under the sheer weight of her dragon form.

The moment her feet hit the stone, she storms toward the castle doors.

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But I am not one to let an opportunity for mischief go to waste.

“Nothing to say?” I call after her, my voice dripping with amusement as I trail behind. “I expected more fire from you, Dragon Queen. Maybe some petty threats? Or are you simply going to smolder all night instead?”

She doesn’t respond.

A shame.

So I press.

“Or perhaps,” I muse, stepping just close enough that she can feel the heat of my body, my voice a purr at her back, “you’re realizing how foolish it is to claim what you refuse to touch.”

That does it.

Nyxara spins so fast I barely register it before my back slams into the stone wall of the corridor.

I let out a breathy laugh, reveling in the way she cages me in, her hands on either side of my head, her claws biting into the stone. Her body is inches from mine, heat rolling off her in waves.

Her emerald eyes burn with something dark, something deep and unrelenting.

Possession.

She guides me through the door, into her chambers. The air in Nyxara's inside is thick, laced with the scent of heated embers and something distinctly her—a mix of storm-soaked earth and ancient power.

"Did you enjoy yourself back there?" she asks, voice low, lethal.

I smirk, stretching lazily where I sit on the edge of her massive bed, the black silk sheets cool against my bare thighs. "Enjoy myself? Oh, Nyxara, if I had truly wanted to enjoy myself, I wouldn't have stopped at just a few coy words with your general."

Her nostrils flare.

A flick of her wrist, and the iron cuffs snap around my wrists, humming with magic—dampening magic. They don't sever my power entirely, but they weaken it, making it difficult to summon even a whisper of control.

Heat coils in my gut.

"Oh? Binding me already?" I taunt, tilting my head. "I didn't know you were so desperate to keep me in your bed."

"You think this is a game?" she breathes, her voice dangerously low.

"Everything is a game," I whisper back, my smirk widening. "And I love playing with you."

A growl rumbles in her throat, her patience fraying, her control slipping.

Good.

Before I can react, she is over me, pressing her body against mine, pinning me down with the sheer heat of her presence. Her thigh slides between my legs, a deliberate motion that makes my breath stutter, makes my pulse hammer.

Goddess.

She is fire—searing, consuming, relentless.

Her nails drag down my collarbone, slowly and deliberately, tracing the delicate lines of the gold chains that drape over my shoulders. The pearls on my bodice shift with the movement, cool against the heat of my skin.

"You parade yourself around my castle half-dressed," she murmurs, her voice silk-wrapped steel, the edge of a blade grazing my throat. Her sharp nail circles the peak of my nipple through the sheer fabric, watching, waiting, as my breath hitches. "Tempting me."

I smirk, tilting my chin defiantly. "Didn't realize you found me so distracting."

Her lips curve, slow, lethal. "I don't." She leans in, her breath ghosting against my jaw. "I find you infuriating."

She parts my bodice, the intricate shells and pearls shifting beneath her touch, her claws scraping ever so lightly against my skin. The cool air kisses my exposed flesh, but it's nothing compared to the heat of her mouth as she lowers her head, teeth grazing the soft swell of my breast.

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A sharp gasp escapes me, my body arching instinctively toward her.

"Tell me," she murmurs against my skin, lips dragging lower, down my stomach, a path of fire and ruin left in her wake. "Did you want me to burn him alive for looking at you?"

Her words coil around me like a vice, tightening, intoxicating.

My head spins as her mouth continues its descent, as her fingers splay possessively over my hips, keeping me exactly where she wants me.

"Or did you like it?" she muses, pressing an open-mouthed kiss just above where I need her, teasing, tormenting.

I exhale sharply, my smirk lingering despite the haze of anticipation thrumming beneath my skin. "Jealous, are we?"

Her nails dig into my thighs, parting them wider, her breath hot as it ghosts over my aching center.

"Jealous?" she repeats, her voice dark, dangerous, deliciously slow as she rises to her feet. "No, little siren. Possessive."

And then—gods—she kneels.

Right there, at the edge of the bed, Nyxara, the feared Dragon Queen, the scourge of kings and conqueror of realms, is on her knees before me.

My breath falters, my pulse a riot in my veins.

She spreads my thighs further apart, her hands strong, commanding, her fingers leaving faint indentations in my flesh. A shiver races down my spine as she leans in, her mouth a whisper away from where I burn for her.

Then, her tongue flicks out, teasing, tasting.

A strangled sound escapes my throat. My hands fist in the silk sheets, my entire body going taut as she drags her tongue slowly up my slick folds, a deliberate, devastating stroke.

"Fuck," I whisper, my voice trembling.

She hums in satisfaction, the vibration sending shockwaves through me. Her fingers flex against my hips, holding me still as she delves deeper, her tongue swirling, pressing, teasing, devouring.

The pleasure is slow at first—cruel, measured—like she is savoring every reaction, every breathless gasp, every shudder that racks my body.

And then she speeds up.

Her tongue works me open, her lips sealing over my clit, sucking just enough to make my back arch, my nails clawing at the sheets. Her fingers slide up my inner thigh, tracing fire along my skin before slipping inside me, pressing deep, curling just right—

I shatter.

A sharp cry rips from my throat as my body locks, pleasure slamming through me in

waves, my thighs trembling against her shoulders. But she doesn't stop.

No, Nyxara is relentless.

Her tongue flicks, her fingers thrust, dragging me through another peak before the first has even faded. My body writhes, the pleasure too much, too sharp, too overwhelming.

"Nyxara—" I pant, barely coherent.

She pulls back slightly, her lips glistening, her emerald eyes dark with something savage, something hungry. "Not so defiant now, are you?" she murmurs, pressing a final, torturous kiss to my inner thigh.

I try to catch my breath, but it's useless, because she is still touching me, still stroking, still keeping me teetering on the edge of pleasure and ruin.

But then, I feel it.

Heat.

The metal cuffs around my wrists have grown warm, my body, her magic, the sheer force of energy between us weakening their hold.

A little more.

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Her fingers slide deep, her thumb circling in slow, devastating strokes, her mouth moving lower again, her tongue finding me with precision, with purpose, with the intent to utterly destroy.

My head tilts back, my entire body trembling as my climax builds again, stronger, sharper, my magic coiling, pushing, pressing—

And then—snap.

The cuffs break.

Power rushes through me like a tidal wave, surging through every nerve, every fiber of my being.

Nyxara senses it instantly, but before she can react, before she can pull away, I move.

I grip her by the hair, flipping us effortlessly so that she is the one on her back now, her eyes wide with momentary surprise. I straddle her, my hands bracing against her shoulders, pinning her beneath me.

She growls low in her throat, her claws twitching against the sheets.

"Did you really think I wouldn't return the favor?" I murmur, my smirk slow, wicked, as my fingers trail down the laces of her bodice, unraveling her piece by piece.

Her pupils dilate, her breath coming hard and fast.

"Vaela—"

I press my lips to hers, swallowing whatever threat she was about to make. My tongue claims hers, slow and deep, as my magic curls around her limbs, holding her in place as my tentacles slither up her thighs.

She shudders beneath me.

And I grin.

"Now," I purr, my lips trailing down her throat, lower, lower— "Let me show you how a siren devours a queen." Water curls around her limbs, invisible yet tangible, holding her in place as my tentacles slither up her thighs, teasing, tasting.

Nyxara shudders.

"Vaela," she warns, voice hoarse, dark, needy.

"Mmm," I hum, dragging my lips down her throat, sucking at the sensitive skin just beneath her jaw, letting my teeth graze. She jerks beneath me, her hips arching, seeking friction. I do not give it to her.

Not yet.

Instead, I take my time.

I dip my head, flicking my tongue over one peak, rolling the other between my fingers. Nyxara gasps, her claws digging into my shoulders, her body writhing beneath my mouth.

I suckle, gently at first, then harder, letting my teeth scrape, letting my tongue soothe

the sting. She jerks, a sharp breath escaping her lips.

"Fuck, Vaela—"

I grin against her skin.

"Now, now, my queen," I murmur, moving to the other breast, treating it with the same attention, the same slow, delicioustorment. "I seem to recall you making me wait."

She growls, low and dangerous. "I should burn you for this," she grits out.

I laugh. "Maybe later," I whisper against her stomach, trailing lower. My tentacles move in tandem with my lips, sliding up the inside of her thighs, teasing, brushing just where she needs me most.

I look up, meeting her gaze.

She is wild like this. Eyes blown wide with desire, lips parted, her body wracked with barely controlled need.

Nyxara's body is tense beneath me, coiled like a predator ready to strike, yet she doesn't move to stop me. Her claws are buried in the sheets, her breath uneven, her emerald eyes dark with something warring just beneath the surface. A flicker of hesitation—uncertainty.

Not fear. Never fear.

But trust is another matter entirely.

I hover over her, letting my fingers trace slow, deliberate circles against her inner thigh, teasing, coaxing. My tentacles shift, winding lazily, waiting patiently. I watch her closely, reading every tiny flicker of resistance in her expression, the way her lips part but no words come, the way her magic hums beneath her skin, bracing.

She is not used to letting go. To relinquishing control.

I smirk, dragging my lips up the center of her stomach, pressing a kiss just beneath her ribs. "You're fighting me," I murmur, my breath hot against her skin. "You don't have to."

Her jaw tightens. "I am not—"

"You are." I press another kiss to her hip, my fingers tracing higher, slipping beneath the last barrier of fabric. "Let me."

She exhales sharply, her claws twitching against the sheets, but she doesn't stop me.

I lift my head, meeting her gaze, holding it. "Trust me," I whisper. "Let me make you feel good."

A long silence stretches between us, thick with unspoken things. Then, finally, she releases a slow breath, her hands shifting, no longer gripping the sheets in restraint,

but resting against my shoulders, steady, warm.

She exhales slowly, the tension in her body shifting, something flickering in those emerald depths—uncertainty, trust, something raw and unspoken. Then, after a long moment, she gives a single, slow nod.

A challenge. A surrender. A promise all in one.

"Good," I murmur, a wicked smile curving my lips. "Now, let me show you how good surrender can feel."

And gods above, I do.

My mouth meets her slick heat, tasting her, feasting on her.

Nyxara cries out, her hands flying to my head, gripping my hair tight.

I moan against her, letting my tongue swirl, press, stroke—tasting the heat of her, the intoxicating mix of embers and something uniquely her, something rich and dark, something that sparks against my tongue like fire meeting the tide. She is molten, scorching, and I drink her in, savoring the way she shudders beneath me.

My tentacles join in, teasing, probing, one of them slipping inside, stretching her open, coaxing another gasp from her lips.

She bucks, her thighs trembling around me, her claws raking against my scalp.

"Fuck—Vaela—!"

I hum against her, the vibration making her jolt, her entire body tightening as I consume her completely.

"You like this?" I murmur against her. "Being taken like this?"

Her breath is ragged, her body quivering, pleasure winding so tight it's about to snap.

"Tell me, Dragon Queen," I purr, my fingers joining my tentacle, stretching her open, filling her, moving in perfect rhythm.

Her walls clench around me, her whole body shaking, her back arching off the bed as she shatters.

I don't stop.

I drag it out, drinking in the way she writhes, the way her voice breaks, the way she moans my name like a prayer and a curse all at once. My tongue strokes her through the aftershocks, my fingers still deep inside her, coaxing every last pulse of pleasure from her trembling body.

And when the spasms finally begin to slow, when her chest heaves with every desperate breath, I let my magic ebb, withdrawing my power like a tide retreating from the shore. My tentacles dissipate, curling back into me like mist vanishing beneath the sun, leaving only my hands, my mouth, and the lingering heat of my touch.

I lift my head, licking my lips, my fingers still inside her, my nails trailing one final teasing scrape along her inner thigh.

Nyxara glares at me, sated yet furious.

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"Don't look at me like that," I croon. "Youlovedit."

She pants, her emerald eyes still hazy with bliss, but there is something else there too. Somethingdangerous.

She shifts, suddenly,fast, knocking me onto my back, pinning me beneath her. Her lips curving, slow and deadly.

"You should run, siren," she murmurs, her claws dragging down my body.

I smirk, tilting my chin. "And if Ilikethe chase?"

"Then you are truly doomed."

Her emerald eyes darken, molten with hunger, with something raw and consuming that steals the breath from my lungs. A slow, wicked smirk curves her lips, sharp as a blade, a predator reveling in the certainty of her claim.

Then she takes me.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Until I am nothing but a trembling, gasping offering beneath her hands. Until her

name is the only thing I remember how to say, and her fire has scorched itself into my bones, leaving no part of me untouched.

Until I belong to her. To the Dragon Queen.

Chapter

Fourteen

NYXARA

I wake to warmth.

Not my own.

Vaela is draped against me, her silver hair spilling over my bare chest, her breath slow and steady against my skin. One of her tentacles is still curled possessively around my thigh, tightening slightly as she shifts in sleep, as if even unconscious, she refuses to let me go.

For the first time since this twisted game began, there is no tension, no unspoken battle waiting to be fought between us.

Only heat.

Lingering. Dangerous.

I exhale sharply, running a hand through my hair. I should not have let her get this close. I should not have let her take so much of me.

And yet...

I glance down at her, my eyes trailing the marks I left on her throat, the faint scratches from my claws down her ribs, the way her lips part in sleep—soft, swollen, ruined.

Mine.

A possessiveness I don't recognize coils low in my stomach.

I need distance.

I shift, but the moment I move, her grip tightens, her tentacle winding higher, keeping me trapped beneath her.

“You're not leaving,” she murmurs against my skin, voice thick with sleep.

I freeze.

Her lips brush my collarbone. “Not yet.”

Before I can snap a retort, she stretches, her naked body sliding against mine in a way that makes my breath catch, my restraint fraying like silk against fire. She lifts her head, blinking slowly, her white-blue gaze glowing in the dim light.

She smirks. “You look beautiful here, Dragon Queen.”

I scoff, shoving down the flicker of satisfaction her words stir in me.

Her fingers trail down my stomach, featherlight, teasing.

I narrow my gaze. “Vaela—”

“Easy, Dragon Queen...” she murmurs against my skin, lips trailing slow, deliberate kisses down my throat. Each touch is a whisper of silk and sin, unraveling me bit by bit. “Settle that fire of yours and just... let go.”

I want to resist. I need to resist.

But when her teeth scrape the sensitive skin just beneath my jaw, I am already lost.

The scent of roasted meats, and fresh fruit lingers in the air before I fully register the knock at the chamber doors. The Sentinels enter soundlessly, their presence nothing more than a shift in the air as they place silver platters of food onto the ornate coral-

carved table in the center of the room.

Vaela, still sprawled lazily beside me, watches them with a slow, knowing smirk.

“I do hope you all enjoyed the show last night,” she purrs, stretching her arms above her head, her bare skin gleaming with the remnants of our night together.

I roll my eyes, reaching for the silk robe draped over the bedpost and pulling it around me before standing.

The Sentinels say nothing, but their silence is enough.

Vaela hums in satisfaction.

The Sentinels bow their heads before vanishing back into the walls, leaving us alone once more.

I sit at the table, plucking a piece of dark fruit from the silver tray and biting into it, its juices bursting sweetly across my tongue.

Vaela doesn't move right away, watching me with amusement. Then, with languid grace, she rises, walking toward me with nothing but her sheer robe slipping from her shoulders, her tentacles trailing lazily behind her.

She takes the seat across from me, reaching for a split lobster tail, its shell already cracked open to reveal the tender, butter-drenched meat inside. She lifts a piece with two fingers, inspecting it with feigned scrutiny before popping it between her lips.

I watch her, unimpressed.

She hums in approval, rolling her eyes in mock delight. “Mmm. Exquisite.” Then she

tilts her head, giving me a slow, teasing smile. “You know, Dragon Queen, serving a guest a member of her own realm for lunch? Quite rude.” She sighs dramatically, shaking her head. “Truly, what ever happened to proper hospitality? Should I be worried you’ll serve me up next?”

I roll my eyes, lifting my goblet. “Careful,” I warn, taking a slow sip. “There may come a day when that sharp mouth of yours gets you into trouble, siren.”

Vaela smirks, dragging a piece of lobster through the melted butter before licking it from her fingers, deliberate and slow. She flicks her gaze back to me, mischief dancing in her pale blue eyes. “And you should learn when to take a joke, Dragon Queen.” She sinks her teeth into the succulent meat, chewing languidly as if savoring every bite, watching me from beneath thick silver lashes. “But I suppose humor is difficult for those who spend all their time brooding atop a throne.”

I arch a brow, setting my goblet down with a deliberate clink. “You mistake discipline for brooding.”

She waves a hand dismissively. “Call it what you want. It doesn’t change the fact that you’re about as much fun as a rock.”

I exhale sharply, drumming my fingers against the table. “Perhaps I would be more inclined toward humor if I didn’t have a kingdom to protect.”

Vaela leans forward, elbows resting lazily on the table. “And what do you think I’ve been doing all this time? Twirling my hair and waiting for you to come ravish me?” Her lips curl as she picks up another morsel of lobster, speaking between bites. “I’ve fought wars, Nyxara. I’ve protected my people. I’ve ruled my kingdom longer than you’ve been alive.” She flicks her gaze to mine, daring me to challenge her. “And I still find time to have a little fun.”

I hold her stare, unwilling to admit that I enjoy this game we play. That I enjoy the way she needles at me, prods at the cracks in my carefully composed exterior. But I do not answer.

Because she is right.

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I have spent so long in battle, so long in control, so long focused on the weight of my crown that I have forgotten what it is to laugh without restraint, to live without every choice hinging on war.

And yet, here she is. Sitting across from me, barefoot in my chambers, licking butter from her fingers, teasing me like this is all a game—like she doesn't realize the hold she has on me.

Or worse, like she does.

Vaela sighs, popping another bite into her mouth before giving me a pointed look. "I can hear you thinking, you know. It's loud, and quite frankly, exhausting. Relax, Dragon Queen." She reaches for the goblet beside her, taking a slow sip before flashing me a wicked grin. "Or at least try to pretend you know how."

I narrow my eyes, picking up a piece of lobster from my plate, studying it before I speak. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to make me enjoy your company."

"Oh, Nyxara," she drawls, pressing a hand to her chest in feigned offense. "That implies I haven't already succeeded." She tilts her head, smirking as she drags a claw lightly against the rim of her goblet. "Besides, I am very, very good at making people enjoy themselves."

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. "You're insufferable."

"And yet, here you are," she hums, taking another slow sip of wine, her gaze never

leaving mine. “Dining with me. Humoring me. Tolerating me, even.”

I scoff. “Tolerating is a strong word.”

She taps a finger against her chin in mock consideration. “True. Enduring, then.”

I shake my head, exasperated. “Are you always this unbearable?”

Vaela grins, biting off another piece of lobster. “Only for you, Dragon Queen.”

I sigh, setting my utensils down, the remnants of the meal nothing more than scattered shells and discarded citrus peels. “This was meant to fortify us for the day ahead, not to give you an excuse to hear yourself talk.”

Vaela flicks a droplet of melted butter from her wrist, utterly unbothered. “Oh, but my voice is lovely, isn’t it?” Her smirk is wicked, teasing, and she knows exactly what she’s doing.

I don’t entertain her, already rising to leave when she stretches, rolling her shoulders with a pleased hum. “As much as I do enjoy lingering here, after last night, I’d say we could both use a bath.”

I pause, considering it.

She tilts her head, grinning. “Oh, don’t look so surprised, Dragon Queen. Even I require more than just salt water every now and then.”

I shake my head, exhaling. “Fine. Come on.”

She rises, padding barefoot toward me, her silver hair spilling in loose waves over her shoulders. “A bath with the fearsome Dragon Queen. I’d be honored.”

I scoff. "Don't push it."

She only hums, smug, leading the way toward the bathing chambers.

And despite myself, I follow.

The water laps at my shoulders, warm and heavy with the scent of crushed lavender and deep-sea minerals. The cavern around us is vast, carved from the ancient stone beneath the castle, its walls lined with glowing moss that casts everything in a soft, ethereal blue-green light. Waterfalls trickle from the ceiling in delicate, silken streams, feeding into the massive in-ground pool, their steady rhythm echo a soothing lull against the rough edges of my thoughts. The air is thick with steam, curling around us in ghostly wisps, carrying the faint scent of salt and something darker—something uniquely Vaela.

She is draped against the opposite side of the bath, her silver hair floating around her like liquid moonlight, her skin glowing with that iridescent sheen that I've grown to love. Droplets slid down the sharp lines of her collarbones, catching on her skin before disappearing into the water. Her silver hair clings to her shoulders, damp strands curling at her throat, framing her face in a way that makes it impossible to look away. The water ripples lazily around her, shifting just enough to tease at the curve of her waist, her hips, giving glimpses of bare skin before obscuring it again. She's completely naked, completely unguarded—but the way she watches me, eyes steady and unreadable, makes it clear she's still in control.

I should not be watching her.

But I am.

She tilts her head, white-blue eyes gleaming through the haze of steam. "Enjoying the view, Dragon Queen?"

I exhale sharply, shifting my gaze as I reach for the bar of fragrant soap resting on the edge of the bath. "Just making sure you don't vanish beneath the surface."

Vaela chuckles, the sound low and indulgent. "How thoughtful, Dragon Queen. But I hate to disappoint—I couldn't drown even if I tried."

She glides through the water with effortless grace, her fingers trailing lazily across the surface, parting the waves as if the ocean itself bends to her will. It likely does.

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"It would be a shame though," she muses, tilting her head, "to die before I've had the chance to show you my world."

I arch a brow. "Your world?"

She presses closer, her bare shoulder brushing mine, her voice dropping into something softer, something almost intimate. "Yes. You've spent weeks parading me through your kingdom, showing me your castle, your forests, your creatures." Her lips quirk slightly. "But you know nothing of mine."

I meet her gaze, something tightening in my chest. This—this is vulnerability. An offering. A piece of herself she has yet to share.

For a moment, I hesitate. I should refuse. I should not let her pull me deeper into this thing between us, this thing I cannot name.

But I don't.

I lift a hand, brushing damp strands of silver hair from her face, fingers lingering along her jaw. "Show me, then."

Vaela's lips curve, slow and satisfied. "Good."

She shifts, her hands sliding beneath the water, skimming along my waist, across my stomach, her touch featherlight but unmistakable. "But first," she purrs, voice laced with mischief, "we should get dressed. Unless you want to greet my people like this."

I scoff, shoving her back gently, though my fingers curl around her wrist before she can move too far. "Get out of the bath, siren, before I change my mind."

She smirks but obeys, rising from the water in one fluid motion, the droplets trailing down her body shimmering against her skin. She doesn't bother to cover herself, knowing damn well I'm watching.

I force myself to stand, to shake off whatever spell she has woven around me, and step onto the smooth stone floor, grabbing a linen towel to wrap around my body.

The Sentinels appear before I can summon them, silent as ever, stepping through the cavern walls like shadows given form.

"Bring us something suitable," I command, my voice steady despite the heat still lingering beneath my skin. "And quickly."

They nod in unison before vanishing once more.

Vaela watches them leave, then turns back to me with that slow, wicked smirk. "You know, we could always give them another show before we go."

I level her with a flat look. "You are impossible."

She hums, completely unbothered. "That's not a no."

I don't dignify that with a response.

The Sentinels return moments later, offering up our clothes—dark, flowing garments made of enchanted fabrics that shift like water and smoke, blending seamlessly with the realm we are about to enter. I dress quickly, fastening the intricate laces of my corset, securing the flowing obsidian gown that clings to my body like a second skin.

My thigh-high boots follow, the heels clicking softly against the stone as I step forward.

Vaela, however, takes her time, slipping into her pearl-encrusted bodice with slow, deliberate movements, the delicate gold chains draping across her shoulders like molten light. Her skirt is sheer and flowing, the high slit running dangerously up her thigh—a distraction I refuse to acknowledge.

She catches me staring and smirks. "Like what you see?"

I fasten the last strap of my boot with more force than necessary. "Summon the portal."

Her laughter follows me as she steps forward, lifting her hands over the large basin of water at the center of the cavern.

The liquid stirs instantly, responding to her presence, to her magic. It coils and stretches, shifting colors—deep indigo, bioluminescent blue, glimmering violet—until the surface bends, expanding outward, shimmering like the crest of a wave frozen in time.

I exhale sharply and then I follow her into the abyss, letting the ocean take me. I expect pressure, weight, suffocation but Vaela's magic wraps around me like a second skin, allowing me to breathe, to move as easily as she does. It weaves through me, lacing through my lungs, altering the way my body reacts to the depths.

It is alive, the deep dark teeming with creatures that glow like fallen stars, fish darting through the kelp forests, their iridescent bodies illuminating the abyss. Schools of crystalline eels weave through towering spirals of bioluminescent coral, their sleek forms pulsing with light as they dance through the currents.

Further below, something massive shifts, ancient and slow—whale-like but alien in shape, its glowing eyes the only part of it visible in the distance.

Vaela moves effortlessly through the water, her form shifting, glowing, becoming something both more and less than mortal.

Twisting coral spires rise from the ocean floor, pulsing with power, glowing veins of magic threading through golden archways and pearlescent pathways. Vast, open domes of enchanted air flicker between buildings, giving form to floating chambers, allowing sirens and sea creatures to drift freely in and out of the palatial expanse.

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I glance down at my hands, flexing my fingers, marveling at the way the water bends around me, accepting me rather than resisting.

I meet Vaela's gaze.

"Welcome to Neralis, Dragon Queen." Vaela coos, as she extends her hand.

I take her hand. And for the first time, I let her lead me.

"This is my realm," she says. "The endless tide, the ever moving, the home to those who exist beyond land's grasp."

Vaela shows me the Gardens of the Abyss, where vines of luminescent flora stretch toward the surface, feeding off the moon's light. Their tendrils twist lazily in the currents, their petals unfurling like ghostly hands, releasing bursts of shimmering spores.

She introduces me to the Depth Dwellers, creatures unlike any I have seen—half-shadow, half-flesh, their skin dappled with light like the reflection of water against stone. They watch us with curious eyes, their forms constantly shifting, never quite solid.

"Ethereals," she explains. "They were once spirits of the deep, given form through magic. They answer only to the ocean's call."

The Sunken Library, a vast ruin of forgotten history where the walls themselves hum with knowledge, carved tablets glowing with words long lost to the surface world.

After the library, she takes me to her chambers, leading me through arched corridors lined with walls of enchanted glass. The ocean stretches beyond, moving like a living entity, swirling in soft blues and violets, carrying creatures I have never seen before.

The room itself is intimate, carved from the sea itself. Pearlescent walls curve like the inside of a shell, smooth stone beneath my feet, a massive bed woven from strands of glowing kelp and silk, draped in translucent fabrics that ripple as if caught in an unseen current.

But I am barely paying attention.

Because as Vaela moves toward a small coral-carved table near the bed, she reaches for a delicate glass vial hanging from a silver chain around her neck. With practiced ease, she lifts the vial's stopper and dips it into a basin of bioluminescent water. The liquid glows softly, swirling with flecks of gold and pale blue, casting eerie light against her fingers as she seals it shut.

My gaze lingers on the action. Strange. A peculiar habit, but I say nothing.

Vaela catches me watching and smirks, slipping the vial beneath the neckline of her gown. "Something on your mind, Dragon Queen?"

I narrow my eyes but shake my head. "Nothing of importance."

She hums knowingly, but I let it go.

For now.

Because Vaela is watching me, white-blue eyes glowing in the dim water, her smile slow, knowing.

And something in my chest tightens.

It is dangerous, this thing between us. This pull, this connection that defies logic, that weakens the walls I spent a lifetime fortifying.

I should fight it. I should drown it before it consumes me whole.

But as she reaches for my hand, lacing our fingers together beneath the shifting currents, I don't pull away.

Because for the first time, I don't want to.

Chapter

Fifteen

VAELA

I lead Nyxara through the arched corridors of my palace, her steps slow, cautious. The bioluminescent glow of the walls reflects against her dark gown, casting flickering hues of blue and violet across her sharp cheekbones, the soft part of her lips. She doesn't speak, but I can feel the shift in her—something deep, something hesitant but no longer resisting.

Something dangerous.

And gods, I crave it.

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Bringing her here—bringing her into my world, into my kingdom—has caused something to settle between us. A tether neither of us can ignore. Even now, I feel it tightening, coiling around my ribs, pulling her closer with every step she takes.

She belongs here.

She would never admit it, but I can feel it in the way she moves, the way her eyes linger too long on the glowing coral spires beyond the glass walls, the way her fingers brush absentmindedly over the water as though she's trying to understand it.

A dragon in the deep.

I bite my lip, amused by the poetic irony of it.

“Come,” I say softly, guiding her toward a vast chamber where the walls curve like the inside of a seashell, smooth and pearlescent, opening into an enormous dome of swirling water.

Tiny specks of golden light drift lazily inside—the Lirien Bloom.

My jellyfish.

They glow like submerged stars, their long, delicate tendrils trailing behind them in the slow, rhythmic dance of the tides. The moment I step inside, they stir, sensing me, their pulses brightening with recognition.

Nyxara stops beside me, arms crossed, observing them with quiet curiosity.

“They are beautiful,” she admits after a moment.

I smirk, reaching out as two of them drift closer, their pulsing forms illuminating my fingers in soft gold. Luma & Neridia. My ever-faithful companions.

“They like you,” I murmur, watching as Luma pulses a little brighter, tentacles curling toward Nyxara, drawn to the warmth of her magic.

Nyxara tilts her head, watching them with an unreadable expression. “Strange little creatures.”

I chuckle. “Careful, Dragon Queen. Say enough pretty words and I might think you enjoy being here.”

She turns, her green eyes sharp. “Don’t push it.”

I laugh, stepping forward. The jellyfish move toward me, curling around my arms, their soft, gelatinous forms pressing gently against my skin.

“They are guardians,” I explain, watching as one of them drifts toward Nyxara, nudging at her forearm. She stiffens, eyes narrowing in suspicion.

I shake my head. “They don’t sting, you know.”

Her gaze flicks to me. “If they did, I would burn them.”

A low chuckle escapes my lips. “You wouldn’t.”

Her expression sharpens. “And why is that?”

I take a slow step toward her, my bare feet gliding over the smooth floor, closing the

space between us. The energy between us shifts, something thick, weighted, unspoken.

“Because,” I whisper, trailing a finger along her wrist, where the jellyfish had touched, “you would never harm something that belongs to me.”

She doesn’t move.

She just watches me, her emerald eyes flickering with something unreadable, something dangerous. Something hungry.

I glance at the jellyfish. “Leave us.”

At once, they retreat, gliding back into the water, the chamber dimming slightly as their soft glow fades into the deep.

The moment they are gone, the weight between us crashes down in full force.

Nyxara’s breath is steady, controlled but I see the truth in her eyes. The way her restraint wavers, the way her claws twitch at her sides, aching to grab me, to claim.

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The weight of it—of us—hangs between us, thick as the waters surrounding her.

And I am done waiting.

“You feel it,” I murmur, stepping closer, trailing my fingers over her collarbone, feeling the warmth of her skin, the pulse of magic thrumming beneath it. “Don’t you?”

She exhales sharply, jaw clenching.

She doesn’t answer, but she doesn’t deny it.

Doesn’t deny me.

I tilt my chin, letting my lips hover just shy of hers, tasting the heat in the space between us. “Let me have you.”

Her body is rigid, her nails pressing into her palms. She’s fighting it. Fighting me.

But then she snaps.

Her hands are on me before I can blink, claws digging into my hips as she pulls me flush against her, her mouth crashing into mine with a force that steals the breath from my lungs. It’s raw, punishing, desperate. A war in itself. A war I am more than willing to lose.

She bites my lip, hard enough to make me gasp, and when I do, her tongue slips past,

deepening the kiss, devouring me.

Then, just as quickly, she wrenches herself away, her grip tightening, her eyes burning as she stares me down and sits herself down on the edge of my bed.

And then her voice drops, low and dark, filled with unspoken promise. “Crawl to me, little siren.”

The words slam into me, knocking the air from my lungs.

Heat licks up my spine, pooling deep in my stomach, setting my skin alight with something molten, something unshakable.

I swallow, my pulse hammering, but I don’t move. Not yet.

Her emerald eyes gleam, daring me, waiting.

“Don’t make me repeat myself.” Her voice is nothing but smoke and fire, curling around me, demanding, dominating.

My breath catches.

Slowly I drop to my hands, the cool stone brushing against my palms as I shift, sliding one knee forward, then the other.

I watch her as I move, as I obey, dragging myself toward her with slow, measured movements, my gaze locked onto hers.

Nyxara watches me, her chest rising and falling steadily, but there’s something else now—something deeper, something raw.

Possession.

Satisfaction.

And fuck, I think I like it.

I reach her feet, still on my hands and knees. My breath is uneven, my body taut with anticipation. I tilt my head back, meeting her gaze from below, and the look in her eyes nearly undoes me.

Dark. Possessive. Triumphant.

Her claws drag down my arms, a teasing threat, sharp enough to remind me who holds the control but not enough to break skin. A slow, deliberate touch that sends a shiver down my spine.

“Remind me, siren,” she murmurs, voice smooth as molten steel, “exactly what it is you feel.”

My breath catches.

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Because I already know.

And gods help me so does she.

Lifting to my knees, I press my lips to her stomach, to the sharp cut of her hip bone.
“As my fiery queen commands,” I murmur against her skin.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, a sharp pull, guiding me to where she wants me.

I don’t fight her.

I spread her thighs, my palms tracing the soft flesh there, my tentacles slithering up her legs, teasing, wrapping, holding her open for me.

And then I taste her.

Goddess.

She is molten heat and salt, a storm contained in soft, slick velvet. I groan, dragging my tongue over her clit, slow, savoring, teasing.

Her breath hitches, her grip tightening in my hair.

“That’s it, siren. Show me how much you crave the burn,” she rasps.

I hum against her, the vibration making her shudder.

Her hips jerk forward, chasing the sensation, but I grip her thighs, holding her in place, dragging my tongue over her again, flicking, swirling, sucking.

She moans, a sharp, breathless sound that sends a pulse of pride straight through me.

I want more.

I want to ruin her.

I press my tongue deeper, my tentacles curling around her thighs, keeping her steady, keeping her exactly where I want her.

I pull back slightly, dragging my tongue torturously slow along her slick folds, barely touching her clit. She lets out a strangled noise, her claws scraping against my scalp.

I grin against her.

“What’s wrong, Dragon Queen?” I murmur, teasing the sensitive bundle of nerves with the tip of my tongue. “Losing your patience?”

Nyxara’s breathing is ragged, her pupils blown wide, the emerald of her irises consumed by the sheer, raw need darkening her gaze. She looks wild like this—hair disheveled, lips parted, body trembling beneath my touch.

But patience has never been her virtue.

A growl rumbles low in her throat, her claws digging into my thighs as she yanks me up, her strength overpowering, her possessiveness undeniable. Before I can react, before I can tease her about how needy she’s become, she rips the pearl bodice from my body, the delicate chains snapping under her strength. The cool water kisses my newly exposed skin.

I barely have time to gasp before she grips the fabric of my skirt, tearing it clean down the middle, the shredded material falling away in tatters as she tosses it carelessly aside.

Then, she flips me onto my back, pressing me into the cool silk sheets, her weight pinning me down.

A sharp inhale escapes me, my body shuddering at the heat of her skin against mine. My tentacles twitch in anticipation, sensing the shift in her energy—the hunger, the dominance, the control she so desperately needs to reclaim.

“Enough,” she growls, her voice molten, unyielding. “You forget who’s in charge, little siren.”

I smirk against the sheets, even as my breath hitches at the feel of her trailing her claws up my spine, slow and deliberate, teasing my over sensitized flesh. “Oh? And who might that be?” I purr, knowing exactly how far I can push her before she snaps.

She snarls in response, her body pressing against mine, her fingers sliding down my waist, gripping my hips hard enough to bruise.

“Keep running your mouth,” she murmurs darkly, her lips ghosting over the shell of my ear. “And see what happens.”

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She spreads me open, her nails raking down my thighs before she hooks her leg over mine, pressing her slick heat against me. I gasp, the friction deliciously unbearable as she grinds against me, slow at first, just a tease, just enough to set every nerve ending ablaze.

Then, she moves.

Hard. Desperate. Unrelenting.

I cry out, my body jerking at the onslaught of pleasure, my hips rolling to meet her. She grips my wrists, pinning them above my head as she sets the pace, forcing me to take everything she gives.

Every sharp thrust.

Every shuddering moan that spills from her lips.

Every delicious, maddening inch of her grinding against me, claiming me, wrecking me.

I can't think. Can't breathe.

I am drowning in her.

Her nails scrape down my sides, slow and deliberate, like she enjoys feeling me tremble beneath her touch. Her weight presses me deeper into the sheets, her heat searing, her dominance absolute.

"You like this, don't you, siren?" Her voice is a low, taunting growl, her breath hot against my throat as she rolls her hips, pressing deeper, harder. "This is what you craved. The touch of a dragon."

A wicked smile curves my lips even as I gasp, my hands gripping her arms, nails dragging over her skin. "Mmm, and here I thought you weren't paying attention," I murmur, voice breathy, teasing.

She growls, sinking her teeth into my jaw, just enough to sting, enough to remind me that she holds the power here. She thrusts again, grinding against my aching core, making my back arch, making me whimper.

"Look at you," she continues, voice nothing but smoke and possession. "Under me. Writhing. Needy. Desperate."

I bite my lip, swallowing another moan, refusing to give her the satisfaction. But she feels it—she knows.

Her fingers trail between us, teasing, taunting, sliding over my slick heat before dragging up my stomach, leaving streaks of my own arousal across my skin.

"I can feel how wet you are for me," she growls, her claws scraping over my ribs.

I let out a breathless laugh, tilting my head back, staring at her through half-lidded eyes.

"Confidence looks good on you, Dragon Queen."

She smirks, gripping my throat in one firm hand, pressing me back into the mattress.

"Stay still," she orders, her voice molten dominance, her claws pressing into my skin,

forcing my pulse to hammer beneath her grip. "You will take what I give you."

A sharp whimper escapes me as she moves again.

I tremble, heat coiling tight, too tight. I try to move, to press closer, but she holds me down, her strength unrelenting.

"You're mine," she growls, low and dangerous, watching me fall apart, watching me drown beneath her. "Say it, Sea Witch."

I let my lips part, a smirk curling the edges even as my breath stutters. "And if I don't?"

A challenge.

She snarls, pressing her body harder against mine, her heat searing into my skin, her grip tightening around my throat—not enough to hurt, but enough to remind me exactly who is in control.

"Then I'll make you."

Her hips snap forward, her pace unforgiving, merciless, and I gasp, my back bowing, pleasure slamming through me like a crashing wave.

"Fuck—" I choke out, my hands gripping her wrists, my claws pressing into her skin, desperate, aching.

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"Say it," she demands, her lips dragging over my jaw, her tongue flicking against my pulse.

I swallow, the pleasure too much, too sharp, too perfect.

"I—" My breath stutters, another cry falling from my lips as she moves again, dragging me to the edge, pulling me under.

"You. Are. Mine," she repeats, her voice like molten steel, burning into my very bones.

I break.

I shatter beneath her, my climax ripping through me, my body shaking, every muscle tightening as I fall, as I drown, as I give in.

"Nyxara—" I gasp, barely a whisper, barely a plea.

Her smirk presses against my skin, wicked and knowing. "That's it."

But she's not done.

Before I can recover, before my body even stops trembling, she moves. Reaching for something beside us—a seashell, smooth, large, glistening with the faint sheen of magic.

My eyes widen, my breath catching as she drags the shell along the inside of my

thigh, the cool surface a sharp contrast to the heat of my oversensitive skin.

"Let's see how much you can take, siren," she purrs, pressing the shell against my entrance, teasing, waiting.

I whimper, my hips bucking toward her, needing more, needing everything.

Nyxara chuckles darkly. "Desperate already?"

"Nyxara," I pant, hands clawing at her back, at her hips, anywhere I can reach. "Please—"

"Please?" she muses, dragging the shell just barely inside me, stretching me, filling me. "I thought sirens didn't beg?"

I growl, trying to move, to take more, but she pins my hips down, watching me squirm, watching me suffer under her touch. She thrusts the shell deeper, and I cry out, my body arching, pleasure slamming through me all over again, raw and unrelenting.

But I am not the only one desperate.

My tentacles curl around her thighs, wrapping her in soft, strong coils, holding her still as I push my magic into her, as I press one slick, glowing tendril inside her.

She gasps, her eyes widening, her grip on my hips tightening.

"You—"

I smirk, arching into her. "Let's see how much you can take, Dragon Queen."

She snarls, but it breaks into a moan as I thrust inside her, matching her rhythm, matching her hunger, pushing her closer and closer to the edge.

We move together, a clash of fire and sea, of dominance and surrender, of something that is neither and both at once.

Her claws dig into my thighs, her breath hot against my lips, our bodies slick and writhing, our moans tangled, desperate.

"Look at you," I breathe, my lips brushing against hers, teasing. "Taking me so well."

She growls, biting my lip, sucking it between her teeth before dragging her tongue over the sting.

I roll my hips, my tentacle pressing deeper inside her, stroking that perfect spot, making her shudder and break for me. One of the suction cups latches onto her clit, pulsing, sucking, and sending sharp, electric jolts of pleasure through her as my tentacle slides in and out of her, stretching her to the fullest.

"Come for me, Dragon Queen," I whisper, licking into her mouth, stealing the breath from her lungs. "Show me how good I feel inside you."

We shatter together, her body tightening around my tentacle, her claws digging into my skin, her moan raw, desperate, wild. My tentacles hold her close as I come apart with her, pleasure washing over us in violent, crashing waves, our magic tangling, twining, binding.

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We ride it out, gasping, panting, clinging to each other as the aftershocks roll through us.

Nyxara's weight is solid against me, her warmth seeping into my skin, her breath fanning over my lips in slow, uneven waves. I feel the tension in her muscles begin to ease, the possessive grip she has on my waist loosening just slightly, but not entirely.

Because she still holds me.

Because neither of us are ready to pull away.

Her emerald eyes flicker open, searching mine, something unreadable glinting beneath the fire that still lingers there. Want. Need. Ownership.

And something deeper.

Something I feel too. From this moment on, I know I am hers.

But I cannot belong to her, not like this. Not with the weight of a contract still binding my choices, my fate, to a deal that should never have been made.

So I shift beneath her, my magic coiling around us, cool where hers is hot, soothing where hers still burns. A whisper of the ocean seeps through the air, and in an instant, the scroll appears in my hand.

Nyxara stiffens, her gaze darkening as she watches the contract hover between us.

The magic embedded in the parchment pulses, faint and eerie, the ink shimmering as if sensing its inevitable end.

Nyxara moves to sit up, her claws flexing, but I tighten my hold on her, keeping her pressed against me, our bodies still tangled, still warm.

I meet her gaze, letting her see the honesty in my own. "I am not bound to you because of this," I whisper, my voice steady, sure. "Not anymore."

She watches me, unblinking, unreadable.

I lift my free hand, summoning a slow, curling tendril of water that wraps around the parchment, weaving through the fibers, seeping into the ink.

The moment the water touches it, the contract withers.

The edges curl. The words dissolve, fading into the ether, erased as if they had never existed.

And then, the parchment bursts into nothing.

The magic that once tied me to an obligation, to a forced fate, is gone.

Nyxara's claws tighten against my hip, her jaw clenched as she stares at the empty space where the contract had been.

"You would destroy the bargain?" she murmurs, her voice unreadable.

I reach up, brushing my fingers along the sharp angle of her jaw, letting my thumb drag against her bottom lip. "I don't need a contract to stand by your side, Nyxara."

Something shifts in her gaze.

Something cracks.

"You have me," I continue, pressing my lips to hers. "Not because I have to be here. But because I choose to be here."

A slow exhale shudders from her lips, and for a long moment, she does not speak.

Then, finally, she nods.

As I pull her back down against me, as our breaths tangle once more, as her lips ghost over mine in something softer than possession, something closer to devotion, I know this is no longer a war of bargains.

This is ours.

And I will fight for her, not because I made a deal.

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But because I want to.

Because she is mine, and I am hers.

Chapter

Sixteen

VAELA

I wake to fire.

Not the searing kind that devours, but the kind that lingers—smoldering, possessive, inescapable.

To the weight of Nyxara draped over me, her arm slung around my waist, her claws twitching lightly against my hip, as if even in sleep, she refuses to let me go.

To the scent of embers and something distinctly hers curling in the air, sinking into my skin, wrapping around me like an unspoken claim.

For the first time since this dangerous, sharp-edged war between us began, there is no battle of wills, no biting remarks meant to wound, no fight for control.

Just heat.

Just her.

The Dragon Queen sleeps. A rare thing, I imagine. A forbidden thing. Yet here she is—her features relaxed, her breathing even, as if, for just this moment, she has let go of the ever-present war burning in her blood.

And I should let her sleep.

I should stay in this moment, revel in it, drown in it, pretend that for once, the world beyond these walls does not exist.

But illusions do not last.

A soft pulse ripples through the water, a gentle but urgent nudge against my consciousness.

I blink, my body tensing beneath Nyxara's warmth as a familiar glow flickers at the edge of the chamber. Lumis and the others have come—my jellyfish, my silent messengers of the deep. They hover just beyond the threshold, their tendrils pulsing with agitation, shifting from their usual soft blue to a sharp, uneasy violet.

Something has happened.

They would not wake me unless it was urgent. And if they've come all this way—if they can sense the weight of something wrong even from the depths of my realm—then I already know.

It isn't good.

I exhale sharply, my mind already racing ahead, already reaching for what needs to be done. But first...

I shift beneath Nyxara's hold, fingers trailing up her spine, pressing just beneath the

sharp ridge of her shoulder blade. Her breath hitches, and in an instant, those glowing emerald eyes snap open, locking onto mine.

I don't give her time to speak, to question, to snarl at being woken.

"We have to go," I murmur, my voice steady despite the unease curling in my gut. "Something's wrong."

Nyxara studies me for the briefest moment, the remnants of sleep fading swiftly as she takes in the glow of my jellyfish in the doorway, the way they pulse with warning. Her expression hardens.

She doesn't argue.

In a single fluid movement, she pushes up from the bed, reaching for her discarded gown, and I do the same, summoning my bodice from where it had been carelessly tossed the nightbefore. The moment the clasps click into place, I lift my hands, calling to the waters.

The portal forms before us in an instant, spinning into a dark, shimmering arch, the current bending at my will.

Nyxara steps beside me, her expression unreadable, her jaw set, her fingers flexing at her sides. Neither of us speak. We don't need to. Together, we step through the portal. And when we emerge, we are not greeted by victory.

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We are met with carnage.

Morrin is waiting.

Not perched casually like usual, not watching with that ever-present amusement, not ready with a sharp remark laced in dry humor.

No.

He stands rigid, his wings drawn tight, his talons scraping deep against the marble floor with barely restrained fury. His beady black eyes burn, but it is not just anger that twists through him. It is something far sharper. Something bitter. Something jagged.

And it is directed solely at Nyxara.

"You were gone," he snarls, stepping forward, his wings flaring. "And while you were gone, the king marched into your lands."

The words shouldn't make the very castle feel like it's sinking beneath us, but the weight of them is unbearable.

I go still.

Nyxara's body tenses beside me, the only outward sign that the words have struck. She exhales slowly, measured, controlled, but I can feel the heat rising beneath her skin, the pressure of her magic pressing against the air.

"How much ground did they gain?" Her voice is eerily calm.

Morrin's wings snap open. "You do not get to ask that."

His beady black eyes shift to me, and the barely contained fury within them boils over, scorching, livid.

"This is because of her."

A cold silence fills the air, thick with something dangerous, something that trembles on the edge of ruin.

Nyxara's claws twitch at her sides, but she does not argue. She does not deny it. Instead, she steps forward, her voice a blade sharpened on fire and grief.

"How many human filth slithered their way into my lands, Morrin?"

Her words are like steel, but her body betrays her. Her claws twitch at her sides, her shoulders drawn so tight that I can practically hear the tension crackling in her bones. But her face—her face is pure, deadly calm.

Morrin's feathers ruffle, his beak clenching as his talons scrape against the stone floor. "Too many."

Nyxara inhales sharply, but it isn't a breath of restraint. It is a slow, burning pull of air through her lungs, as if she is trying to keep from roaring, from letting her rage shatter the very foundation beneath us.

Morrin steps closer, his talons clicking sharply against the stone. "The borders were overrun. The king's men came in, stronger, faster, trained for slaughter. We thought they were only testing our defenses but they came with fire. They came in numbers."

His voice lowers, bitter, full of accusation. "And our warriors were not prepared."

I don't have to hear the rest. I already know what he's going to say.

"They didn't stand a chance."

Nyxara doesn't move. Doesn't breathe.

But the air around her shifts, thickening with the scent of burning embers, with the telltale warning of a storm about to ignite. Her magic is curling at the edges of the room, pressing against the walls, slithering into the cracks of the floor. Heat licks at my skin, a silent scream of fury restrained behind clenched teeth.

Morrin's gaze sharpens, his voice lowering into something venomous. "You let her distract you," he hisses. "You let her pull you away from your duty, and now your people have paid the price."

I expect Nyxara to lash out. To bare her fangs. To remind him exactly who he is speaking to.

But she doesn't.

Instead she turns. Slowly. Her glowing green eyes land on me.

It is not just rage. Not just fury.

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It is something deeper. Something that coils in her gut like a sickness. A grief so raw it has become something monstrous.

And I know before she even says it. I know what she's about to do.

"You," she murmurs, stepping toward me, her claws flexing, her breath even, but her voice crackling with quiet destruction, "are going back to the cell."

I scoff, my temper igniting instantly, the ocean inside me crashing violently against my ribs. "You cannot be serious."

Her expression does not waver.

"You will be locked away, where you should have been from the start."

I take a step forward, my chest brushing hers, the heat of her fury clashing against the cool pull of my magic. "You're blaming me for this?" My voice is sharp, clipped, biting. "I did nothing but—"

"You made me weak."

The words shouldn't sting.

And yet.

And yet, something sharp lances through my ribs, deeper than I expect.

I let out a slow breath, my magic curling around my fingers, the ocean in my veins demanding release, demanding I fight back. "You think locking me away is going to fix your mistakes, Dragon Queen?"

A muscle in her jaw ticks.

Her breathing is still controlled, but I see the truth in the way her claws tighten at her sides, the way her nostrils flare ever so slightly, the way she has to force herself to stay still.

"You do not get to speak of my mistakes," she says, voice so cold, so final, that it feels like a blade to the throat.

She lifts a clawed hand, her movements slow, deliberate—a silent command. The guards step forward, shadows moving in the dim light.

I tense, magic curling tighter, gathering in my palms. "I will not let you do this," I growl, my power humming, waiting, aching to be unleashed.

Nyxara doesn't even blink.

"You do not have a choice."

The guards move.

I fight them, of course.

But I let them take me.

Because I have my own plans.

The moment the heavy iron doors slam shut, the moment I am alone in the cold, dark cell—I smile.

Not a soft, wistful smile. No, this is sharper, edged with something wicked. Something deadly.

Nyxara may have forgotten one thing.

She may have locked me away.

But she did not take the one thing I needed.

I lift my hand, fingers brushing over the cool weight of the sea-water pendant that rests at my throat. The small, delicate jewel glows faintly, pulsing in time with my heartbeat. To anyone else, it looks like nothing more than a trinket, an ornament hanging from a thin chain.

But it is so much more.

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The power contained within it hums against my skin, alive and waiting.

Nyxara underestimated me.

She thought I would stay here, obedient, caged.

She thought wrong.

I exhale, closing my eyes, and let the ancient language of the sea slip from my lips, low and steady, curling like mist through the cell. It is a sound older than the tides themselves, a whisper in the dark that only the ocean answers.

And the ocean always answers.

The air shifts.

The pendant warms beneath my fingers, and then the water shivers.

A single droplet beads at my fingertip, shimmering in the dim light before sliding down my palm, coiling around my wrist, spreading.

It slithers through the cracks in the stone beneath me, twisting like a serpent, wrapping itself around the iron bars of the cell. I drag my fingers through the air, feeling the magic pulse through my veins, feeling the water obey.

A creaking groan splits through the silence as the moisture seeps into the metal hinges.

The locks swell.

The iron warps.

And then—snap.

The heavy door swings open.

Too easy.

I step forward, barefoot against the cold stone, stretching my arms as if shaking off invisible shackles. My magic hums beneath my skin, stronger now, filling the space where frustration and rage had curled.

Nyxara made a mistake.

She thinks I will wait here, sulking, useless, a liability she can cast aside when it suits her.

She is wrong.

Because if she will not listen to me, if she will not trust me... then I will do what I should have done from the start—I will win this war for her.

Even if I have to lie, deceive, and risk everything to do it.

I move through the darkened corridors like a shadow, silent as the deep, unseen as the tide. Every step is calculated, precise. The castle is still, wrapped in an uneasy hush, the lingering presence of loss pressing against the walls like a ghost.

They think I am still locked away. They think I have yielded.

Fools.

The moment I reach the outer courtyard, the night air brushes against my skin, carrying with it the distant scent of burning wood, of steel and blood. The stench of war.

The human king is closer than I expected. And that only makes my next move easier.

I slip past the last set of guards, their post only half-heartedly patrolled. The fear of what lurks beyond the castle walls is far greater than the concern for what remains inside.

A fatal mistake.

For them.

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The terrain shifts beneath me as I move past the castle's outer wards and into the thick darkness of the forest. The twisted branches of ancient trees loom above, their leaves whispering secrets to the wind. The damp scent of moss and earth mingles with the salt lingering in my hair, the ocean a distant song in my blood.

My pulse thrums in time with the crashing waves.

Faster.

Faster.

I move like the current, swift and unrelenting, cutting through the dense underbrush, following the pull of something more potent than instinct—purpose.

It isn't long before I see it.

The human king's encampment sprawls just beyond the valley, a sea of torches flickering in the dark, illuminating rows upon rows of soldiers.

A temporary city of war.

I slow my steps, crouching low against the cover of the trees, observing.

The men move with precision—trained, organized—not the rabble Nyxara's forces had been slaughtering in small skirmishes. These were the real fighters.

The ones meant to conquer.

The ones meant to win.

And leading them?

A warlord draped in human skin.

I can already hear the king's voice in my mind—smooth, silken, coaxing. The kind of voice that has lured countless fools to ruin. A liar's voice.

But I know how to play this game better than he does.

I let a smirk curl along my lips as I rise from the shadows, the moonlight casting a ghostly glow over my skin. My magic hums at my fingertips, whispering against my pulse, ready, waiting.

This is it.

The moment.

Nyxara believes she has cast me aside. That she has removed me from the board. But the game has only just begun.

I step out into the open, into the lion's den, and let my voice carry through the cold night air, smooth as silk, curling like smoke.

“Time to play, Your Majesty.”

And then I walk straight into the war I intend to win.

Chapter

Seventeen

NYXARA

The castle walls groan under the weight of my return.

The torches that line the corridors flicker erratically, their flames sensing my presence, twisting toward me as if drawn to my anger. Shadows stretch unnaturally across the black marble floors, bending under the force of my magic. The air tastes of iron and war, thick with the scent of burnt wood and the lingering remnants of the battle that took place at my borders.

And I was not here for it.

I was away. Distracted.

With her.

My claws flex at my sides as I walk, each step measured, my thigh-high boots slamming against the floor in time with the steady, sharp beat of my rage. Morrin strides beside me, his beady black eyes narrowed, wings drawn taut in a way that tells me he's barely holding back his fury.

Not at the war. Not at the deaths.

At me.

“The Sentinels have been waiting,” he says, voice clipped. “They will have the full account of what happened while you were gone.”

While I was gone.

The words are a knife against my ribs.

I do not reply, do not acknowledge the sharpness in his tone, because he is right.

I allowed myself a distraction—a temptation I should have ignored. And in that moment of selfishness, my people paid the price.

The war chamber doors loom ahead, the carved stone etched with runes that pulse faintly in my presence. The guards stationed at the entrance bow low, pushing them open without a word.

Inside, the Sentinels are already gathered.

They stand rigid, unmoving, waiting.

A heavy silence blankets the room.

I step forward, my gaze sweeping across the large war table in the center of the chamber. A detailed map of my lands stretches across it, now marred with newly drawn markings—borders breached, strongholds weakened, casualties counted.

Too many casualties.

“Speak,” I command.

One of the Sentinels, his violet eyes flickering like dying embers, inclines his head. “The king’s forces pushed into the eastern borders at dawn. The attack was coordinated, efficient. They knew where to strike, how to maneuver. They came in larger numbers than anticipated.”

A sharp pulse of magic flares in my chest, controlled but lethal.

“How many of my warriors fell?”

“Hundreds,” the Sentinel answers. “More wounded.”

A muscle tightens in my jaw.

Hundreds.

Hundreds dead while I lay tangled in silk sheets, foolishly believing I could afford a moment of respite.

I exhale through my nose, forcing the fire curling in my lungs to settle.

Morrin steps forward, his wings rustling against the heavy silence. “The human filth didn’t just come to test our defenses this time. They came to take.”

I lift my chin, eyes locked onto his. “And what did they take?”

He hesitates, just for a breath. “Land. Power. The belief that we are untouchable.”

The war chamber seems to darken, the torches flickering as my anger coils tighter.

I drag my claws across the edge of the table, slow, deliberate, the sound like steel scraping against stone. “What remains of their forces?”

“They have retreated beyond the valley for now,” the Sentinel reports. “But they will return.”

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Of course, they will.

They did not just come to attack.

They came to send a message.

I exhale sharply, straightening, forcing my expression into something cold, something calculating. “Prepare the patrols. Double the defenses along the borders and make sure the wounded are tended to. They will not catch us unaware again.”

The Sentinels bow in unison, ready to carry out my orders.

I turn on my heel, prepared to leave—to strategize, to prepare for what is coming next—when a shift in the air stalls me.

Something is wrong.

The castle’s magic shudders, the walls humming with warning.

A figure steps forward, emerging from the stone itself, his body forming from the very walls of the chamber. One of the Spectral Guard.

I meet his glowing violet gaze but his silence is answer enough. A cold feeling creeps down my spine, one I haven’t felt in centuries.

“What is it?” my voice is quiet, but no less deadly.

The Spectral Guard inclines his head. “She is gone.”

The entire room stills.

My breath halts.

The steam of the war maps curls in the heavy air, the weight of the words pressing down on my chest, sharp and suffocating.

I turn my head, slow, deliberate. “What?”

The Spectral Guard does not shift, does not flinch. “The sea witch has escaped. She was seen leaving through the north gate, into the forest, heading toward the human encampment.”

A sound escapes me, low and lethal.

A snarl.

The table beneath my hands cracks, the force of my magic splintering through the polished obsidian, veins of heat spidering outward.

Betrayal.

Again.

The castle seems to shift around me, the very foundation responding to my fury. I hear Morrin inhale behind me, his feathers ruffling, but I do not turn to him. I cannot. Because my mind is already twisting backward—dragging me into the past, to another betrayal, to another moment of weakness.

To him.

To the human king I once trusted, who whispered pretty lies in my ear, who swore loyalty and then plunged a dagger into my back the moment I turned away.

And now his son holds my realm's destruction in his hands.

Because I was foolish enough to let my guard down. Again.

A sharp crack fills the room as the map beneath my hands shatters, water from an overturned goblet spilling over the edges, hissing as it meets the heat rolling from my skin.

The Spectral Guard does not move. He waits, silent as the grave.

I rise to my full height, the power within me thrumming like a storm, my drenched gown clinging to my skin, my claws curling into fists.

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“How long ago?” My voice is deadly calm—the kind of calm that precedes a massacre.

The Spectral Guard inclines his head. “Within the hour.”

An hour.

An hour she has been with him.

I close my eyes, inhaling deeply, forcing down the scream clawing at my throat.

Morrin’s voice cuts through my rage like a dagger.

“What did you truly expect, Your Majesty. She’s the sea witch. The queen of siren whores. She fooled you,” he says.

I hear the disappointment in his tone.

The blame.

“You let her in,” he continues, his voice sharp, cutting. “You let her get close. Close enough to see our weakness. To learn of our defenses, and now she’s given him exactly what he wanted.”

I whip around, snarling, my magic surging outward. A vase across the room explodes against the stone wall, shards flying.

“Enough.”

Morrin doesn't even flinch. “She's played you for a fool, Nyxara, and now the whole realm will suffer for it.”

Fool.

The word lashes through me like a blade, a precise cut meant to wound.

The torches lining the chamber walls flicker wildly, their flames twisting unnaturally, feeding off the slow, smoldering fire coiling in my chest. The castle itself seems to tighten, as if holding its breath, as if the very stone and air knows what is about to come.

I inhale sharply through my nose, swallowing down the rage, forcing it into something cold, something sharp.

Morrin watches me carefully, his dark eyes unreadable, his wings twitching with unspoken wariness. He shifts slightly, but he does not move away. He knows better.

And yet, he asks, “What are you going to do?”

I meet his gaze, my expression carved from ice and fury. The answer is simple.

“The war is far from over. He will come.”

Morrin's feathers ruffle, his talons scraping against the stone, but he does not speak.

The air tightens, thick with power, the weight of it pressing against my lungs, my skin. The torches burn hotter, their golden light flickering violently, casting jagged shadows along the walls.

I take a step forward, my voice dropping into something dark, something final.

“He may have the sea witch,” I murmur, low and lethal. A slow exhale, steady, controlled. “But I will end them both.”

A finality settles over the room.

The weight of my words crushes the silence, a declaration sealed in fire and war.

Then, without another glance, I turn.

I storm from the war chamber, my boots slamming against the black stone floors, my gown billowing behind me like smoke, like the remnants of something already set ablaze.

The Sentinels do not move.

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The Spectral Guards do not follow.

Because they know better than to stand in my way.

Because they feel it—the heat rolling off my skin, the barely controlled storm brewing beneath my ribs.

I do not stop.

Not as I stride past the throne room and push through the towering doors of my chambers. Not as I tear the ruined gown from my body, shredding the delicate fabric with a single pull, tossing the remnants to the floor as if I can rid myself of her that easily.

But it isn't enough.

She is still on me.

On my skin.

In my lungs.

The scent of her—salt, storm, and something uniquely hers—clings to me like a ghost.

I grit my teeth, my claws flexing as I stalk through my chamber, through the archway leading to the spiraling steps downward.

Down into the depths of the castle.

To the baths.

The onyx floors are cool against my bare feet, the air damp with steam, thick with the scent of night-blooming jasmine and heated stone. The large inground pool shimmers in the dim torchlight, water black as ink, cut only by the glimmers of molten gold veins that ripple beneath the surface.

The moment I reach the edge, I do not pause.

I step in.

The heat envelops me, curling around my skin, licking up my thighs, wrapping around my waist like a lover's grasp.

I sink deep, until the water closes over my shoulders, until I am swallowed by the warmth, until my body no longer feels like my own.

But it's still not enough.

The filth of her betrayal is still here.

The memory of her hands on my body, her mouth at my throat, her magic curling around mine—it clings to me.

Like poison.

I grab the cloth from the bath's edge, scrubbing against my skin with brutal force. Harder. Until my flesh is raw, until my nails rake along my own collarbone, until I feel something other than this wretched, twisting ache in my chest.

She betrayed me.

She made a fool of me.

And now, because of my weakness, my people are dead.

I scrub harder, my breathing ragged, my claws dragging down my arms, my legs, my stomach, as if I can carve her away, as if I can cut out whatever piece of me allowed her to get this close.

But no matter how much I scrub, no matter how furiously I wash her away I cannot stop the way my chest tightens. The way my throat closes. The way my eyes burn.

And then, the first tear falls.

A single drop of blackened grief slipping into the water, vanishing into the abyss.

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I go still.

I close my eyes, my body trembling.

Not from pain or loss, but from rage. A deep, seething, burning rage that consumes me whole. A rage that does not weep or break, but instead will set the world on fire.

I wipe at my face, forcing the tears away, shoving them down, burying them beneath vengeance. She chose this. She left. She betrayed me. And now...

She will burn for it.

I force myself upright, my movements measured, deliberate. The water curls as I rise, hissing as it drips from my skin, steaming against the air. I step onto the black marble, reaching for the heavy silk robe waiting on the hooks near the entrance. I pull it on, tightening the belt at my waist, my expression set in stone.

The sea witch thinks she's won. She thinks she can walk into the arms of my enemy and strike me down from afar. That she can leave me. I bare my teeth at my reflection in the polished obsidian walls, my magic coiling like smoke, seething, pulsing, waiting.

She will learn her mistake soon enough.

Because the king may have her now, but when I come for them I will end them both.

And I will not hesitate.

Chapter

Eighteen

VAELA

The human king's encampment is an ugly thing. A scar carved into the land, festering with steel and rot, a wound that refuses to heal. The banners of red and gold hang limp against the evening wind, soaking up the scent of sweat, iron, and blood.

It is a blight, a violation—a sickness eating away at the border of Nyxara's realm, tainting the very air with human filth. And as I stand here in the midst of it, I feel it seep into my skin like an infection.

But I do not let it show.

I keep my expression cool, unreadable, my posture regal. My silver hair catches in the wind, the sheer fabric of my gown clinging to my curves, the pearls along my bodice glistening beneath the flickering torchlight.

The men around me—grimy, battle-worn, reeking of ale and death—do not trust me.

I feel their stares. Their barely veiled contempt. Their hunger.

They fear me.

And that is exactly how it should be.

I walk through the camp, my bare feet silent against the packed earth, my presence a ripple in still water, a whisper through the dark.

A soldier spits at my feet as I pass.

Another murmurs a prayer, fingers clutching an iron charm at his throat.

One stares too long, licking his lips, before a grizzled veteran yanks him back by the collar with a sharp, muttered warning.

I smile.

They do not know what to do with me.

A siren in their midst.

A creature that should not be here, standing among men who only see women as conquests or corpses.

But I am neither, and before this is over, they will all drown beneath my feet.

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Two guards flank me, their hands hovering near their weapons as if I might snap my fingers and drown them where they stand.

I don't miss the way they stiffen when my tentacle flicks lazily along my calf, or how their grips tighten on their swords when I sigh, stretching as if this entire situation bores me.

One of them, a scarred man with a permanent sneer, grunts, "You must be desperate to walk into the lion's den, sea witch."

I arch a brow, barely sparing him a glance. "Is that what you call this? A lion's den?" My lips curl. "Strange. All I see are rats scrambling over scraps."

The sneering one lets out a harsh chuckle, stepping closer, his breath hot and rancid against my skin. "Watch your mouth, sea witch, or I'll—"

I turn to him sharply, my tentacle flicking out before he can finish, curling around his throat with just enough pressure to make his next breath stutter.

"You'll what?" I murmur, tilting my head, my grip tightening ever so slightly. His pulse races beneath my hold, his bravado faltering.

The younger soldier stiffens, shifting his weight, debating whether or not to intervene.

I lean in closer, my voice smooth as silk, laced with venom. "If you value your tongue, I suggest you keep it. Otherwise..." My smirk deepens as I let my tentacle

slide lower, just brushing against the hilt of his sword. "I'll have it."

His jaw clenches, fury battling with fear in his eyes.

I release him with a slow, deliberate pull, stepping forward without another glance.

"Now," I purr, adjusting the pearls at my throat as if nothing happened. "Let's not keep your king waiting."

King Aldric Velmar II is exactly what I expected—broad. Powerful. Marinated in wealth and warfare.

He sits in a throne built from stolen bones, fingers tapping lazily against the pommel of the blade at his side. A king who takes what he wants, who drinks deeply from the suffering of others, his crownless head a statement—one that promises he will claim another soon.

His dark, calculating eyes rake over me as I step inside, slow and thorough, assessing, cataloging, deciding what I am worth. A smirk pulls at his lips, indulgent, amused.

I tilt my head, letting the pearls along my collar catch the candlelight. "No crown?"

The king's smile widens, teeth flashing white against his tanned skin.

"Why wear one," he muses, "when my hands are already poised to take another?"

Predictable.

I step closer, the fabric of my gown whispering against the ground, my hip brushing against the edge of his throne as I trail my fingers along the golden goblet at his side.

"Bold words," I murmur, watching his eyes darken. "And yet, last I checked, your men were still bleeding into the dirt outside her borders."

His jaw tightens—a barely perceptible flicker of irritation.

Even as he keeps his mask of amusement, I see the crack in his patience.

"You came to me," he counters smoothly. "That means I've already won."

I let my lips curl. "Oh? And here I thought I came because your army was too weak to break through Varellith's borders without me."

The air in the tent stiffens. A few of his guards shift uncomfortably. Aldric's eyes flicker—not with anger, but something closer to intrigue.

He does not scare easily.

Good. Because I want him to believe he is winning.

I lower myself onto the furs beside his throne, crossing my legs lazily, letting my tentacle slide along my calf, curling lightly around my thigh.

Aldric watches the movement closely—the way the pearlescent tendril flexes, the way my body shifts with ease, the way I hold myself with power, not submission.

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“Let’s talk, shall we?” I say, tracing a single finger along the rim of his goblet.

He is curious.

He is hungry.

And that will be his undoing.

I meet his gaze, slow and deliberate, letting a smirk ghost across my lips. “You aren’t the only one who wants to see the Dragon Queen fall.”

That gets his attention.

His fingers tighten around his goblet, his body leaning forward, the flickering light catching in his dark, predatory eyes. “Is that so?”

I tilt my head, letting the shadows of my silver hair cascade over my shoulder, my voice lowering to something smooth, dangerous, sweet as poison.

"She has ruled for too long. Has held power for too long. Perhaps it is time for her reign to end."

Aldric exhales a quiet chuckle, studying me as if deciding whether or not I am an enemy, an ally, or something far worse.

His mistake is thinking he has a choice.

I drag my fingers slowly along the polished wood of the table beside me, nails tapping against the surface as I feign indifference.

“I’ve spent weeks in her castle.” My voice drops lower, the weight of my words settling into the space between us. “I know her defenses. Her weaknesses. I know just how to bring her down.”

Aldric stills.

For the first time since I stepped into his tent, I see something shift behind his gaze—true interest, true greed.

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, studying me. “And why, exactly, would you betray her?”

I let my smirk widen, trailing a tentacle idly across my thigh, knowing his gaze will follow. “Because she betrayed me first.”

I exhale slowly, letting the lie settle, letting him see what he wants to see—a woman scorned.

We talk for what feels like hours. Of war. Of Nyxara and his soldiers, weapons, and strategies. His questions are sharp, but my answers are sharper—half-truths wrapped in silk and venom.

When he leans forward, intrigued, I lean forward too—just close enough for him to think he is winning me over.

Men always think they are winning.

And that is why they lose.

Finally, he exhales, swirling the deep red wine in his goblet. “You do not trust me,” he says.

I chuckle, low and sultry. “Should I?”

His smirk returns, slow and indulgent. “No.”

He likes this game.

And I intend to play it until the very end.

Aldric leans back in his chair, watching me with a calculating gleam in his eye, fingers tapping idly against the hilt of his sword.

“Well, you came to me, siren. So tell me, how do we end the Dragon Queen?”

I don’t answer immediately.

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Instead, I let the silence stretch, dragging my nails slowly along the soft fabric of my gown, tracing invisible patterns against the silk. The tension in the room thickens, the men shifting slightly, waiting, watching.

“She is not invincible,” I murmur at last, tilting my head. “Powerful? Yes. But not without her faults. Her weaknesses.”

Aldric hums, swirling the wine in his goblet. “Where do I strike?”

I lean forward, letting my tentacles unfurl lazily from my back, gliding over my arms, trailing along my collarbone. “Not with steel.”

His brow lifts, intrigue flashing behind his dark eyes. “No?”

I shake my head. “You could throw every sword, every spear, every battle-hardened soldier at her gates, and it wouldn’t be enough. Dragons don’t fear blades. They fear ruin. They fear the slow, creeping decay of their own power being stripped away, piece by piece, until they have nothing left.”

His smirk deepens. “And you can do this?”

I smile in return, slow, deliberate. “What do you think?”

Aldric exhales a quiet chuckle, shaking his head. “I think,” he muses, lifting his goblet, “that you are dangerous, sea witch.”

“Good,” I say smoothly. “Then you are paying attention.”

The guards flanking him shift uneasily. They do not like this.

They should be afraid.

A man behind me—young, foolish—scoffs under his breath. “A sea witch isn’t going to be the one to bring a dragon down,” he mutters, low enough that he thinks I won’t hear.

Wrong.

His mistake is assuming I will let it go, that he is untouchable.

Without moving, without speaking, I flick my wrist. The water in his goblet trembles—then rises, twisting into a thin tendril that snakes toward his throat.

He gasps, jerking back, his hand flying to his neck as the water tightens.

The other men react instantly, hands flying to their weapons, but Aldric raises a single hand.

He does not stop me. Instead, he watches. He wants me to show them exactly what I am. What power I wield.

The soldier struggles, his eyes bulging as the water slips down his throat, filling his lungs, drowning him where he stands.

I hold him there, watching the light fade from his eyes, feeling the delicious panic in the air until I grow bored.

Then, with a flick of my fingers, I release him.

He collapses to the ground, coughing, retching, gasping for air.

I don't spare him another glance.

I turn back to Aldric, meeting his gaze evenly. "Let's get one thing clear," I say, voice smooth as silk, sharp as a blade. "Disrespect me again, and I will drown this entire camp. I am more powerful than any of you mere humans could even fathom to understand."

Aldric watches me, his expression unreadable. Then, slowly, a smirk tugs at his lips. "And yet, you are here, meeting with me when you could take the Dragon Queen down yourself."

I incline my head, stepping closer, letting my fingers trail down his arm, letting my nails graze his skin. "I am," I murmur, voice like velvet. "Because I want something from you, the same way you want something from me."

His smirk does not falter. If anything, it deepens. "And what would that be?"

I press closer, letting my breath ghost against his ear. "You want my power? Fine. I will lend you my strength. I will lend you the sea. But I do not fight for free."

A flicker of hesitation—small, but there.

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Then, a slow chuckle rumbles in his chest. “And what is the price of a siren’s loyalty?”

I lift my hand between us, palm up, magic thrumming at my fingertips, waiting. “A bargain.”

Aldric’s eyes narrow slightly, but he does not refuse.

I let my fingers dance along his wrist, nails scraping lightly over his pulse. “You will have my aid. My power. My creatures. And in return, you will give me exactly what I want.”

His voice is low, almost dangerous. “And what is that?”

I smile, slow and dark, the hunger twisting through me as I meet his gaze. “Victory. By sunrise.”

A muscle jumps in his jaw. “And if I fail?”

My smirk widens, and I let my tentacles slither down my arms, curling around his wrist, pulling his hand into mine. “Then your soul belongs to me.”

He exhales slowly, watching me carefully, but I see it—the flicker of arrogance, the unwavering confidence of a man who has never known true defeat.

He thinks he will win.

He always does.

Aldric lifts his hand, palm up, accepting my terms.

“Done.”

Magic snaps between us, thick as the tide, binding the words, sealing the promise.

A bargain. A deal forged in war and blood and whispered ambition.

Aldric does not yet realize his fate was decided the moment he let me through his gates.

Chapter

Nineteen

NYXARA

The scent of smoke and steel thickens the air, curling through the war chamber like a living thing, seeping into the stone walls as if the castle itself knows what is coming. Hours have passed since Vaela left me for the human king, and in her wake, the tension here has only grown heavier. The torches lining the room flicker wildly, shadows dancing across the high ceiling, casting jagged shapes against the polished obsidian war table.

I stand at the head of it, my claws drumming against the carved map of my lands, my gaze fixed on the markers representing the human army. Too many. The number grates against my patience, the reality of their audacity curdling like bile in my throat.

They have moved faster than anticipated. Hundreds—no, thousands—of the king’s

soldiers now stand on my soil, tainting it with their filth, desecrating what does not belong to them. Their swift advance cannot be coincidence. The ache of betrayal twists in my chest when I think of the one who undoubtedly guided their way.

And she helped them.

Vaela.

My jaw tightens, my claws digging into the edges of the table, leaving deep gouges in the polished obsidian.

She knew everything—every flaw in my walls, every shift in my defenses. All of it, she offered up to him like a prize. The siren who wrapped herself around me like silk, who whispered against my skin, who made me believe I could trust her.

But it was all a lie. From the moment she arrived, she was looking for anything she could use—every vulnerability, every secret. And the moment she tore apart our contract, voiding it and every promise within, I should have known. She freed herself from any bond or obligation, from any semblance of loyalty.

I slam my hand down onto the table, magic crackling at my fingertips, seething through the stone. I will not be weak. Not for her. Not for anyone.

Morrin stands across from me, wings tucked tightly to his back, his expression unreadable, though I feel his judgment like a blade at my throat.

Over the past few days, reports of skirmishes along the borders have poured in—small battles that left blood staining the forest floors, charred remnants of villages smoldering in the distance. My scouts and patrols return exhausted but determined, their eyes shadowed with too many nights spent on constant alert.

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A group of forest kin—creatures both beastly and clever—line the walls in rigid silence, waiting and watching with dark, knowing gazes. One among them, a lithe creature with tufted ears and branching antlers, steps forward.

“U-um, m-my queen?” the small creature pipes up, voice trembling like a leaf. “W-we’ve seen the human armies b-building fortifications. N-new outposts keep popping up e-every day, and we suspect they’re preparing to march in just a few days...”

Murmurs ripple through the chamber. Another of the forest kin, this one sporting glimmering scales along its arms, speaks up. “We've spotted that sea witch among the king’s men, my queen,” the dwarf kin rumbles, his voice gruff. “And she walks free—doesn’t look like any prisoner I’ve seen.”

My claws dig into the obsidian table. “So she walks freely.”

They nod in unison, uneasy tension radiating through their ranks. There is no question who this “she” is.

Morrin clears his throat, stepping into the circle of flickering torchlight. “We need to strike first,” he insists, his voice sharper than steel. “Your people have held out for days, but we cannot keep fighting smaller battles like this. The humans are gaining ground.”

My eyes snap to him. “No. Let them come.”

The room stills. Even the torches seem to dim.

Morrin's beady black eyes narrow as he studies the map. "So, we hold our ground behind these walls, Nyxara?"

A scaled Sentinel, fresh from the western front, interjects, voice tight with worry. "With respect, my queen, some of our people fear that letting them come so close will cost too many lives. We've already lost half our patrols in the eastern territories—if we simply wait here, won't that embolden the humans?"

"Sometimes," I add, running a claw along the map, "the mightiest hunter lies still, waiting for the perfect moment. Let the humans come close. Let them taste the idea of victory. Let them believe we're cornered."

The chamber falls deathly silent. A ripple of unease passes through the forest kin, their eyes flickering between one another. Morrin's gaze meets mine, the faintest glimmer of grim approval there.

I glance up, pinning each of them with a dark, relentless stare. "And when they finally take that last, foolish step forward... they will fall before they even realize the trap was sprung."

No one doubts my intention. Defending the castle walls, allowing them to believe we've retreated in fear—this will be their undoing. And when the time comes, there will be no mercy, no reprieve. Only fire and blood.

I pause, letting my words settle into the hush that grips the chamber. My generals, my Sentinels, my forest allies—they watch me with a mixture of dread and unshakeable loyalty. The magic within me coils like a viper, hungry for release.

An older Sentinel, battle-hardened scars carving deep into his face, ventures to speak. "The humans have brought siege engines. Their numbers alone—"

“Numbers,” I cut him off, my voice echoing around the chamber. “They will bolster their courage, but it won’t save them.” I straighten, lifting my chin. “They do not know these walls as we do. They do not know this fortress.”

A beat of silence.

Then, one of the forest creatures—its fur caked in mud and flecked with dried blood—steps forward. “Your command, my queen?”

I do not hesitate. I do not waver.

“We draw them in,” I say coldly. “We let them taste the idea of conquest, and then we cut them down. We strike the moment they breach the second gate.”

“But what if they are prepared for that?” Morrin challenges. His wings ruffle in agitation. “What if the sea witch’s magic counters ours?”

I tilt my head, lips curving. “Then they will die tired.”

Across the table, a whispered ripple of agreement spreads among my warriors. The creatures at the perimeter bare their teeth in grim satisfaction.

Morrin nods, though the lines of concern remain etched into his brow. “We’ve already begun reinforcing the gates. Our alchemists are creating new wards, and the forest kin have agreed to ambush any supply lines that stray too far.”

“Good,” I say. “Let them know we are not passive defenders. Show them no mercy in the open fields. Harass them by day and by night. But once they near the castle, hold your positions. Let them feel safe on the threshold of my domain.”

A hush settles once more as my words sink in. Then the older Sentinel bows his head,

voice choked with resolve. “As you command, my queen. The preparations for war have already begun.”

I look around at the hardened faces, the wounded, the weary. They are loyal. They have shed blood and tears for our cause and I will not let that be in vain.

“No more waiting,” I pronounce, my voice carrying through the chamber. “No more strategizing. This will be their end.”

The castle shifts as my orders spread. The walls pulse with magic, ancient wards awakening, responding to the impending battle. The sky darkens, as if the storm brewing inside me has begun to reflect itself in the heavens.

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Down in the courtyards, my warriors prepare. The Sentinels sharpen their blades, their eyes glowing in the dim torchlight. They flicker in and out of existence, whispering to the shadows, calling forth the creatures that will join the fight.

The forges burn bright, molten steel hissing as newly forged weapons are submerged in ice-cold water.

A group of wyvern riders saddle their beasts, the creatures snorting and shaking their armored heads, their wings stretching against the night sky. Above them, my dragons circle, waiting for my command.

My armor is brought to me in silence.

Blackened steel, forged in the flames of my own fire, etched with runes of power. A second skin, unyielding, unwavering.

I fasten the chest plate, the weight of it pressing into my bones, a familiar comfort. My claws flex against the leather straps, securing the pauldrons at my shoulders. My battle leathers stretch over my thighs, the fabric reinforced with enchanted scales that shift like liquid in the candlelight.

The last piece—the crown.

Not a delicate thing. Not a symbol of grace. A weapon in its own right. Jagged edges of obsidian and silver rise from the circlet, framing my temples like the teeth of a predator, sharpened to wound.

I lift it, feeling the cold bite of metal in my palm. The inside is molded to fit the curve of my horns, the sharp peaks nestling between them like a second spine of shadow and steel. As I lower it into place, the weight settles at my brow, the enchanted silver locking into the ridges of my horns, binding to me, becoming me.

The obsidian curves at the back, arching around the base of my skull, while silver chains drape between the spires, threading along the ridges of my wings. The moment it is secured, the magic within it hums, whispering to my own, shadows curling from the edges like smoke, as if the crown is alive.

As if it knows war is coming.

I exhale, rolling my shoulders, feeling the armor move with me, feeling the balance of my wings as they extend, the dark membrane stretching, catching the flickering light before folding once more against my back.

I am ready.

And tonight, every human who thought to step foot into my land, will burn.

The night air is thick with the scent of metal and fire. The acrid tang of burning oil drifts through the wind, mixing with the stench of sweat, steel, and blood yet to be spilled.

Then, the war horns sound.

A deep, guttural bellow, like the roar of some ancient beast, rolling through the very bones of Varethorne. It vibrates through the stone beneath my feet, through the marrow in my bones. A summons. A promise.

I step onto the high battlements, the wind howling around me, my cloak snapping

behind me like a banner of war. The torches along the castle walls burn high, their golden light dancing against the onyx stone, but they do not soften the darkness stretching beyond the gates.

From this vantage point, I see everything.

The first wave of human soldiers has reached my borders, their torches flickering in the distance like scattered embers on the battlefield. Their war cries shatter the stillness of the night, a clamor of steel and savagery as they press forward.

Behind them, towers of wood and iron lumber into position—siege engines creeping forward like monstrous, mechanical beasts, their spiked wheels grinding deep into the earth.

And beyond them—Vaela.

She stands atop the cliffs, her silver hair a beacon in the night, catching the glow of the moon. The ocean writhes beneath her, churning violently, the tide rising and falling as if it breathes with her.

She is waiting.

Watching.

The betrayal should not sting. And yet it does.

My magic flares, the heat licking at my skin. Sparks dance between my fingertips, curling into fire.

I exhale slowly, my claws tightening at my sides. My breath is barely a sound, a whisper swallowed by the flickering torchlight.

"I do not need her," I murmur, the words brittle, sharp. A lie I force past my lips. "I never did."

The shadows do not answer.

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But they know the truth.

The first wave of arrows rises like a black tide, blotting out the stars.

A thunderous cacophony of steel against steel as my warriors raise their shields. The castle walls shudder under the assault, the force of thousands of arrows raining down in a deadly hailstorm.

A single signal—a flick of my hand—and the night ignites.

Flames erupt across the battlefield, racing along the dry grass like a living thing, hungry, insatiable. The first line of human soldiers barely has time to react before the fire swallows them whole.

Screams split the night, shrill and raw, bodies crumbling to ash before they can even reach my gates. The acrid scent of burning flesh fills the air, thick and suffocating.

The battlefield is chaos—blood, fire, the clash of steel against steel, the screams of the dying. My Sentinels move in the shadows, swift and merciless, their cloaked figures slipping through enemy ranks like wraiths, blades flashing, cutting down anything that dares move. The Sentinels phase in and out of existence, flickering ghosts of war, their whispering weapons carving through armor like silk, severing flesh from bone.

And yet the humans fight harder than I expected.

They push forward, stumbling over their own dead, undeterred by the massacre

unfolding around them. The second wave advances, shields locked, formations tight. They are prepared. Too prepared.

A war drum beats in the distance, deep and thunderous, shaking the ground beneath my feet. A signal.

I lift my chin, watching as the human frontline tightens, their spears glinting in the firelight. A ripple of command moves through them, and suddenly, I see it.

A break in our forces.

A weakness they intend to exploit.

My jaw clenches and I unsheathe my sword, the blade forged in dragonfire, its edge sharp enough to split bone. The weapon hums in my grasp, a whisper of destruction waiting to be unleashed.

And then the humans surge forward.

They strike with coordinated precision, forcing my warriors back step by step. My Sentinels cut them down by the dozens, but they keep coming. They sever them from the shadows, yet they do not falter. Their numbers are unrelenting, a tide of steel and flesh threatening to push us back toward the castle gates.

For the first time since this battle began, a sliver of doubt pierces through my fury.

No. I will not be undone. Not by men. Not by creatures who think themselves worthy to set foot in my lands. Heat burns beneath my ribs, coiling in my chest, demanding release.

I let it.

A roar tears from my throat, the sound shaking the very foundations of the battlefield. My bones crack, my flesh ignites, and before the humans can take another step forward I shift.

My body expands, power erupting from within me, wings unfurling into the sky, blotting out the light. My scales shimmer like molten obsidian, the fire inside me crackling through every inch of my form. Clawed feet slam into the earth, talons sinking into the bodies littering the battlefield. My tail whips out, catching a line of soldiers, sending them flying into the air, their bodies crushed before they even hit the ground.

Terror ripples through the humans. Some hesitate. Others run, but it doesn't matter. Because they are mine to burn. I inhale deep, viridian wrath pooling in my throat, my chest expanding with molten fury and then I breathe fire.

The front line erupts in an explosion of hellish light, flames engulfing everything in their path. Metal melts. Flesh peels. Screams pierce the air, sharp and agonized, as men crumble into nothing.

The humans break. Their careful formations collapse. They scatter, their disciplined lines falling into chaos.

I let out another roar, taking to the skies, circling above the battlefield, smoke and embers trailing in my wake. Below, my warriors regain control, surging forward, cutting through what remains of the human forces.

Victory is close, the battlefield bending to my will, the tide of war shifting in my favor. But something feels off.

A tremor moves through the earth beneath me, deep and rolling, not from the force of my fire or the clash of steel, but something other. It pulses through the battlefield,

subtle at first, like the slow breath of a beast waking from slumber. Then the scent of salt thickens, creeping past the blood and smoke, lacing the air with something unmistakable.

I beat my wings, lifting higher, my gaze sweeping the battlefield, scanning for the source of this shift. And then I see her.

Vaela.

She stands alone at the edge of the cliffs, her silver hair whipping in the wind, her sheer gown rippling around her like liquid moonlight. She does not wield a weapon, does not wear armor, does not charge into battle with a blade in hand. She doesn't need to.

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Because the ocean itself is hers to command.

The moment her lips part, the waves obey.

A hum rolls through the battlefield, soft yet potent, barely a whisper above the roar of war, but enough to send a shudder through the sea. The tide surges, rising unnaturally, spilling over the rocky shore, pushing forward rather than pulling back. It does not crash—it waits, held in place by something only she can control.

Her magic.

Familiar, undeniable.

The betrayal I braced for never comes.

The humans falter. Their footing is stolen from them, their weapons made useless as the ground beneath them softens, their ranks breaking as the sea rises to meet them. It is not an attack against me—it is a death sentence for them.

Realization dawns, slow and creeping, burning through the thick haze of my rage.

She is not here to destroy me.

She is here to help me.

I hover in the air, wings outstretched, staring down at her, at the sea answering her call, at the fear creeping into the eyes of the soldiers who once stood so sure of their

impending victory.

Vaela tilts her chin up, her glowing white-blue gaze locking onto mine across the battlefield, and I know.

This was always her plan.

She didn't betray me.

The truth strikes me like a bolt of lightning, splitting through the storm of my fury, unraveling everything I thought I knew. Vaela went to him—not to surrender, or to hand me over. No, the sea witch went to him to trap him.

To destroy him.

She fed him lies wrapped in truth and made him a bargain he couldn't refuse. The whole plan was so flawlessly executed, that even I had believed it. But I was wrong, and so was he. Vaela never belonged to him.

She has always been mine.

And now, she is delivering his death to me on a silver platter.

The realization tightens in my chest, something dangerously close to relief, something I cannot afford to feel yet. The battle is not over. The king still breathes.

But not for long.

I glance down at the battlefield, watching the humans flounder in rising water, their ranks thrown into chaos. Their torches sputter out, their siege weapons are dragged under, their screams drown in the roar of the tide.

Vaela stands above them all, a queen in her own right, her hands outstretched, her song weaving into the waves, commanding them, shaping them, killing with nothing more than her voice.

She played the game.

And now, for the first time since the battle began—I smile.

Chapter

Twenty

VAELA

The sea is my weapon, and I wield it well.

The tide surges at my command, ravenous, unrelenting, alive. It reaches up the shore, curling around the battlefield like a serpent, dragging Aldric's soldiers into the deep, where they will never be seen again. They thrash, screaming, clutching at the ground, at each other, at anything—but it doesn't matter.

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The sirens are waiting.

They slip from the tide like shadows, their smiles too wide, their eyes too dark, their laughter a haunting melody that dances between the war cries. They drag the men down, nails raking through steel, fingers pressing against thrashing limbs, whispers like silk against their ears.

Come deeper, love.

Come drown for me.

I do not watch them struggle. There is no need.

I know how this ends.

Instead, I turn my gaze to the battlefield, where fire and shadow carve a path through the foolish remnants of Aldric's army.

The forest burns with Nyxara's rage, the trees twisted in agony as viridian fire races through their roots. Creatures of the wild tear through the lines of men, fangs sinking into flesh, talons ripping through armor like parchment. The Sentinels move like gods among mortals, their weapons dripping with the blood of invaders who should have known better.

And above it all, she flies.

Nyxara.

Her onyx wings split the sky, her body a leviathan of fire and fury, raining down destruction in streaks of burning green. She is beautiful. Terrible. Untouchable.

And Aldric was supposed to kill her.

That was the deal.

He was supposed to take Varellith before dawn and rip the heart from this realm and place it at my feet. Instead, the sun is cresting the mountains, gilding the battlefield in a golden haze, signaling what I have known all along.

Aldric has lost.

And I?

I have already won.

The great King of Solmar stands among the wreckage of his ambition, soaked in blood, sweat, and failure.

His golden armor is ruined, tarnished black with soot, splattered with gore. His once-pristine royal cloak—a symbol of his dominion, of his supposed right to conquer—is torn, singed, dragging in the mud behind him.

Aldric is out of time, out of men, out of options, and he knows it.

Still, he refuses to fall.

I'll give him that—the man is stubborn.

He pants through gritted teeth, his chest heaving, fingers white-knuckled around the

hilt of his sword. There is no army at his back anymore. No war machines. Only the bodies of those who followed him here, who died for nothing.

He lifts his head and finds me.

And oh, how he loathes me. That fury in his eyes? That betrayal? That is what I live for.

"You," he snarls, voice hoarse, broken.

I smirk. "Me," I echo, letting the word roll off my tongue like a purr.

His hand tightens around his sword, but we both know the truth. Steel won't save him now.

"We had a deal," he grits out.

I sigh, feigning boredom, dragging a hand through my silver hair, still damp with sea mist.

“Did we?” I hum.

His jaw locks. “You gave me your power,” he growls. “You swore it was mine to wield.”

“And it was,” I admit with a mocking tilt of my head. “But you didn’t do your part, did you?” I gesture toward Nyxara, still burning bright in the sky, still very much alive. “You were supposed to kill the Dragon Queen before sunrise.”

I glance toward the horizon, where the first slivers of sunlight are creeping over the mountaintops, gilding the battlefield in a soft, golden glow.

Aldric follows my gaze—and there it is.

The horror.

The weight of his failure.

His teeth grind so hard I swear I hear them crack. “I should have slit your throat the moment I met you,” he hisses.

I laugh, light and easy. “Oh, darling, you should have done a lot of things.”

His breath shudders, his body trembling with rage, with exhaustion, with the slow realization that this is the end. And still, he lunges.

Predictable.

I do not move.

Because before his blade can reach me—Nyxara's fire descends.

The flames engulf him, turning steel to molten slag, melting the flesh from his bones. His screams tear through the battlefield, raw and jagged, his fingers clawing at his chest as if he can rip the agony away.

Fool.

He collapses, his crown slipping from his head, lost in the dirt, in the blood, in the ashes of what he once was.

And still, he does not die.

Because I won't let him.

I kneel beside him, placing a delicate hand against his charred chest. "A deal," I whisper, "is only binding if both parties uphold their end."

His burned lips part—to beg, to curse, to plead, but I don't let him. I press my palm harder and I pull.

His soul rips free from its mortal cage, thrashing, resisting, desperate. It is gold and ash, tattered and broken, the remnants of a king who thought himself a god. The big pearl on my bodice pulses, hungry. The moment his soul touches it, it is swallowed whole.

Aldric collapses.

Empty. Lifeless.

A useless husk.

I hum, tapping a finger against my lips. “Well. That was dramatic.” But I am not done. A king’s soul should not be wasted. I pluck the pearl from my bodice, feeling the tremor of his trapped essence. Then, I reach down and claim a jagged shard of obsidian, prying it from the fingers of a fallen Sentinel. The blade is slick with blood, dark as the deep. From the ocean, a piece of coral rises, twisting and smooth, its veins pulsing with the magic of the tide.

And at last, the tree.

The one still burning with Nyxara’s Viridian Wrath, its bark cracked with fire, its roots pulsing with the life of this land. I press my hand to the scorched wood, whispering words of salt and sea, of power and promise. The fire does not consume me—it bends, listens, obeys.

The obsidian fuses to the coral. The pearl settles at the peak, glowing, alive. The magic thrums, sealing it all together in a single, terrible thing.

A staff.

A weapon.

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A king who sought to own what was never his, now reduced to something useful for his enemy. I turn and see Nyxara is waiting. She lands, her massive form shifting, scales shrinking, fire dimming, until she stands before me in her human form, emerald eyes both confused and wary.

"Thought you might want this," I say, twirling the staff between my fingers, letting the pearl at its peak pulse with the remnants of Aldric's soul.

Nyxara doesn't take it.

Not yet.

Her emerald eyes flick from the weapon to me, dark and unreadable, her lips pressed into something that is not quite a frown but not quite amusement, either.

"You could have told me," she says at last, her voice low, slow, carrying the weight of something unspoken beneath it. "I don't like things being hidden from me."

There's something dangerous in the way she says it, a razor-edge beneath each syllable, a warning wrapped in velvet.

And gods, it makes my pulse race.

I smirk, letting my fingers trail lazily along the length of the staff before offering it to her once more. "Where would the fun in that be?"

She doesn't move. Doesn't take it. She just watches me.

Waiting.

I sigh dramatically, shifting my weight to one hip. "You had a whole war to win, my love. I couldn't have you worrying about me when your realm was in danger." I flash her a slow, knowing smile. "Besides, this way, you never had to doubt the outcome. Even with my power on his side, I made sure Aldric never stood a chance."

Her jaw clenches slightly.

"Is that what you think?" she murmurs, stepping closer now, slow and deliberate, her fire-bright gaze holding mine hostage. I don't step back. I don't even breathe.

I can feel the heat of her magic, the weight of her presence wrapping around me, something dark and possessive curling in the space between us.

"And I am supposed to just believe you didn't let him touch you," she says softly. "That you didn't whisper your siren song in his ear and let him think you were his."

Ah.

So that's what this is.

I let my smile sharpen, lifting my chin as she closes the distance, until her breath is warm against my cheek. "Believe what you want, Dragon Queen," I purr, tilting my head, letting my lips brush the air just beside hers. "But the king is dead, and here I am, handing you his soul wrapped up in a pretty little weapon. Would you rather I had let him win?"

Her eyes darken, Viridian Wrath glowing.

"I would rather," she murmurs, her fingers finally curling around the staff, "you

remember exactly who you belong to."

A thrill runs through me, electric and sharp, but I mask it with a lazy grin.

"Oh, my queen," I whisper, stepping back just enough to let my gaze roam over her, slow and deliberate. "I never forget."

She holds my stare a moment longer, then lifts the staff between us, her fingers tightening around it. The pearl at its peak glows, pulsing in time with the soul trapped inside.

Aldric's soul.

Hers to break. And just like that—The war is over.

Chapter

Twenty-One

NYXARA

The war is over.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:33 pm

The humans are defeated. But the land is wounded.

I walk through the ruins of my kingdom, through the ashes of what was lost and the embers of what remains. The once-magnificent trees of Varellith—tall, ancient, and untamed—stand in scorched, splintered silence. The battle tore through the forest, leaving charred roots and blackened soil, the ground soaked in the blood of those who fought to protect it.

And yet, despite the devastation, life stirs beneath the ruin.

The rivers are beginning to run clear again, the currents no longer choked with ash and debris. The creatures of the forest, both those who fled, and those who fought or watched from the shadows, emerge from their hiding places, hesitant but whole. The sky above, once blotched with smoke and shadow, begins to clear, the first golden light of morning breaking through the darkness, chasing away the last remnants of war.

Varellith survived.

And so did I.

The tide stretches far onto the shore, closer than it ever has before, as if reaching for something. The sea, once a force I fought to keep at bay, has not retreated.

It lingers.

It claims what is now part of it.

I follow the path upward, to the highest balcony of Varethorne, where the wind carries the scent of salt and rain, of fire and victory. And standing there, waiting for me, is Vaela.

Her silver hair catches the light, tangled with salt and blood, strands whipping in the sea breeze. Her pearl bodice and lace gown clings to her like mist over the tide, her bare feet pressing against the cold stone. Her expression is unreadable, but her presence is undeniable.

She belongs here.

Just as I knew she would.

Something foreign coils in my chest, pressing against my ribs, something tight, unrelenting, consuming.

I had hated her.

For betraying me. For making me believe she had chosen him. For whispering in Aldric's ear, letting him touch her, letting him believe he could claim her. But I was wrong. She had never chosen him.

No, instead, the sea witch played him. Ruined and destroyed him from the inside out. And now he is gone.

And despite it all, she is here. Still standing, and still mine. I approach, the weight of war still thick in my bones, my magic burning low but steady beneath my skin. She tilts her head, waiting for me to speak first.

I don't.

Instead, I do something I have never done before.

I kneel before her.

The wind howls through the empty battlefield below, the ruins of war still fresh, still bleeding, still healing.

"I was wrong," I murmur, my voice quiet but steady. "You, siren, are not my enemy. You never were."

Her eyes flicker, silver catching the sunrise, reflecting it back like shattered light.

"And?"

The word is simple, but there's an edge to it—a test. I exhale slowly. I have never bowed for anyone. Not even the gods. But she is not a god. She is worse. She is a siren, a storm in human skin, a song spun from salt and sin, a force that defies the natural order of things.

I lift my chin, holding her gaze as I speak the truth I had known long before today.

"And without you, this war might not have been won for my king. I owe you a great debt, and so, my land, power, and soul... are yours. Should you want them."

The corner of her mouth lifts—a smirk, slow and knowing, dark with satisfaction appears. Her fingers tangle into my hair, gripping tight, forcing my head up until I'm looking into her silver eyes—glowing, sharp, dangerous. The ocean wind lashes around us, cool against my burning skin, carrying the scent of salt and victory.

"You know," she muses, tilting her head, feigning innocence, though the glint in her eye is anything but, "I thought I'd have to work harder for this." She drags her nails

along my scalp, scratching lightly, making me shudder. “But look at you. So eager.”

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A slow, hot coil of something dangerous and deep twists low in my stomach.

I exhale, steadying myself. “I am yours to command. Yours to serve.” Her fingers tighten, yanking my head back further. I let her. She leans in, lips just barely brushing mine, her voice a warm ripple against my skin.

“Then serve me properly, Dragon Queen.”

She shifts back, planting one foot on the obsidian gargoyle statue beside her, spreading her legs wider, baring herself completely.

I don’t need to be told twice.

I drag my hands up her thighs, feeling her softness, her warmth, the way she shivers beneath my touch.

Vaela hums in approval. “That’s more like it.”

She leans back against the balcony railing, the sunlight making her glow, her silver hair catching in the wind. She looks like something untouchable, and to everyone else, she is. But I can touch her.

And so, I do.

I kiss the inside of her thigh, slow and deliberate, dragging my tongue over her skin, feeling the way her muscles twitch beneath my lips.

She huffs a laugh, but there's a tremor to it now. "You always this slow, or do you just like teasing me?"

I smirk against her skin. "I like hearing you beg."

Her grip tightens in my hair, a sharp pull. "Cute." And then she tugs me in, pressing my mouth against her soaked, aching heat.

I groan at the taste of her, hot and sweet and fucking intoxicating.

Vaela gasps sharply, her head tilting back, her thigh tensing beneath my fingers. "Oh—gods."

I lap at her, slow at first, savoring, teasing.

But she doesn't want teasing.

She wants to be taken apart.

Her fingers clench in my hair, her hips rolling forward. "Don't fucking play with me, Nyxara."

I growl softly, my hands sliding under her thighs, gripping tight as I pull her further into my mouth, sucking, flicking, devouring.

Her moan is low, breathy, wrecked. "There you go," she pants, smirking even as she trembles. "Knew you had it in you."

She's drenched, hot and slick against my tongue, her body tightening, her legs trembling. As the first cold brush of her tentacle's winds around my wrists, slithering, teasing, keeping me right where she wants me. I shudder, my body reacting on

instinct, heat pulsing between my legs.

Vaela notices. Of course she does.

She laughs, low, sultry. “Oh? You like that?”

I moan against her, sucking harder, flicking my tongue in a way that makes her jolt. She curses, her nails scraping against my scalp, gripping me tighter, dragging me deeper. Her tentacles wrap around me, sliding over my waist, curling down my thighs, teasing, tormenting. I whimper into her, my body arching, desperate, wanting more.

Vaela gasps, her hips jerking, her whole-body trembling.

“Gods, yes—just like that,” she breathes, her voice breaking, her pleasure cresting.

I drive my tongue deeper, faster, matching the way she rocks against my face, my fingers digging into her thighs, anchoring her, letting her use me.

Her breathing is uneven now, her grip turning desperate.

She’s close, and I want to feel her fall apart. I slide one hand between her thighs, slipping my fingers inside her, curling deep, pressing against that perfect spot. Vaela shouts, her whole-body tightening, her tentacles squeezing around me as she comes, hard and shuddering, waves crashing over her.

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She holds me there, legs clenching around my head, back arching as her pleasure rips through her. I stay with her, licking, sucking, drinking in everything she gives me. Finally, her body relaxes, her grip loosening in my hair, her tentacles slowly unwinding from my wrists and waist. I pull back, panting, my lips wet, my chin slick with her.

She looks wrecked.

Completely fucking ruined.

Her icy eyes are half-lidded, hazy, and sparkling with satisfaction. She lifts her hand, grips my jaw, tilting my face up so she can see me properly. And then she smirks.

“You know, Dragon Queen,” she exhales, lazy and pleased. “You really are good at that.”

I grin against her thigh, licking my lips. “I learn fast.”

She hums, amused, smug. Her fingers tighten on my jaw, dragging me up, pressing her mouth to mine. She licks the taste of herself off my lips, moaning softly, as if she’s already thinking of the next time, of how she will break me apart again and again. Her grip on my hair doesn’t loosen.

She pulls back just enough to whisper, low and teasing, “You’re mine.”

The words settle deep inside me, sinking like an anchor, like the tide pulling me under. I smile, slow and knowing.

"And you are mine, siren."

Vaela grins.

Then, she pushes me back down.

And I obey.

In the days that follow, our worlds begin to knit themselves together.

The sea does not ever retreat. The tide stretches further into Varellith, and the forest does not resist the ocean's touch—it welcomes it. Roots drink from the salt, branches stretch toward the shore, the rivers carve new paths that lead into the tide.

What was once separate now thrives as one. The our realms are whole.

The creatures of the deep walk among the creatures of the wood. The sirens sing in the rivers, the Sentinels of stone stand where the waves meet the trees. And at the heart of it all, at the throne where two realms become one, Vaela sits.

I stand beside her, watching, waiting.

Because even I know, while we may have won this war. This will not be the last time our kind sees bloodshed at the hand of humans.

Their greed, their thirst for vengeance is too great. It's only matter of time before Aldric's young princess seeks to destroy those who took her father from her, and when she does, we will be ready.

My sea witch, and I.