



Above the Ashen Clouds

(Twisted Worlds #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Five years ago, the world changed. Cities were replaced with mystical forests, fields with devastating mountains, and deserts with marshlands—and all of them came with beings that used to live only in fantasy novels.

Cat, a political science PhD candidate who lives in Princeton, New Jersey, has been fascinated by the world's newest inhabitants since the day they first appeared—strictly in an academic sense, of course. Not taken in by the reality TV shows, social media presences, or general cult obsession, she wants to learn everything about the new creatures. So when she attends a summit between the angels and humans as part of her studies and receives a surprise invitation from an angel to visit their nearby mountain, she accepts.

Zariel is an angel and an archivist, devoted to preserving the texts inside the mountain that serves as both a library and a prison. Like the rest of his kind, he's convinced that their ancient library and its archaic magic has the answer to how to return home. But when he sees Cat at the first summit between angels and humans, he is shocked to discover that she is his mate, an unheard-of occurrence between an angel and something other. Unable to leave her behind, he manages to convince her to visit their home in the Ashen Mountain, to give him a chance to uncover this latest mystery. No matter how the other angels feel about it.

However, some of the angels have their own plans to return home, and they are not afraid to turn to chaotic blood magic. Cat and Zariel are quickly drawn into a conflict between these angels, their own desperate need to discover the truth about the worlds, and their unexpected bond. As their relationship grows, they will have to fight to stay together, even when others are literally trying to tear the world apart.

Twisted Worlds is a series of stand alone romances that contains an interconnected plot with characters that are referred to and/or appear in multiple books. This novel is the second in the series, and focuses on a romance that can be read and enjoyed on its own. However, reading the series out of order may result in missing some context about the books connecting threads and potential spoilers for the earlier books.

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Curiosity killed the Cat.

That's me. I'm Cat. It's short for Catalina, and I've been the unfortunate recipient of endless and unoriginal jokes about my nickname since I was old enough to appreciate them. And no, my mother just liked the sound of my name—the '90s were a dark time. No one in my immediate family has ever been to Catalina Island.

And yes, I'm too curious for my own good. But in my defense, how could I not be? The world is fascinating, if one only looks.

Five years ago, our world changed in an instant. While most of the country slept, familiar landmarks, cities, and counties were suddenly gone, replaced with lands that were certainly not from here. Where they came from, no one knew. There were now elves in Minnesota, fae whose bodies were metal melded with flesh, other fae in Alaska who were rumored to create new life from their dead, and nymphs, leshi, and pixies. It seemed as if every creature from folklore and fantasy now lived on earth.

Oh, there were lots of theories—and I mean lots—and they ranged from the promising to the outright belligerent. Aliens, government conspiracy, 5G, and lead poisoning were the main suspects, as well as the idea that the world was experiencing a collective hallucination. In the early days, I particularly enjoyed the theory that the earth had somehow crossed into the horizon of a black hole and thus our comprehension of the world had changed to reveal what had been here all along—until someone who actually knew about black holes squashed that theory.

But after the metaphorical dust settled, infrastructure was repaired, and people came to the devastating realization that those who were gone were gone for good, attention

turned to who the new inhabitants were—and what that meant for those of us who remained.

I was lucky. I didn't lose anyone close to me when the angels' ash-covered mountain appeared near my erstwhile home in Princeton, New Jersey. I was also lucky I was able to use my education in political science at the university to be at the front of the latest research regarding human relations with these new occupants. And I was even luckier that the mountain appeared near the university and not on it, as that would've made my research quite difficult. Instead, the mountain removed a golf course and fields, so the location could've definitely been worse.

But what I was not lucky about was that our new angelic neighbors didn't tell us anything about themselves after they arrived. At all. They remained in their mountain, all but shunning us entirely, leaving us to learn what we could by glimpses and rumors. In their self-enforced solitude, whatever storied glory they wielded in their original home was now confined to shadows and stone.

In a broken world, those within it are also shattered.

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Chapter one

Cat

I had seen enough transcripts to last a lifetime.

From within my sterile cubicle in the Political Science Department, I sorted through paper after paper looking for one single reference in all of these interviews to answer my question—were the angels inclined towards militarism in their culture? That is, did they value and promote their military? And if so, what would that mean for the United States’ international policy in the coming decades? Were they a threat that we had to consider, should they ever decide to leave their mountain? What would happen if they decided to ally with foreign powers with interests that were hostile to the United States? These were the burning questions I had to answer for my work at the Institute for the Study of Human-Otherworld Relations (ISHOR). Sure, my work had its moments, and learning about the angels was fascinating, but these interview transcripts were most-decidedly ... not.

Interviewer: What did the angel say to you?

Witness 3: He said nothing with his mouth. But he didn’t have to. I heard it.

Interviewer: Heard it?

Witness 3: Yes. In my head. He told me to buy the ticket.

Interview: A ticket?

Witness 3: Yes. A lottery ticket. Told me to buy 'em all.

Sigh. Angels couldn't communicate telepathically. That much we knew, based on what creatures from the other world had told us about them. Other than a few very carefully arranged communications, no one has had direct communications with the angels, yet. These last five years they had stayed on the mountain, isolated and stubbornly unwilling to have anything to do with us.

All of that was about to change. Hence, my research suddenly had enough importance to promote me from a lowly summer research assistant to a full-time research assistant to Doctor Cheblek, assisting her with her research as I pursued my PhD in political science. I had narrowly beaten Carolyn Zabinsky for the position—she had a superior academic record but suffered when it came to creativity. She had also been my archnemesis since undergrad, when she decided to take all my credit for a class exercise .

My work mattered. Carolyn did not. Carolyn could go intern at the local historical society and cosplay Revolutionary War civilians, as far as I cared.

The angels were my only concern. That, and getting my doctorate.

As of now, almost all our knowledge about the angels was second hand, imparted by creatures who were from the same world as them, the ones who had made an effort to integrate into our society. Unfortunately, with the religious connotations surrounding angels, they were a species prone to a lot more creative elaboration than, say, a unicorn. My dissertation, and the attendant research papers that came with my program, were to focus on that exact topic—how the fact that many religions have angels in a position as god's messengers could affect their potential influence on the United States' international policy, should they decide to exercise it. If these angels wanted to, they could dramatically influence international politics, merely because of what people believed them to be.

I had yet to read about anyone claiming that a telepathic unicorn told them to buy lottery tickets. Or told them to abandon their family in order to walk from one side of the country to the other. Or told them to stop eating anything “excreted” from another living creature, including plants, which apparently meant removing bananas, seeds, peas, and other such things from their diet .

In short, angels obviously had an influence that other creatures simply didn’t. And thus, they warranted special study and careful negotiations. The upcoming summit with the angels was the pinnacle of years of effort, and any future relations depended on its success.

“Still here, Cat?” a wiry male voice asked.

“Yes,” I answered, not looking up from the documents. The voice belonged to my colleague Dimitrius. Or as I called him, “Dimmy.” He was of a respectable height and had bold eyes, but there was no light behind them. The lights were on, but no one was home, as people say. He was a legacy student. I mean, so was I. But I took my education seriously.

“You know,” Dimmy said, “if you’re not working smart, you may as well not be working at all.”

Slowly, I raised my eyes to find Dimmy’s knowing smirk, which lurked under slicked-back hair that was days overdue for a wash. “ You’re still here.”

“Not for long. I’m going to Wawa.” Dimmy’s gaze roamed over my buttoned blue cardigan, and it was all I could do to restrain myself from snapping at my fellow assistant. Dr. Mulberry didn’t take kindly to his assistants being beaten with textbooks. Even ones who dressed like they were already tenured tweed-obsessed professors.

“Have fun with ... that.” I turned my attention back to the riveting transcript.

“Do you want to come with me?” he asked.

“To Wawa? ”

“Yes.”

“No, thank you,” I said. “I have work to do.” And I’d rather get a colonoscopy. There was Wawa and its coffee and hoagies, and then there was Wawa with Dimmy. No.

“You know”?Dimitri leaned on the metal edge of the fabric cubicle dividers?“many say the twenties are the prime years of a woman’s life.”

“I’m sure they do.” I curled my toes, because that was the only body part I could curl without him seeing my budding anger. My hardcover copy of *The Prince* would look excellent soaring towards Dimmy’s head.

“And here you are,” Dimmy continued, “spending your prime years staying late in a building with no one to keep you company.”

“There are others here.” And there were. Academia never slept.

“You know, this isn’t going to make Dr. Mulberry choose you for the summit. Or should I say, why he didn’t choose you.” He scrunched his nose. “I’ve been working on our proposal for weeks—he’s not going to care that you’re, what, reading tabloid articles? Next thing I know you’ll be subscribing to *Little Fairy Flavor* .”

“Dr. Mulberry will choose who he thinks is best to accompany him,” I said, ignoring his implication that I followed fae social media personalities. Or any social media personalities. If Dr. Mulberry wanted to bring Dimmy of all people with him to meet

the angels, then he was more than welcome to. Even if the idea made me want to grit my teeth. And even if Dr. Cheblek told me there was nothing she could do to influence his decision, but agreed privately that it was the wrong one.

“Have fun at Wawa,” I said. When and if I decided to spend my energy on a relationship, it would be when I was ready for one and all my criteria in a partner were met. And it was never going to be Dimmy.

Dimmy pushed himself up and prepared to leave, having finally seemed like he had gotten the hint, though we’ve already had similar versions of this conversation around, oh, thirty times? He would try to ask me out, I’d say no, he’d say something that just toed the edge of my reporting him to human resources, and then he’d spend the next day bragging about his accomplishments, both real and imagined. And then the cycle would repeat itself. Again.

“Cat?” a familiar voice asked from down the hall.

“I’m still here, Silv,” I called out after releasing a stilted breath.

Silv, short for Silvianus, was our department’s resident satyr—and my friend. He strode down the hall, wearing pants, special shoes designed to hide his hooves, and a dark brown canvas jacket. If one didn’t look too closely, he just seemed like a particularly hairy man. A hairy man with little horns.

“Would you like to take a walk with me?” he asked, eyeing Dimmy .

Silv had absolutely no interest in women other than as treasured friends. This was yet another of his endearing qualities. He knew what was going on instantly, having been working with us for over a year now. Silv often hinted that back in their old world, something would’ve eaten Dimmy by now.

“A walk?” I asked, already moving to shut down my work station.

“The trees are shifting with the season. I can practically taste it.”

He, like all the other creatures, had adopted the primary language of the part of the world they had appeared in. Thus, Silv spoke perfect English, though he retained something of a lyrical accent, and occasionally his word choice was ... odd.

“Sure,” I said, closing my files and logging out of my computer. “I could use some air before I head home.”

Dimmy huffed and left. I would’ve felt bad, if it was anyone other than Dimmy.

“Come,” Silv said, politely offering me his arm once my computer was shut down.

“This place is unnatural at the best of times. It’s no place to spend an evening.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” I chuckled.

Together we left the building, making office small talk while we strolled through the desolate campus. Silv was technically an intern, but he received lodging and a stipend in exchange for the valuable insight he gave us into his original world. Back home he had been a scholar, and he had seamlessly shifted into a similar role for us. I had a feeling he was studying us as much as we were studying him, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a file under his bed with each of our names on it, ready and organized for if he ever had the chance to return home.

It was early fall, the hint of autumn already in the air. Now that I had left the ungodly chill of the office building, I unbuttoned my cardigan, letting my skin breathe for the first time in hours. The university buildings’ windows stared at me in silent judgment as we passed, the brilliant white frames standing out in the darkness.

With no one around other than Silv, I checked my phone. I'd have to remember to call my mom tomorrow. She lived in Quakertown, around an hour from here, and yet far too close. It had been a few days since we talked—she'd want to know how I was doing. And when I was coming home. And when I was going to graduate. And if I bothered to date someone recently. The world had changed, but mothers hadn't changed one bit. The summit was only in two days, and I couldn't tell her too much about my work until after it was made public, so our discussions always left her unsatisfied.

“I wanted to talk with you about the angels,” Silv said, stepping on the concrete with a distinctive swagger, his jacket still draped over his shoulders. “But I didn't want that cretin to overhear.”

Silv was well-known enough here that he didn't have to hide his identity, but it made things easier if he blended in. Many of the creatures from the other world had taken massive strides to fit into our society, but change never came easy. And it was probably tiring being stared at constantly.

“What about them? You told us everything already.” I adjusted my satchel. The weight strained my neck, and I stretched, getting a view of a nosy woman watching us from a window. I ignored her.

“I did,” Silv said with a nod. “But I wanted to ask you not to go to the summit.”

“What? Whatever for?”

“You don't know what they're like, Cat. You have no reason to know.”

“I've been studying them for years.”

“Yet you've never met one.”

I took a moment to think. I didn't remind Silv about how much work I had done to prepare for this summit. He already knew. The angels and the government had agreed to a formal meeting that would occur in two days' time, where they would give us translated manuscripts and trinkets for us to study, and we would provide them with food and other supplies. The hope was that this would establish a better relationship. Others, apparently, were not so optimistic. Like Silv.

On that fateful day over five years ago, the angels' mountain suddenly appeared in place of a sprawling country club outside of Princeton. Suddenly this little city that was a picturesque suburbia littered with Revolutionary War sites became a place of angels. Not just angels—ashen angels.

In the daylight, I could see it even from campus—the towering mountain that lurked on the edges of the city, far higher and narrower than any mountain should be. Currently, it was estimated to be over ten thousand feet tall, a marvel of stone hovering over the world. There was no magic barrier protecting the mountain as there were guarding some parts of the invading world, yet humans were still unable to visit it—there was a cloud of some sort of ash or fine metal that whirled around the mountain in a torrent, making it impossible for any to enter without guidance. The angels could manage it, however, as their wings were coated in a fine silver metal. And they apparently had magic that made them immune.

“I appreciate that you worry about me,” I finally said. “But you’re going to have to tell me more than that to change my mind. You know what this means to me. I’ll be perfectly safe.”

“You don’t know what they’re like.” Silv repeated and crossed his arms. “I never lived in their lands, but I heard the stories.”

“You told them all to us—we’re expecting anything. Including cannibalism.”

He let out a curt laugh. “That part probably isn’t true, but they’re cruel. The humans in their kingdom are not citizens to them—they’re tolerated, because they don’t bother anyone and they distract others who get too close to their cities. I can assure you that there are no humans inside that mountain. Not above ground, at any rate.”

My brow furrowed. “But you’ve said that humans are permitted to study at their universities. They allow many creatures.”

“That doesn’t mean they value them the same.”

Silv frowned as a car drove by, blasting some pained thudding music. “I’ll never understand why the humans here tolerate such assaults on the senses,” he said once the car passed.

“Anyway,” he continued, “only angels are allowed to use their magics. Only angels are allowed to go near their treasured libraries that dwell within the mountain.” Silv pointed to that mountain, which lurked over the horizon. “If you think that means they wouldn’t hesitate to destroy you if it suited them, you’re being painfully naïve. Not to mention the rumors of what I heard occurs underneath.”

“I won’t be alone.”

His tone made a chill run down my spine. What were the rumors? Silv the Scholar wasn’t prone to exaggeration, and if he didn’t voice this rumor, that meant either he thought it was too extreme to mention, or he was worried about how it would negatively influence our interactions—in a way that could someday harm him. Or me. And since he told us about the cannibalism rumor ...

“You aren’t listening to me,” he said. “You shouldn’t go near them. I have no idea what they might do to you if given the chance.” He played with a button on his jacket. “How about I come to your place instead, and we spend the day eating pizza

and watching awful television and let the others contend with the summit? It's your turn to host."

I smiled, shaking my head. "If I don't go, Dimmy will. I can't let Dimmy have this. He won't appreciate it."

"Let him have the dangers," Silv said. "I know you worked hard, and that this is important to you, but please—don't go. There will be other opportunities for you to shine."

Other opportunities? Did he not see what I had been through the last couple years? "After all of this," I said, "you expect me to still rely on pictures? To write my dissertation on second-hand accounts?" All reports indicated that these angels were the celestial beings depicted by so many Renaissance painters, glorious and winged—with metal-glazed feathers. But all rumors said they were brutal creatures, little better than some eldritch horror. What was the truth?

"I expect you to stay alive." Somehow, Silv's expression turned even more solemn. "Stay back from the summit and find a young man to court, for once, if a day of lounging with me is not enticing enough for you."

I cackled. "I'll find someone when I'm done with my dissertation and not a moment earlier. It's going to take a lot more than that to get me to be happy about staying behind. You're starting to sound like my mother."

"Sometimes mothers make valid points." Silv shook his head in resignation. You'd think I had announced that I was going to be a mime on Times Square, and not possibly going to the summit that could decide my career. "Cat, you've been one of the nicest humans I've met since I came here. You helped me decorate my apartment. You taught me how to work the television and appliances. You even taught me yoga. I can't lose you. Not to them."

My heart wrenched, but I couldn't waste my work, not even for Silv's fear.

"Dr. Mulberry isn't even choosing me," I said, telling Silv the truth. "He hasn't said anything to me, so it sounds like he isn't. You're likely warning me for nothing."

"You want this that badly, and you never thought to ask the man responsible?"

"I ... can't."

Silv let out a long breath. "Sometimes, Cat, you need to take action. You can't wait for what you want to come to you."

"Do you want me to go to this summit or not?"

"Absolutely not." He gave me a concerned look. "It's not just the summit. It's ... we'll talk later."

"We will. I promise." I gave him a reassuring smile, one he half-heartedly returned. "And like I said and you pointed out—it very likely won't be me."

"I hope to whatever gods that walk this earth that that's the case. "

All of my work, and this prime opportunity was likely going to Dimmy. Dimmy, who wasn't going to write his dissertation on angels. Dimmy, who likely only cared about this semester to the extent it bolstered his reputation. Dimmy, who bragged about how his great uncle was leaving him a used bookstore in his will.

The best things in life truly were wasted on the useless.

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Chapter two

Zariel

Why couldn't I be left alone?

I was in our library in the Ashen Mountain, in one of the upper rooms with restricted access. It was a place where one expected peace and quiet. No, demanded it, in order for us to complete our tasks. The silver stone ceiling carved with eyes and feathers and covered with white crystalized ash hovered far above us, as if the mountain itself were watching our work and making sure we performed it to the expected perfection.

Though, apparently, silence was too much to ask for.

I was finishing the last flourishes of a document we were to give to the humans at the summit tomorrow when Cael strode up to me, his own completed documents in hand and a swagger in his wings that was mirrored by his long brown hair. Even his position as the High Artist's son and expected heir didn't excuse him from mundane tasks—we expected competence and dedication, no matter one's origins. Cael plopped the documents on my worn wooden desk with an exaggerated grunt, more fitting of a training yard than these staid halls.

"I'm finished," he said, crossing his arms and giving me a satisfied smirk. "Twenty-five pages detailing the weather patterns of the Glass Plains. What the humans plan on doing with this, I have no idea. It's not like they'll ever go there. Luckily it was mostly diagrams, and simple ones. What are you working on?"

“A bestiary,” I said, finishing off a sentence with an unnecessary flourish and scratch from my pen. “The humans wanted information on all the creatures possible, and gave us a list. Probably to help identify who else came here. So”?I waved my hand over the papers?“this is part of a bestiary. A portion of what I was able to translate. With some parts I was able to guess the word based on my memory of the creature, so at a minimum it’s accurate in spirit.”

“You’re abnormally good at this. The translating.” He shook his head. “At least your work makes more sense than mine—poetry.”

“You just said you translated weather patterns.”

“That was today. Father had me working on poetry most of the week before this. I think the weather patterns were supposed to be a consolation for what I endured.”

I grimaced. Poetry? Suddenly I was glad that I was transcribing records of gnomes’ mating cycles and their rather unfortunate obsession with mushrooms. Angelic poetry tended to be singularly painful to listen to, and I couldn’t help but wonder if it had always been that way. When we left our world, our language shifted to match the dominant local human language, but our written language stayed the same. Our library of archaic and almost indecipherable scripts was the first sign that anything had changed. In the years since we arrived, we managed to make excellent progress translating the documents in this library to a language we could understand—working off documents that we had committed to memory before the worlds shifted and using that to rebuild a key with which we re-learned our own language, as well as others from our original world. Our task was more than mere copying—it was translating and transcribing two copies, one for the humans and one for us to take back to our world, where we would want these translations to add to our vault of knowledge. If we ever returned there.

We had spent many months, especially in the beginning, wondering how it was that

the language shifted but nothing else about us had. Some speculated that the language shift was an effect from being in a new world with a new physical makeup. Others speculated that it was magic. And then someone disturbingly suggested that perhaps our language wasn't the only thing that changed and that our memories of our home were compromised, which ended the matter entirely. No one wanted to think of that possibility. Without additional discussion, we had accepted that this was simply how things were, and not the possibility that we didn't truly remember where we came from. Or who we had left behind. When parts of our world came here, it meant, necessarily, that the rest of our home did not. Perhaps we merely exchanged places—we had kept our mountain, while back home our people suddenly acquired an unusually manicured field.

But in the meantime, these pointless translations would buy us supplies and consequently the time for us to complete our actual research—how to go home.

“Did you manage to replace your work?” Cael asked quietly, watching the angels around us.

“Yes. I managed.” I eyed a discarded pile of parchment in the corner, trying not to grimace. An Artist, a supervisor of sorts, named Gadriel had an “accident” on my desk with an inkwell, making me have to re-do a whole day's work in a single evening. It wasn't the first time he was clumsy near me.

“You should apply to be an Artist,” he said. “These situations would stop, if you were one of them.”

“I'd never get accepted.” I met his gaze. “You know this.” In my case, it didn't matter how long I had been in the library or what I had accomplished before and since being here. It didn't matter that I was getting the reputation of being able to solve translations no one else could. I had my positions as a lowly scribe or archivist as the library demanded, and that was all I was going to have. I was content. For now.

“It’s a waste—”

“ This is a waste—of time,” I said quietly, hoping that the other scribes wouldn’t be able to hear over their scratching pens. Cael was the High Artist’s son, but that didn’t mean the other scribes wouldn’t take a chance to curry favor by reporting anything compromising. I surveyed the hall, the angels of all ages and genders bowing and scraping their pens against papers. In this hall alone there were four rows of ten angels each, and we were trained to produce documents quickly and accurately. We had prepared from adolescence to compete for the chance to serve the library, our bodies themselves crafted to assist us in the pursuit of knowledge. We were trained for far more than working for humans. “We should be searching for a way home,” I added, “not bartering with knowledge they do not need.”

Cael shrugged. As my oldest friend in the Ashen Mountain, he was used to my stewing. And knew better than to indulge it. “We need supplies,” Cael said. “While we have stores—”

“—We don’t know how long we will be here, and they are a precious resource, dwindling by the day,” I said, finishing the Artists’ common refrain. I closed my eyes momentarily, hoping to contain my frustration. The fact that the thousands of us had survived within this mountain for over five years was due to its vast storage rooms, since this place was equipped to be defended against a siege. Though being able to survive didn’t mean that the food was good. Of course, the elite Artists had access to produce from a small garden, orchard, and chicken coop that was located on the higher levels. I was not elite.

“Aren’t you getting tired of gruel?” Cael asked.

“We’ll never have to eat that mush again once we return home.”

Cael paused. “Unfortunately, that isn’t an option. And you know as well as I that if

we no longer have our stores, the ones below will be the first to lose their meals.” He levied a heavy gaze at me, one with so much history and understanding.

“I know,” I said. For her. I had to hope the summit succeeded for her .

My sister, Aniela, was below, in the prison that made up the lowest levels of the mountain. When the worlds shifted, we angels didn’t take our palaces or cities with us. No—what was left of our world was merely the Ashen Mountain, which was one of two libraries that both served as a prison and prized library for our people. Prisoners and books both needed guards, and by having them in the same place, only one set of guards was needed. This was the treasure of our people—our knowledge. The scholars, librarians, and scribes conducted their work in the voluminous halls above the base of the mountain’s interior, while the imprisoned languished below ground, never to see the light .

It was a bit of irony—I had spent almost the entirety of the nearly three decades of my life fighting for a place in the Ashen Mountain’s library. From the moment I could grip, I was handed a pen while our lore was whispered into my ears. I had undergone brutal rituals that had twisted my mind and body, all to enable me to serve the mountain. Now I wanted nothing more than to return home so that I would have a chance to leave, to have a life that wasn’t just this .

My stomach wrenched in a familiar knot, thinking of my beautiful sister in that pit of darkness. I visited her when I could, but due to my position in the library and hers as a notorious criminal, there wasn’t much I could do. Even when we returned home, there would be little I could do, except to petition for her to be confined to a more comfortable prison. The cost would likely be magic that connected her behavior to my life, but I would pay it. Or someone in my family would. Once Father heard what happened to her, he’d fix this. He had to. He would do something . He was the High Artist’s friend. Surely, something would be able to be done.

At least the High Artist let Aniela keep her feathers and not make her endure each of them being plucked every month. A small mercy to spare her that shame and pain.

Unfortunately, confinement in the Ashen Mountain's prison was what happened when one tried to kill the High Artist. She was guilty and admitted it—she told me so herself. But the excuse she gave rang hollow to me—that she was jealous, that she was angry at being denied a promotion. Promotions were everything here, but for her to try to kill ... I blinked. There was no point in ruminating over the same thing that I had for the last three years. She had told me the same story many times, even when I begged her to tell me anything that explained why she had done this.

Anything other than that .

It didn't make sense, but I received no other explanation. No matter how many times I asked.

I shifted in the chair, and my metal-touched wings grazed the ground. The runes on my stomach burned just enough to irritate, as they had been doing lately. The runes gave us our magic and let us dwell in a land of ash, but the cost could be pain. If this kept up, I'd have to ask a healer, or ... something.

What was the magic trying to say or do by burning so? Was there anything, or was it nothing at all, something that was merely a consequence of the magic binding with our bodies? A binding that was paid in blood. The irritations usually only happened at times that made sense, such as when our magic was being used.

To obtain one of the runes, I had consumed the fresh blood of a condemned glawakus, a creature that absorbs memories with a look. As such, my memory was impeccable, to the point that I could recall the creature's sticky, tangy blood perfectly. Was that why the runes were burning today, because I was searching my memory and using my magic to translate ?

This part of the library was a cavern of stone that carried a dim reflection, as if the hall was made of muted mirrors. Lights from oil lamps that were encased in thick protective glass and iron gates were placed on stands around the room, illuminating the dozens of scribes working on the finishing touches for tomorrow. It had taken months for us to come to an agreement with the humans about what documents they would receive. We needed this summit to go well. Stern librarians roamed the aisles, watching that the precious papers were treated with the care they deserved.

“Are you going tomorrow?” Cael asked me. Ah, that’s why he was still here, lurking next to me.

“Apparently,” I said. I never argued with the Artists. The fact that my sister was a traitor was enough to put me under suspicion, even though I was careful never to step out of line. If the Artists wanted me to go tomorrow, I would.

“You don’t seem excited.”

“Why should I be? They’re humans. I’d rather spend the day flying.” The mountain’s exterior was a marvel of pine trees, snow, and ash, even in this new world—the outside was so different from the oppressive rock of the mountain’s interior. With the ashen clouds hiding us, it was possible for us to soar and forget that we were far from home. At least for a little while. When the Artists didn’t forbid us, for reasons of their own.

“Wouldn’t we all.” Cael sighed. “But you know the Artists respect you. ”

“Hardly.”

“They do.” He swallowed. “If it wasn’t for ... the circumstances, you would be an Artist by now.”

“I’m glad to have your confidence.” No matter that there was no point in wondering if there was truth to it.

“Aren’t you a spark of brightness.” Cael turned to leave but didn’t actually take the steps to do so. “Well, I’ll leave you to it. Try not to glower too much tomorrow. We don’t need the humans more afraid of us than they already are.”

“When they’re not trying to worship us.”

“Yes ... that is unfortunate. And disturbing. We need to go home. That’s the only way you’re going to find a mate and some sort of life that isn’t here.” He lowered his voice even further. “It’s not like you’re going to find someone here.”

“A mate? I have other concerns.”

“And you’ll be able to help her ,” Cael whispered. “Once we’re home.” Cael, Aniela, and I grew up together. They were friends. And as Cael put it on more than one occasion, “My father can be a brutal prick.” He, too, thought that there had to be more behind Aniela’s motives, but neither of us could afford to discuss it.

“We first need to get home,” I repeated. “It’s the only way to fix things.”

“That’s what tomorrow is for. To give us time to do so. We need the humans.”

He was right. We needed the humans. And I hated it.

I nodded in agreement as Cael left me to my own devices .

What he said to me was ridiculous. A mate? We were trapped in another world and my sister was a prisoner, whose life was likely in danger—the prison wasn’t known for having residents with long lives. A mate was the last complication that I needed,

and fortunately there was no such inconvenience for me in the Ashen Mountain. I was more concerned with staying alive. Besides, an angel had dozens of potential mates in the world, and it wasn't like one wouldn't be there when I was ready.

I turned my attention back to the document. I was almost done with the translation, but I was caught on the last sentence. This tedious work was a waste of time, though Cael was right—we needed the supplies. We needed the humans to give us paper and food. We needed them to keep holding us in distant awe.

And to do that, we needed to give them something they wanted.

Chapter three

Cat

Bookstores smelled the best.

Coffee in hand, I wandered the aisles of the local bookstore before I had to be at the university. I should've been there earlier—the whole department would be in an uproar today—but frankly, if Dimmy was the one chosen to go to the summit, then they could do without me for twenty more minutes. I needed the books, I needed the coffee, and I needed the short walk through the neighborhood's mishmash of modern, colonial, 1600's English architecture, and everything in between.

I wasn't looking through the shelves for anything in particular—I tended to acquire books before I knew I wanted them. So I strolled past the front display of otherworldly memoirs, including a bestseller written by a fae and another by a siren who had started a wellness company, and then found myself in the familiar classics section. What would the old authors have thought of the current situation, about how the creatures they used as enticing metaphors were now real? It was probably for the best that the authors were dead. For instance, John Milton, the author of *Paradise Lost*, would've had an aneurysm since he wrote an entire poem—dictated it, as disturbingly depicted by Fuseli—about humans being cast out of paradise—

My throat caught. There were stories here, old tales of people falling into other worlds, entire cities disappearing, and many of them were retellings of even older stories. The worlds had shifted before—it was theorized that Atlantis may have been a city lost in a previous shifting of the worlds. But what if these old stories carried a

root of how this could've happened? Classics were classics for a reason—they contained memories that humanity didn't dare let itself forget.

Before I could tell myself that I'd never have time to read it, and that I surely couldn't have been the first to come to this conclusion, I snagged a copy of *Paradise Lost*. Besides being large enough to act as an efficient weapon, it was a tale of the fall of mankind and the subsequent exile from the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden was not the only ancient story of humans losing a paradise, but *Paradise Lost* was probably the most prominent version of the tale that was written originally in English.

Were the worlds shifting the origin of the story of the Garden of Eden? No, not necessarily. Probably not. But it couldn't be ignored that mankind being exiled from a paradise or paradise-like state was not a unique theme. There were academics who studied the myths of the primordial paradise and drafted hefty tomes on the topic—but not this academic. My knowledge on this particular topic had its limits. Though, maybe reading this would give me some fresh insight for my dissertation—it was a bit of a stretch to connect the topics, but one worth considering.

Once I paid and left the bookstore, my new book shoved in my purse, I rushed to the department and was greeted by a particularly frantic Dr. Mulberry, his dark skin covered in a sheen of sweat. “Where were you?” he asked while gesturing wildly at an undergrad research assistant to get out of our way.

“I’m not that late.” I frowned. Despite my loitering, I was only five minutes late.

“We need to leave now.”

“Now? We ?” My eyes darted around the room. “Where’s—”

“Mr. Johnson has food poisoning,” Dr. Mulberry said, arranging the sleeves on his

tweed jacket. “He can’t make it. He said he had some Lutheran sushi a friend made at home ...” Dr. Mulberry grimaced, finishing the sentence without words .

Lutheran sushi? Yep, that would do it. I had no idea what Lutheran sushi was, or what would possess Mr. Dimmy Johnson to consume it, but it sounded ... questionable.

“So I’m going?” I asked, evaluating my clothes. I was wearing black trousers and a purple cardigan. Professional-ish, but not nearly nice enough for the summit. The entire country would be watching and waiting for the results of today, and everyone else was wearing silk blouses, expensive blazers, and overpriced loafers. The clothes were just one problem. There was also my hair and makeup. None of it was nice enough for something like this—I could end up in a picture in a newspaper.

In the back, Silv watched our exchange, his eyes wide and head shaking, urging me to refuse. I tried to gesture to him to stop, but couldn’t do much while in the path of Dr. Mulberry’s panic. Instead, I had to watch Silv twitch while I was faced with a desperate Dr. Mulberry.

“Yes, you’re going.” Dr. Mulberry said, exasperated. “You were going to go this whole time.”

“I was?”

“Of course. Your dissertation topic means that you’re the one best situated for this.”

I resisted the urge to raise an eyebrow. Should I believe him? Dimmy was very good at getting the right people to like him, especially the ones that affected his career. It didn’t matter—no point in arguing with Dr. Mulberry now.

But I still wasn’t dressed for something like this .

“I’m not—”

He held up a hand. “Whatever you’re going to say, it doesn’t matter. I need a living body for this summit, and ideally, I need someone capable. But I will make do with just living.” If that’s what Dr. Mulberry needed, then maybe he shouldn’t have done everything but officially choose Dimmy in the first place, or let us believe that he did. Maybe then I wouldn’t have spite-dressed like a burnt-out receptionist.

“Alright,” I said, ignoring Silv. And also ignoring the burst of excitement shooting through my limbs. “I’m ready.”

It was going to be me. I was going to see the angels. In person.

“Good.” Dr. Mulberry dramatically sighed, and it was likely warranted. There were going to be a lot of important people watching the outcome of this summit, and if it went badly, Dr. Mulberry would be one of the first to be blamed. “Good sweet Lord, save me from inept assistants. Just for today—save me.”

Chapter four

Zariel

I hadn't left the Ashen Mountain in years, other than for short flights, and now I wanted nothing more than to go back inside its familiar silver walls. But if I wanted to leave the mountain and be home, truly home, we had to make the summit a success. Cael had hammered in a truth we had long known—without assistance, we wouldn't survive long enough to figure out a way to return home. I reminded myself of that fact—even as we humbled ourselves to exchange our carefully guarded knowledge with creatures who didn't understand where we came from, or what they were asking of us.

We had to go home. That was the important part. The payment of knowledge was worth it to bring this treasure back to our people .

I walked behind the High Artist and other Artists with my arms crossed, doing my best to seem impassive. And I was. Today we were dressed as warriors in breeches and leather vests, not scholars. Even though our lives were devoted to knowledge, and even though the mountain had guards devoted to its protection, we were all trained to defend the mountain should the need arise. While a couple guards came today, the Artists wanted as many of the library staff from all ranks as possible to witness the exchange and assist with planning any future summits.

Thus far, the summit had merely been a matter of our flying over the crowds that waited on the streets for our arrival, where they would remain out of sight but within earshot. There were many among the humans who thought we were servants of their

god and that we came to announce the end of the world. Maybe some of our species were a god's servants—somewhere—but not us. We served only ourselves, as was right.

Cael had given me worried glances the entire journey, but by now his face was turned to stone—he had appearances to maintain here, too. The humans would gain their information, but we wouldn't be pleased by having to provide it. And as the High Artist's son, even more attention would be on him.

After around twenty minutes of flight from our mountain we had arrived at the meeting place, an airport that was closed for the encounter. I was perplexed at this choice, but it seemed that it had the security the humans desired, the space for us to fly in, and it was also close to our home. The Artists found it acceptable, so who was I to challenge their decision? Even if this location was nothing like the Ashen Mountain, with none of its craftsmanship or beauty. It didn't have the silent song that called to us, the only place left of our home.

Leaving the mountain and its clouds to go to the summit felt like leaving behind a part of myself. Which it technically was, considering how our runes were made.

There were fifteen of us on this journey, with many more who remained at the mountain—waiting outside for the humans to deliver their promised shipment, near where the humans couldn't pass. Apparently, the humans were prepared to be quite generous with their gifts—we'd see if they kept their word. Today, my task was to stand in the sterile room that was nothing more than a circle of seats under harsh lights, and watch. A stoic show of force and nothing more. We would defend ourselves if attacked, but it seemed odd that the humans would've gone through so much effort if they wanted to just kill a few of us. There was no reason to think they'd be hostile to us now.

And then the talking started. All my nerves vanished and were soon replaced with

boredom.

“High Artist of the Ashen Mountain,” one of the human representatives said, “we welcome all of you, and this great opportunity to further the relationship between our peoples.”

“The honor is ours,” the High Artist lied, “and we want nothing more than the same aims as you—a beneficial friendship. You have our gratitude for hosting us today.”

There were even more formal greetings—hesitant exchanges with the stuffy and fragrant humans about alleged friendship. And discussions. So many discussions. They asked us questions, what we knew about...everything. We were told that angels were known here as beings of divine wisdom. It was just a happy coincidence for them that the angels who ended up in this part of the world were the ones who cared for the library. They likely wouldn't have been as impressed if the night quarter of our capital, with its attendant courtesans, had appeared here instead. Instead of a library in a mountain, it would be a street of musical, ribald, and barely dressed angels attracting customers for the entertainment of all senses.

“Zariel,” Cael whispered from next to me, “stop scowling.”

“I'm not.”

“We're trying to be allies.” He shifted, his tall wings grazing the ceiling. “Act like it.”

“Yes,” I said, biting back a smirk. He was set to be the High Artist someday—whether he liked it or not, and sometimes he acted like it, despite his best efforts.

But Cael was right—there was nothing to be gained by acting as if my feathers were being plucked .

I took a deep breath and prepared myself for a long day of nothing, when my runes suddenly burned with an intensity that shocked me. And then it faded, replaced by something more .

It was as if a hook worked its way into my body, pulling my attention across the room, desperately seeking something unknown. Something that I needed more than my breath.

And then I saw her.

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Chapter five

Cat

I couldn't breathe. I could barely move. I struggled to recall my own name.

These weren't pictures or videos—these angels were really here, standing in front of me. And they were massive.

They were here .

Male and female both towered over us by more than a head, some of them having to be near seven feet tall. Their wings were even taller than that, brushing the ceiling of the large conference room they had shoved us in. Metallic-glazed feathers—the metal not unlike frost etched on a window—were perched on their massive wings, making them shimmer under the fluorescent lights. We were told that not all angels had that feature, and this only belonged to those who lived in the Ashen Mountain. But beyond that, we knew next to nothing about the angels' magics, no matter how much we asked.

The angels were beautiful, but far more fearsome than I anticipated. Their features were angular and sharp, their eyes roaming over everything like hunters searching for weakness in their prey. Tight leather and fabric in dark jewel tones graced their bodies, showing off angles that belonged on statues and not flesh. I had seen thousands of grainy and blurry pictures and videos, but nothing compared to having the real thing mere feet in front of me.

Their melodic voices carried through the conference room, despite it being packed with dozens of people. Why didn't we choose a larger space for this? Though, based on the law enforcement officers that were pacing the halls and the outside, we were probably in one of the few places in the airport that balanced security with accessibility. There were some groups who wanted to kill the angels as aliens, and others who saw them as divine messengers. And many more in between, who merely wanted to see these legends for themselves.

Whatever the angels were, I had never been aware of how comparatively small I was in my entire life. I wasn't short, but compared to them I was. No wonder the other creatures working with us at the university had absolutely refused to attend this gathering. I was seeing literal legends in the flesh, and it may have been a good idea to leave them to my imagination .

"Stay here," Dr. Mulberry said to me, leaving my side to speak to the head of the Political Science Department, who surveyed the gathering with a frown. I took a relaxing breath and moved off to a corner. As if I was going to do anything else. What happened today was going to be studied for years to come, dissected and analyzed. My job was to watch and make mental notes for my dissertation. My experience from being here was priceless, the envy of academics around the world. I couldn't waste this opportunity.

No matter how much I suddenly regretted not taking Silv up on his offer to binge TV and gorge on pizza.

I was doing my best not to be noticed by anyone, when suddenly one of the angels looked at me, his gaze locking with mine.

Oh, shit.

I swallowed.

“Thank you, everyone for meeting with us today,” the mayor of Princeton said, her smile impeccably cheerful. She plunged into an obviously well-rehearsed welcoming speech, though I barely listened. I couldn’t look away from him .

The angel seemed to be close to my age, though appearances were deceiving when it came to these creatures. I tried to control my breath. He had radiant clear skin that stood out even in the room’s fluorescent lights. Brilliant blue eyes peeked out from under dark lashes, inquisitive and relentless. Straight black hair covered the tips of his ears, framing a handsome face with sharp cheekbones, and pouring down his back. His full lips parted, and for a long moment he was still, as if waiting for clouds to erupt into a storm.

Was he still watching me? He was.

Damn, he definitely was. Lines furrowed his forehead. Did I upset him? Did I do something wrong?

Did I spill something on my shirt?

Then, without warning, he strode towards me, making both angels and humans move out of his way, before stopping directly in front of me. I spared a look around—no one seemed to have noticed that an angel burst through the crowd. Or, more specifically, none of the humans paid us more than a passing glance, and they casually moved aside. The angels were another matter—we had their attention. However, the angels remained in place while the discussions continued, their expressions curious while their eyes occasionally went in our direction. Whatever was happening, they weren’t going to interfere.

My chest felt as if it was in a vice, the room suddenly far too small. What was this? What was he doing? What did this angel want with me?

“Hello,” he said to me, his voice smooth with a rich timbre.

“Hi,” I said, clutching my bag against my side.

“What is your name?”

“Um ... Cat.” I coughed. “Catalina. But no one calls me that.” Not a single head turned in our direction. No one was listening to us? Still ?

“Catalina,” he said.

“Yeah, like the island? The name actually stems from Greek, I think it’s a version of Katherine, but no one really pays attention to name origins, and no one really calls me my full name anyway ...” I rambled. I couldn’t stop rambling.

Why couldn’t I stop rambling?

Far from mocking me, the angel’s lips curled, as if he found it charming to watch me. “My name is Zariel,” he said. “And I am beyond pleased to meet you.”

“You ... are?” I looked around the room again. Still, none of the humans were paying us any mind. Something was off. Very off.

The angels, however, were focused on us in a way that was impossible to ignore.

“Our glamour abilities are weak compared to others,” Zariel said, noting where I was looking, “but a little distraction is manageable.”

“A glamour?”

“Yes.”

“And this is ... weak?” We had heard nothing about angels being able to do this, though it did seem like angels were immune to whatever Zariel was doing. But why was he telling me about his magic? Angels were notoriously secretive about their kind, even with the creatures from their original world, and here he was—offering me this knowledge within a minute of meeting .

Zariel smiled, sending a flutter through my chest, along with a sensation of familiarity, like I knew him. I wanted to tell him my secrets, my thoughts. Like this statue of an angel was my friend.

I needed him.

That was impossible. And made no sense.

“I wanted to speak with you without being bothered,” Zariel explained.

“You did?” I blinked hard while still staring up at him, resisting the urge to run my damp palms over my pants.

“Yes.” He glanced back at the other humans for a moment, a frown spreading on his face. “We don’t have long because the glamour won’t hold, but I want to ask you, without distractions—would you like to come back to the Ashen Mountain with me?”

“What?” I had to have misheard. He wanted me. Me. To go back to the mountain? The home of the angels. Me? We met literally just moments ago. What was this? Why was he rushing?

Why was he offering this to me at all?

“Not forever,” he quickly added. “Only for a couple months or so. Let’s say three. I’ll bring you back as soon as you like, though. Even sooner, if you prefer. You would be

my guest. You can stay as long or as little as you like.”

“Three months,” I said softly. His offer was amazing—with the knowledge gained after three months in their home I could learn so many things about the angels. My dissertation would be unparalleled, beyond anything Dimmy could hope to do. No human had this sort of access before, that I knew of. I’d be an academic legend. Should I do it?

Besides the research, going with Zariel would also give me more time to see him , this angel who made me feel like I knew him so well. Was he ... rambling too? The thought of saying no and sending him on his way left an unexpected pang in my heart, like leaving behind a sweet kitten at the animal shelter.

This was ridiculous. Spending three months with strange creatures because I found someone attractive? It didn’t make sense. Though he did offer to let me stay a shorter period of time if I wanted.

What if this was a trap? Silv had warned me about the angels. The other creatures the university had interviewed also seemed nervous of them. What if kidnapping women was something they did and no one ever told us? What if I never came back? I had milk in the fridge—it would be a spoiled disaster when I returned if I was gone that long. And it would be hell to explain my absence to the university.

Yet what I was feeling was beyond physicality. I had to go with him. I didn’t know why, or how, but I had to.

Research. It was for my research.

Yes. Research.

My lips pursed as I tried to gather my thoughts under Zariel’s relentless stare. It could

be a trap, but there was something about Zariel, something that called to me ... and it wasn't like women disappeared by the Ashen Mountain. Zariel seemed to be too concerned about his magic lasting for them to be able to make people forget women altogether. If I left, I would be remembered, and someone would piece together that this was the last place I was seen. They would come and find me. Eventually.

“Why me?” I asked, my eyes narrowing. “Why now?”

“Why not? We want this summit to work, and offering it to you, like this, means it could happen without months of arguing.” He smirked, like he knew exactly how much work went into making today happen. He wasn't telling me everything—there was a reason he was choosing me—but it didn't feel malicious. I had no sense that he wanted to hurt me, none of the latent caution that came with interacting with some creatures. He was imposing, yes, but something told me that he wouldn't let anything hurt me.

“Is everyone alright with the idea?” I asked, gesturing toward the other angels, who watched us with barely concealed, if impressively impassive, displeasure.

“They are,” he said, in a tone that made me wonder if he was talking to me, or to himself.

“If you're sure ...”

“I'm sorry, but we don't have long,” he said. “If you would like to go, we need to go now. Human minds tend to ask questions they shouldn't.”

“Won't anyone wonder where I am?”

“Yes. They will. But they won't see you leave with me. ”

I had to decide. Now. I could go with Zariel and have the chance to see things that would let me craft a dissertation that would eventually become a New York Times bestseller. Or I could stay here, and endure Dimmy.

Dimmy.

... I could give into what I was feeling and go with Zariel, whose full lips parted in such a gentle way, who looked at me with something I couldn't quite place. Longing? No. That was impossible. How could he long for someone he had never met? But, regardless, going would also mean that there would be more time with him, and ... I couldn't claim that didn't send a surprising thrill of pleasure through me. In fact, the thought of him leaving without me spurred a sudden panic, a sense that felt wrong . I'd regret it forever if I stayed behind.

I couldn't say for sure that it was my rational mind making the decision when I said, "Alright. I'll go."

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Chapter six

Zariel

I tried not to show my relief, though it felt as if I'd been spared my execution.

Cat said yes. She said yes . She was coming with me. I wouldn't have to choose between my home and having to leave my heart here, alone and exposed to the other mortals.

Yes, my heart.

My mate.

How had this happened? This shouldn't have happened.

This couldn't have happened.

It was impossible.

But it did. The urge to pull her close to me, the desire to tear apart anyone who so much as looked at her, revealed that it had. Not to mention how I already yearned to run my fingers through that fine golden hair, to taste those supple lips that beckoned to me, to feel for myself the curves that lurked under those ridiculous garments she was wearing. I was already dreaming of exploring the deepest parts of her, taking her and—

She was my mate. I couldn't deny that fact any more than I could turn an entire mountain into ash.

And now, I had to figure out how not to lose my mind in pursuit of her.

Angels had mates as nature demanded, a remnant from our more feral origins. It was a phenomenon that only occurred when an ideal partner for rearing children presented itself. While some creatures had mates who were the partners that were ideal for them in every aspect, ours were subject to nature, not personal fulfillment. A mate for an angel wasn't a single perfect counterpart. In fact, any angel had several potential mates in the world, and it was merely a matter of who they encountered first that triggered the bond. There were stories of mating bonds appearing at the worst times and circumstances, thwarting family rivalries and spawning the downfall of once-mighty houses. It was a threat that always lurked over an unmated angel, making some families shield their unmated from unfamiliar contact if a bond would be inconvenient, such as an arranged marriage between unmarried parties. Once the bond struck, it couldn't be refused, no matter who it latched onto. The bond cared not one bit for our laws or who it hurt in the process.

Damn infuriating, was what it was. Nothing prepared me for the intensity that seeped into every part of me. Nothing .

But how could this have happened in the first place? The bond never appeared with someone who wasn't an angel. The feeling was as overwhelming as I had been warned—it was hard to think. To focus. To do anything other than be consumed with the thought of touching her and making her mine. It was utterly ridiculous and illogical, but that was the mate bond. It was known for making fools of us all.

Did she feel the bond too? She wasn't an angel. I had no idea what she was feeling. But she agreed to come with me, after barely speaking to me. That had to mean something, right? Surely, she was feeling something for me. Anything. I would take a

small smile, a sly glance, a light brush of her hands. Anything, as long as it was from her.

Cat wasn't an angel. There were no angels on this planet, other than us. Half-angels didn't exist, because our mate bond didn't occur outside our kind. Why would we bother reproducing outside of our species? She had no glamour on her that could be hiding her as an angel masked among the humans.

No, Cat was truly, fully human. A beautiful human. Light yellow hair framed a complexion that was somehow paler than mine, and a serious expression that focused on me. She wasn't as tall as an angel, but if she stood on the tips of her toes, she would reach past my shoulders. To me, every single one of her features, from her little nose to her manicured brows, was perfect, as if no other woman could ever compare .

What was happening?

What would the Artists do? I couldn't have a human mate. The idea was ridiculous. What would I even do with her in the Ashen Mountain? Humans didn't go to the library—they weren't permitted to study in our sacred halls. The library was a domain reserved for angels alone. Thus it had been for untold centuries.

And what would they do to me? They couldn't punish me for just having a mate, could they?

Regardless of the cost, I couldn't leave her here. Once I explained it to the others, once they sensed the change in my— our —spirits, they would know, and accept what I did. They wouldn't be pleased, but I'd deal with any repercussions as they came. I wasn't going to leave her here, and they wouldn't separate us—separating mates unwillingly was treated as literal torture. Mate bonds were respected. Always.

Or so I told myself. In the past, some mates were killed to get rid of the bond. Before, I wasn't important enough for such a thing as an inconvenient mate bond to matter. But now ... I was known to the Artists. Cael was right—if it weren't for Aniela, I probably would've been an Artist by now. Most potential mates of mine didn't have the means to disrupt my entire world, and I already had a sister imprisoned for treason. Would the Artists think that I did something to cause this? Something that warranted my being placed in the prison too, a sacrifice for the next generation of angels? But it was unacceptable that I leave Cat here. I'd have to be pried away by force before I would leave her.

As of this morning, my plan was to keep my head down and work until we were truly home and justice could be set right. That plan had changed.

Trembling, I took Cat's hand in mine, exhaling with the relief like I was on fire and her touch was cool water, stifling the simmering flames. Without hesitation I strolled through the crowd of oblivious humans and indignant angels with her at my side. I received stern looks and Cael gave me yet another raised eyebrow—they had to have sensed that something happened, something that made me single out a human, my wings hovering protectively over her. No one would be touching a human, much less leaving and bringing said human back to the mountain, unless there was a dire need and a reason. It wasn't as if I was known for impulsive actions, or for doing things against the rules. My behavior after Aniela was accused was proof of that fact. I let my sister be cast into the deepest prison without protest after she admitted her guilt—because that was our law, and she had broken it.

I followed the rules. All the rules. It kept me alive and able to hold the position I had worked so hard to earn.

Regardless of what the Artists thought of my bringing a human to the mountain, any disagreement would be resolved privately, without the humans watching. At least she would be with me. At least I had taken this chance before I potentially lost her

forever. They wouldn't send her back. They couldn't.

Or so I told myself. This had never happened before. I could guess at the outcome, but I couldn't claim to know what would happen.

The High Artist watched us with minimal interest as he was still in conversation with some medal-festooned human, and a sense of foreboding made me want to hug Cat as close to me as I could. Cat's own steps were measured, her breaths short, and she still clutched that bag against her. No matter—I wasn't about to make her part with her possession. She could have whatever she wanted. Anything she wanted.

But would she ever want me?

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Chapter seven

Cat

“ They’re letting me leave with you?” I asked Zariel once we were outside of the conference room. I saw the looks the other angels gave him, the judgment. Even if they didn’t say anything, I could tell they weren’t pleased. There would be consequences, no matter what he said. Yet I had to trust that Zariel could handle it, whatever it was. Worst case they would just send me back, right?

I had to trust him.

It made absolutely no sense, but I did.

“Yes. You’re welcome to come with me.” His wings were spread over me, pushing me closer to him, literally sheltering me as we left through a side door. I stayed close since his wings would hide us from anyone watching, and I didn’t want them to stop us and ruin my chance to see the Ashen Mountain for myself .

The Ashen Mountain. I was going to see it. I was going to be inside it—

As this angel’s guest.

Maybe I was dreaming? I was talking and moving without thought, a creature prodded by instinct. At any moment I would wake and find myself in bed without having gone to the summit at all.

“Can I hold you?” Zariel asked me once we were outside, the wind gently blowing his long black hair. “For flying,” he quickly added.

I nodded—like I was going to decline now. No one was nearby, but in the distance jeeps and SUVs were driving along the runways, likely extra security for the event. It wasn’t surprising that there wasn’t anyone standing here—any unnecessary staff, even janitors, were banned from the grounds today. That was a good thing, because it gave the two of us a chance to get away without anyone noticing. If someone saw a human leave with an angel, surely there would be questions. And pictures. And news stories. So many stories.

Before I had a chance to think about the fact that I was soon to be flying with an angel, strong arms wrapped around my back and under my legs, pressing me against his body as if I weighed nothing. And then we were gone, leaving the world before I had a chance to do anything other than clutch my bag against me with one arm and wrap the other around him. As my stomach dropped, I closed my eyes and pushed my head against his chest—the thick fabric of his shirt and the leather of his vest pressing against my face. The scent of juniper and light woodsmoke filled my nose, and something that was uniquely him, calming my senses. Despite flying hundreds of feet over the countryside, despite the fact that he was the only thing keeping me from falling to my death, this felt right, like returning home. The feeling washed over me, lulling me to the sweet sense of belonging. In this moment, I was meant to be here. With him.

“What about the ash?” I yelled once we were in the sky. Oh god, was he going to let the ash kill me?

“I won’t let it hurt you,” he said. “When it comes time, listen to me.” Considering what the clouds around the mountain were made of, listening to him was just good sense.

I blinked hard. This was an angel, and he was taking me to the Ashen Mountain. I still didn't know why he picked me—I wasn't the only young woman at the summit. I couldn't get too comfortable. We had heard nothing about angels harming any local humans, but nothing was ever a guarantee, especially where our new guests were concerned.

Of course, adding to my nerves was the fact that I was hundreds of feet above the ground.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that I was perfectly safe, even though the cars below us were tiny shapes darting along gray roads. I laid my head against him, trying to enjoy the view, even though the wind sent a blistering chill through me and slapped my face. My breaths were matched by the solid beat of his white and silver wings. No, I definitely wasn't getting too comfortable with the way Zariel's surprisingly muscular arms cupped me, holding me securely against him.

I woke up this morning hoping to just see an angel, and here I was being held by one and carried to their home.

It didn't take long, maybe fifteen minutes at most, before we approached the Ashen Mountain, its signature clouds washing over us like entering fog.

A blistering fog. I braced myself, praying that he knew what he was doing.

"Push your face against me!" Zariel yelled.

I did.

A moment later the air burned my lungs, the ash hitting my skin like little pricks of fire. I gritted my teeth. I knew this was going to happen—the burning ash was why no drones or other aircraft or people managed to get close to the angels' home, and no

one wanted to risk the consequences of accessing the mountain through more invasive measures. But I wasn't prepared for the onslaught, as if I was rolling in a bed of stinging nettle, my skin both spasming and aflame.

"Just a little longer!"

I grunted in acknowledgement, my eyes slammed shut and protected by Zariel's body. I tried to take as few breaths as possible, and any that I did take were smothered by Zariel's chest. I didn't think about what I was doing other than desperately trying to draw air, even as the pins from the ash invaded my skin, burning and burrowing. My clothing was no protection. Not from this. He was the only thing protecting me from complete destruction.

One breath.

Don't scream. Don't scream.

Two breaths.

Oh god, I can't take anymore.

Three breaths.

This was a mistake. A horrible mistake—

The air suddenly cleared—we were inside a tunnel. Zariel set me down gently and I collapsed to the ground, wiping my face and catching my breath.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

I nodded, shaking off as much of the ash as I could, batting it away quickly in case

the pain started again. It no longer burned as it did before, but my skin was tender, the memory far too fresh.

Zariel winced as he took me in. “I’m sorry. Now that you’re in here, it shouldn’t affect you nearly as much. Our magics negate the ash.” He looked around him. “Otherwise, nothing could survive in here.”

He was right. The remnants of the misery were fading, and now my skin, though pink, felt as if it were covered by a layer of dust and grime. Oh no, I’d have to go through that cloud again . Because I would—I’d have to leave and go through the ash clouds if I ever wanted to get home .

“I don’t understand.” I coughed and patted the ash off my skin and clothes. It came off my skin easily and didn’t stick like normal ash. I tucked my bag against my chest—at least it had survived the flight. “It stung so bad outside. I thought I was going to die.”

Zariel watched me carefully. “It’s the mountain. This isn’t how it works, but think of it as magnetic—inside the mountain, the force is dissipated. Negated. This space stops the ash from affecting you more than it already has. And try not to worry—you would pass out from the pain long before the ash managed to kill you.”

“Ah.” I didn’t understand and was slightly horrified by how casually Zariel mentioned that last part. Still, all I cared about was that the air no longer burned my lungs, and that it no longer felt like my skin was preparing to tear itself off my bones. I had many questions about the ash and how the angels were immune, and how the mountain was somehow safe, but they would have to wait.

Instead, I took in what no human had seen before—the Ashen Mountain.

We were in a tunnel which led directly outside, flying ash visible from the unblocked

entrance to the open air, though it made no move to come within the mountain's interior. The walls were a gray stone carved directly from the mountain, yet this space was illuminated with natural light that came through carefully placed windows. The tunnel was carved smooth and etched with swirls and other motifs that reminded me of baroque fashion, both curved and beautiful, yet harsh.

I wiped my face. Though we were in what was technically a tunnel, the mountain wasn't dark. Above us were skylights, the brilliant sun pouring through, despite the clouds of ash that swirled between us and the sun. Now that I was closer, I could see that the ash itself carried its own glow, almost like brilliant snowflakes dancing through the air.

I was really here.

I looked around me, my senses taking everything in. The mountain had a slight chill, but nothing near unbearable. The scent of mint and stone lingered in the halls. And that ash, white and crusted against the walls, floor, and ceiling like snow, was everywhere.

"The ash is over the whole mountain?" I asked.

"No," Zariel said. "You're not trapped here, if that's what you are asking. I will make sure you can leave when you want." He squirmed. "I will make sure that when you leave, you're better prepared. I'm sorry."

I wasn't asking about that, but he obviously picked up on my nerves—if I wanted to leave, I'd need help. I probably couldn't stay conscious long enough to walk out, if I tried.

My dissertation had better be worth it.

Despite being in a mountain, there was greenery. Plants grew in planters placed against the walls, strategically situated to take advantage of the sun. The vines poured out, giving a taste of life against the stone, out of which columns were carved, giving the illusion of being in a building and not under a mountain.

For now, the two of us were alone here, but how long was it going to last before other angels interrupted? What would the other angels do about me being here?

“Is it what you expected?” Zariel asked, watching me intently. A strange heat worked through me. I had been so consumed by getting to the mountain that I had given comparatively little thought to the angel who had brought me here. Again, he stirred such strange feelings within me for someone I had just met. Longing? Desire? This wasn’t a normal crush, this was something deeper, something that lurked, waiting for the moment to wake. Something wasn’t right.

“Yes. No. Not at all,” I said, wiping off more of the ash. “It’s brighter than I thought. We thought that the mountain was more ... solid.”

Something clouded Zariel’s features, but it disappeared with the next breath. “We angels prefer the open sky. Even in here, we do our best not to hide from it entirely. We’re not meant to be underground.” A light rumbling sound from ahead in the tunnel caught our attention, and Zariel offered me his hand, his large fingers dwarfing my own. I took it, again fighting against the sudden urge that this was right .

This? There was no this .

The sound revealed itself to be footsteps, working their way down the hall. In due time a male angel appeared, his long brown hair framing a face that was as radiant and harsh as a lightning bolt. When he saw me, his grin melted into a frown and his wings twitched. I recognized him from the summit, still wearing the black leathers and dark blue garments. He was covered with a light layer of ash that he brushed off

his arms as he inspected me, his glittering wings rippling under the light. He must've followed us from the summit as soon as we left. But what did this mean for me?

"Who is this?" he asked Zariel.

"This is Cat," Zariel said. "She's staying with us for a couple months." At Zariel's urging, the three of us strode through the tunnels, gently working our way upwards—my mind caught in a flurry between understanding where exactly I was and trying to parse out this angel's obvious distaste for me. If he didn't like me, he was probably just the start of what I would be facing here.

"Zariel, what did you do?" the newcomer asked with a groan. "The Artists are never going to allow this."

"Yes, they will."

"She's a human."

"I noticed."

"There have never been humans in the library."

"Until now."

"And we just started negotiations."

"They will make allowances."

"What? There is absolutely nothing you could say that would make the Artists—"

"Yes, there is." Zariel gave him a pointed look, and the two of them exchanged a

series of facial gestures that was only possible through a lifetime of familiarity. Whoever this angel was, he was a friend.

My throat went dry. Was Zariel going to be in trouble for bringing me here? What could he say to them that would explain what he did? Were they going to send me back? He was right—people at the university would eventually piece together what happened, and they would have questions. Intense questions. But my eventual return—and armed with enough research to set up an excellent dissertation—should easily manage any consequences. That, and the fact that I would—truthfully—insist that I had chosen to go.

Suddenly, the new angel's eyes widened. “That? That's impossible.” The man looked at me, his mouth dropped open. “They'll never believe you.”

“They will. And you know it. Why would I lie about this? And now, of all times?”

The angel shook his head. “I know you wouldn't, but you know as well as I that's not what matters. You have a knack for trouble, Zariel. Whether or not you try to avoid it, it finds you. Father isn't going to be pleased.”

“I know.”

“I can't protect you. But I will try.”

“I know. To both.” Zariel straightened his back. “But I had to do this.”

The other angel rubbed his eyes and let out a long sigh. He then turned to me, his expression not exactly friendly, but it had none of the barely masked anger and fear it contained when I first arrived. “My name is Cael,” the angel said to me. “I have been friends with this one”—he pointed at Zariel—“for far too long. And welcome to the Ashen Mountain.” Cael shook his head. “I can only hope Zariel has a plan.”

“A plan for what?” I dared to finally ask.

“Managing my father.”

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Chapter eight

Zariel

I took deep breaths, trying to make my racing mind settle into something useful. And failing.

Cael was right—it was impossible. We were impossible. Mates or not, Cat and I could never be together. The Artists would find out what happened to make me mate with a human—perhaps it was an effect of our transfer into this world—and they would fix it. They would fix me. We already couldn't have children in this world, making the mating with Cat more bizarre. To have children we needed the moon. Our moon—a crystalline sphere in our original world, which legend says is composed of the same substance that makes up our bones. The moon was nowhere near here, so why would I have this bond with her? This infuriating bond.

The Artists would decide that this mate bond wasn't valid and send her home, and then my life would continue as if I had never met her.

They would take Cat away from me.

My chest clenched and I had to force my fists to relax. They were not going to take her away. I would find a way to keep her. No matter what. I would slice the skin off their necks, crush their skulls under stones. I would drink their blood while it was still warm from their veins, not for any power, but for the fact that they dared to take away what was mine.

I couldn't keep her. Every conflicting emotion running through me was ridiculous. How could I feel this for someone I just met? The mating bond wasn't known for logic—it insulted the very word.

Yet what the bond made me feel, it felt ... oddly right .

But what if, somehow, the Artists decided that I was a traitor too, like Aniela? Cael was right—by taking her, I could've ruined any future negotiations for us with the humans. They probably already noticed that she was missing. They wouldn't remember her leaving, but they would notice that she was no longer there. They would figure out that the last place she was seen was with us. Then they would have questions. Not to mention that it was possible that some sharp-eyed human spotted us.

In the meantime, it took all my restraint not to tear Cael's wings off his back for walking so close to her as we moved through the stone tunnels to the Silver Hall, which was the main atrium. He didn't need to be that close to her—why was he so close to her?

I took a deep breath. She couldn't be my mate, not in truth. The bond likely didn't affect her at all, since she was human. They didn't have mate bonds like us. She came to this mountain for her studies—not me—and when she was done, she would leave. She probably thought that I was an oddity, something to watch and admire. Once she was satisfied, I'd be alone, cursed to long for her until death took one of us. How was I going to bear this senseless yearning in the meantime?

Just the flight to the mountain itself was torture with her pressed against me, her scent overwhelming all my senses. She loved touching me. I could tell by the gentle shift in her body, the way she turned into me to hide from the wind. The way she relaxed within my grasp. I had to hold her respectfully, keep my hands still, no matter how much I craved to do to her what angels did to their mates.

No. She was in a strange place, with strange people. She likely had no idea what I was thinking, and I wasn't going to force anything on her until she was ready. If she'd ever be ready.

I'd be patient. No matter how she was like cool water and I was dying of thirst, begging for those precious drops to bring me back to life.

“This is the mountain?” Cat asked once we stepped out onto one of the Silver Hall's main balconies. From here, we could view the cavernous hall in its entirety, the balconies and tunnel entrances embracing a chasm inside the mountain, with us facing a glass window dozens of stories high and hundreds of feet wide. Winding stairs worked their way upwards towards the peak of the mountain, past additional halls, and eventually to the upper levels of the library itself. Additional stairs worked their way down, spanning thousands of feet and ending in the prison where the light was not permitted. Most angels in this space flew to where they needed to go, but the stairs remained. The library not only held books—it held our lives. It was a city hewn from stone, a place created for those born to fly.

“Yes,” I said, basking in the awe of her gaze. A wave of pleasure worked through me as she slowly took in every aspect of the Silver Hall. “This is my home.”

Cat's eyes widened further, watching several angels glide through the air, while others walked patiently on stairs, many of them small figures in the distance. “How many angels are here?”

“A few thousand. Who work for the library.”

“All of this for a library ...”

“Mind that this library is more than just a place to store books,” I said proudly. “We house our kingdom's records, and are one of its jewels—a position of rank here is just

as respected as one in a noble house or at court. This is one of two twin libraries, both devoted to the same aims. Along with our sister library, we're working to have a copy of every document and book possible—in every language.” She seemed to be listening to me carefully. Good. I could talk about the library for hours. “We're renowned not only for our kingdom's records, but the continent's. This place, the knowledge within it, and our ability to use it, is what sets us apart from others, what makes us angels what we are. So yes, it takes thousands of us to maintain this place, and we would spare thousands more if needed.”

I would happily speak of the library's accomplishments, but Cat didn't need to learn how we used our knowledge. Maybe she would never learn.

Cat slowly nodded, seemingly taking in everything I said. “The loss of this place must have been awful for your home.”

“Yes, it is.” I didn't have to be a seer who could see back to our world to know this. This library was the angels' treasure—they surely hadn't stopped mourning our loss. Not to mention the thousands of angels within.

Carefully, she took a few hesitant steps towards the ledge, gripping the metal railing as she peered down into the abyss. I needed to warn her that she couldn't expect many railings in this mountain, since this was a place designed for those with wings. Though, her eyes would tell her that truth soon enough. “What's down there?” she asked. “It looks like another city.”

“That is the Ever-Dying Prison,” I said. “The name was influenced by a kingdom that gave us some of our more ... creative punishments. ”

“There's a prison here?” Cat asked, horrified. “In a library?”

I shrugged. “The prisoners need to be guarded and so do the books. It just makes

sense to have them both here, where the guards can protect both. And it's harder for prisoners to escape from thousands of feet underground."

Cael coughed, reminding us that he was still here and behind us. Unfortunately. "There's going to be a disaster once the summit is over and the Artists return," he said. "Maybe it would be best if you two talked before this." He gave me a knowing look.

Damn. He was right—I had to tell her. I was going to have to tell the Artists that she was my mate, and she needed to know the real reason I brought her here before then, and the questions she could possibly face. I owed her that much.

"Cat," I asked, "are you alright going with me to my rooms? I have a few things I think we should talk about."

Eyes open in wonder, her head turning in all directions, she didn't bother to look at me when she said, "Yes."

Chapter nine

Cat

We couldn't be in a mountain. Mountains didn't look like this. This had to be a beautiful dream.

The walls of what was basically a subterranean city were light blue and silver. The tops and edges of the rocks, and even the decorative carved edges and motifs, were coated in a substance that seemed to be ash, but was firm to the touch and reflective like powdered snow.

Snow.

If one didn't know any better, they'd think that this place was a winter wonderland, coated with snow and ice. At various points throughout the Silver Hall, there were shrubs bearing red berries and evergreen trees growing out of outcroppings in the rock, as if a forest was sprouting from the stones. If the angels couldn't fly to the plants to tend to them, I wouldn't have believed they could grow in a hall such as this.

Lights—such brilliant lights—poured into the hall through the massive window that towered above and plummeted below, making the entire space shine with a reflective glow. Ash—and snow?—were visible through the window, circling around in a constant dance.

Angels walked along paths and stairs and also flew through the air, darting through

their home. Dressed in draping robes, the angels glided above us effortlessly, as majestic as any Renaissance artist's dream. The angels' flights called attention to the carvings on the walls, which were beautiful—yet made my skin turn cold. Harsh runes made of sharp edges and small circles lurked on the surfaces, which were also speckled with figures that at first glance seemed idyllic, surrounded as they were by elaborate snowflake and swirl motifs. But on a second look, the figures were grotesque in a rather baroque fashion, with some angels being depicted as rulers, and other creatures as the conquered ... and consumed. Cannibal angels? That had to be just the style of art.

Still not over the grotesque angels, I looked down into the darkness and truly shuddered. The prison that lurked beneath the ground was now even more terrifying, a black pit that seemingly led nowhere. Who was down there? What would it take to merit that fate ?

This place appeared to be made of ice and snow, but in reality it was stone and ash. The angels were ethereal beings of beauty—and capable of unspeakable brutality.

Silv was right—I should've stayed far away.

“Cat?” Zariel asked, interrupting my thoughts. Cael had left, leaving us alone.

I pushed a strand of hair behind my ears and turned to face my host. He stood in the atrium, at home in this world of wintery rock, his metal-tipped wings spread behind him. A ray of sunlight worked through the windows, casting us in its glow and making the ash around us shine. My breath caught—I was trusting this angel to care for me, this beautiful, fearsome creature. “Yes?” I asked nervously.

“Truly, we need to go.”

That was right, he wanted to talk to me. I needed to stop thinking about the mountain

and focus on him and my position here. Despite how unsettled I was, I couldn't help the contentment that worked through me under his gaze. He stared at me with such intensity, as if he was inspecting everything. What was he doing to me? Why was I feeling this way? Was it this place? The excitement and the novelty? Or was it him, being near a creature from legend? It couldn't be him personally—I barely knew his name.

I reached for his hand before I could think, and he clasped it and gave me a small smile, revealing a dimple in the corner of his mouth. Instantly a deep fire settled within me, begging for more. More of him .

I took a deep breath. What was going on? This was beyond a crush—this was need. An ill-timed physical need.

“A few minutes,” Zariel whispered to me, the press of his mouth against my ear, his delicious closeness, making me close my eyes. “That is all it will take, and I will explain everything.”

“Everything?”

“Yes. Including what you're feeling for me.”

I stilled. “What are you talking about?”

“It's alright.” He gave my hand a squeeze. “I feel it too. And I think I can explain it.”

While we walked, we passed angels who gave us curious—alright, horrified—glances, but no one stopped us, other than to ask if the Artists knew that I was there. Zariel told all of them that yes, they did, to which each angel gave a solemn nod, and a look that left me uneasy. More than one shot me a glower when Zariel wasn't paying attention. Maybe I shouldn't have come here. I really wasn't

wanted—I should've known better.

“Don't worry,” Zariel said softly. “While I don't know you, I know you.” We passed another group of angels and now could speak again, making our way over stairs and through tunnels. He shook his head. “I'm sorry. I will explain more.”

All I could do was take a breath, be patient, and wait for answers. My mind and my heart were dancing in every direction, from the shock of being in the mountain, the angels' hostility, and the possibility of being sent home without seeing the books themselves. And then there was Zariel.

Zariel.

Because of him, I wasn't afraid, but what I felt wasn't normal. He basically told me that it wasn't normal. I shouldn't be feeling this for someone I just met, how he could be the piece that was missing in my life. Ridiculous. I wanted nothing more than to stare at him and talk to him and learn everything about him.

This wasn't good.

“This is your room?” I asked Zariel.

The space was respectable, to put it lightly, with three rooms so that it was more an apartment than a dorm. The main area, in which we were standing, was made of the same silvery stone as the rest of the mountain's interior, but the light in here was from lamps, which Zariel had quickly lit so that we weren't standing in the dark. A couch was pressed against one wall, with a stack of books resting next to it on the floor. With another stack on the couch. And yet another nudged next to the door. I grinned before I could help myself—an angel, lounging and reading? Two fabric-covered chairs were arranged on either side of the couch, and I chose one of those to sit on, feeling the arms' velvety coverings under my fingers. This space was a home.

Besides books, there were indecipherable charts on the wall, a few portraits of angels who had an uncanny resemblance to Zariel, and a drawing of a rotund calico cat. Was she a pet? Angels had pets?

The walls were coated with more of that brilliant snow-like dust that swirled in designs, like ripples on a pond. Was this beautiful crystalline rock really the ash from the mountain, the same substance that burned me? I remained glued to my chair, unwilling to reach out and touch it. At least it gave the room a mystical silvery glow as the specks glinted in the light.

“This is our room,” Zariel corrected, turning in time to watch my reaction to the ashen wall. “And don’t worry, as long as you don’t smash the wall and breath in the dust, it won’t harm you.”

“Oh?” The reminder of our imminent room sharing banished my worries about the death glitter. “I didn’t think that we’d be—”

“Please. Let me explain.” Zariel sat on the other chair across from me, adjusting his posture so that his wings lightly graced the floor. The dim light caught his sharp features, a face so perfect that it made my breath escape every time he looked my way. His hands were strong, yet smooth, and for the first time I noticed that the tips of his fingers were stained with something dark—ink? Yes, he said he worked in the library. Normally, the thought of seeing the angels’ library and discovering endless secrets would’ve had me ecstatic—but the angel staring at me was grim enough to smash any joy.

Something was going on. There was that non-sensical pull again, the one that urged me to touch him. To hold him. To—

“We’re mates,” he suddenly said.

I shook my head. “Come again? Sorry, I think the flight made me more tired than I thought. I thought you said we were mates?”

“Yes.”

“... Can you tell me what that is?” Maybe that word meant something else to them.

Zariel squirmed. It was adorable, if a brooding angel dressed in black leather could be described as such a thing. “Among angels, if a pairing between a couple would be ... beneficial, then it sparks something in our minds and souls. They become irresistible to each other. To the exclusion of anyone else.”

“Beneficial ... like for children?” My stomach twisted, even as another—deeper—part of me stirred. Mate? I couldn’t have a mate. I needed to complete my dissertation and get my PhD. I didn’t have time for this. And there was also the small problem of being human, in a place that wasn’t exactly welcoming me with open arms and toothy smiles.

“Yes”?he grimaced?“children are the obvious goal.”

I frowned. “But not everyone likes the sex that could ... result in children. ”

“There’s more than one way to be a parent,” Zariel replied. “When those pairings happen, the couple is encouraged to adopt orphans since it’s seen as nature’s way of ensuring their care. And such couples almost always do.” He swallowed hard. “Though, in our case, it seems to have happened for other reasons.”

I frowned. “What other reasons?” We couldn’t have children. I wasn’t even thirty, I was still in school, and I had a hard enough time remembering to use milk before it spoiled.

He paused for a long moment before answering. “We angels are beings that are a bit more attuned to other creatures’ magics. I personally think that this mating bond is something resulting from that—magic that we angels manipulated that has gone out of control. Maybe it was triggered by the worlds shifting. Like the magic that allows us to be in this mountain—it’s possible that the location change altered the fundamental aspects of the magic.”

Magic? Mate? I was here for the library, not a man. Especially not one with feathers.

Unfortunately, my rebellious heart jumped and I had to force back a smile of pleasure. So Zariel was trying to tell me that he found me irresistible? How did I feel about that?

Fine. Alright, better than fine.

I couldn’t indulge such thoughts any further if I wanted to keep my pride, but my heart was ... empty. Like something was supposed to be there and wasn’t .

My eyes found his supple lips, and for the first time I noticed that this room smelled of him, and at that same instant an incessant throbbing started in my core. Another side effect of the mating bond? I didn’t smell anything when I walked in, but now I was almost giddy from the sensation of him surrounding me.

Oh no.

“But I’m human,” I whispered, crossing my legs.

“I know.” Zariel sighed. “That’s the dilemma. Among our people, the mating bond is respected and encouraged. Revered, even. We’d be considered practically married the instant we recognized it. But you ... I will not pretend that this will be easy for you, if you decide to stay.”

“How so?”

“A mating bond with an angel has never happened to anyone who wasn’t an angel before.” Zariel frowned. “That I know of. I haven’t had a chance to do any research before this. Like I said, maybe our bond is a side effect of the worlds merging. And offhand I can think of a few writers who might know something, and maybe a few other archives, something that can speak to the effect of shifting magnetic poles on the unity of magic with physical bodies ...” He continued speaking in the same vein, shifting the topic to directional orientation, atmospheric make-up, and even astronomical influences. I understood nothing.

I held back a grin, despite everything. He was nervous and rambling, seemingly unable to look me in the eyes. At least if I was in this situation—and even if this wasn’t the research trip I had planned—I wasn’t going to be alone in my confusion. Nor would I be alone in resisting the ridiculous urge to remove the clothing that suddenly felt far too stifling. But I needed clarification.

“So, you ... love me?” I asked once his rambling came to a lull. “Isn’t that what this means?”

He sighed and clenched his fists on his lap. Black hair covered his ears, the top of his head a delightful mess from the flight that I wanted to run my fingers through. “Cat,” Zariel said, “as I said earlier, I don’t know you. It’s impossible for me to love you. But, yes, I do find you irresistible, to the exclusion of reason. What I can promise is that I will protect you. I will treasure you. And I absolutely want to know everything about you that I possibly can. I truly have no intention of taking the bond further than friendship, but that doesn’t mean I won’t enjoy getting to know you.”

I let out a long breath and chuckled, even as the heady pleasure settled. “Oh, that’s a relief. I feel the same way. I mean, I find you oddly attractive, but as you said, it’s impossible for these feelings to be anything deeper. We’re both scholars, in our own

way, and know better than to give much credence to these things, and—” Alright, maybe Zariel wasn’t alone in his nervous rambling.

And then we locked eyes and I stopped talking, an eternity looking back at me. A visible emotion stirred within him, a feeling that was echoed by my own heart. I didn’t know him. But I wanted to know everything. I didn’t love him, but I desperately wanted the chance to try, the chance to see what could happen. Possibilities opened before me, and the thought of slamming them shut forever was enough to make my throat clench. Was he really my mate? Could he be? Was this just nature, acting in ways that made no sense and beyond our control? I didn’t care. I wanted to just sit forever with him looking at me like this , like I was absolutely perfect and his dearest treasure.

I was so lost that I chided myself for missing the most interesting part of the conversation.

“Wait,” I said, “what magic lets you fly here? To the mountain.”

Zariel frowned. “There’s no point in hiding it since you’re here and you’ll discover it eventually. But to be able to fly around this mountain, and handle the ash, we have to have these.” Zariel shifted his leathers and lifted his shirt, revealing a series of runes that were burning in his skin along his waistband like a fiery belt. No, not burned like a brand—burned as if a flame was within him. The runes, similar to the ones in the hall, glowed bright red, as if embers were pressed under his skin, a flame burning under the surface. Each as tall and thick as one of my fingers, the runes swirled and curved, following his hips.

What did the runes mean? What did they all do ?

“Fire,” I said in awe. Without noticing, I had moved, practically falling off my chair, consumed by the miracle before me.

“Magic,” he gently corrected.

“Do they hurt?” Jerked back to reality, I leaned back in my seat, gripping the arms.

“Not always, and not usually.” Zariel tugged his shirt back down. “And they’re a small price to pay for the magic they give.”

Silv didn’t say a thing about fiery flesh runes. Did he know about this?

“Are all of those runes just so you can fly around the mountain?”

“No. I have one for small illusions, as you saw at the summit. One is for the Ashen Mountain, to fly outside it, and I also have one to enhance my memory.” A memory booster? The academic in me was jealous.

“How do they work?” I asked. My dissertation was practically writing itself, and thinking about the dissertation let me forget about the perfectly carved abs that were under the runes. “How do you get them? Is there a limit to how many you can have?”

He quirked up an eyebrow. “An inquisitive thing, aren’t you?”

“You tricked me into coming here by appealing to my intellectual side.” I crossed my arms and met his challenge. “I’m hardly going to run away with an angel I just met because he’s handsome.”

He smiled. “You think I’m handsome?”

“That’s not the point.”

“I disagree, and I’ll answer every question you have that I’m allowed to.” The smile slowly melted from his face. “Unfortunately, before we can do that, we need to

prepare for when the Artists return. Specifically, what they might do or require of you. There are some things I need to tell you.”

Chapter ten

Zariel

“Y ou risked everything, and you may yet ruin it all,” the High Artist said to me from behind his black wooden desk. On either side of him were two Artists that I knew by reputation—these Artists didn’t deign to spend time with us mere archivists and scribes. The High Artist tapped his desk with his fingers. Hard. “The humans were looking for her already, even before the summit was over. Luckily, they assumed she had left on her own. And with even greater luck, no one from our world was there—I doubt your little trick would’ve worked on them for long.” He frowned and clenched his fists. “The humans will discover the truth soon enough, as dim-witted as they are. And then what are we going to do? Starve? Abandon the mountain? Why—tell me why you were so reckless.”

The High Artist was Cael’s father, my father’s close friend, and had known me from infancy. Without his recommendation and emphasis on how I proved myself in my studies, I wouldn’t have my position in the mountain—the mountain didn’t care about noble birth alone, as intellect did not care one bit whether one slept on rushes or a feather bed. But our history didn’t change how the High Artist—who was practically a king—was barely restraining his fury. He had been back in the mountain for less than half an hour before he demanded to see me. Alone.

“She is my mate,” was all I said in reply. I let them fill in the rest as I humbly hid my hands in my garment’s folds. Now I was wearing my daily archivist robes, flowing things of white and silver that had far too many draping layers, but blissfully resulted in less chafing than the tight clothes we wore for flying. I had left Cat in my rooms

with instructions to open the door for no one other than me, not even Cael. I wasn't worried that Cat wouldn't listen or try to leave the room—my mate had sense. One reason I loved her. Liked her.

“Mate?” The High Artist sighed and rubbed his face while the others watched expressionlessly. “Yes, I know.” Of course, he did. A mate bond was something that some of us could “hear,” in a sense, and that sense tended to appear as angels aged. “But that doesn't change the fact that you should've waited before pursuing her and addressed this matter through the proper authority. She was in no danger—her position among the humans seemed to be respected. She could've waited for you to court her properly, without putting the rest of us in danger.”

“By our laws, she was entitled to be by my side from the first instant I recognized the bond for what it is, if I have her consent,” I said. “And I do. I did not force or threaten her—I'm prepared for you to judge this for yourself. I never would've been expected to wait for any such approval at our home.”

“There is no need to bring her into this directly,” the High Artist said, resting his head on clasped hands, elbows propped on his desk. “I saw her leave with you. She went willingly. But your statement reveals a key difference—we are not home. We must be careful. And she isn't one of us.”

The room fell silent, the awkward truth of that statement rippling through the air. The other angels crossed their arms. What were they thinking? If they thought anything at all, they kept their own counsel.

“... Do you know what caused this?” I dared to ask. “Our mate bond. Has this ever happened before?”

“No. I cannot claim to understand this unfortunate mystery.” At that, the other Artists regarded each other with looks I couldn't decipher. “But neither can I change the fact

that she is indeed your mate, and thus we must come to an understanding. We may not be home, but as High Artist I have an obligation to respect our laws. And”?he swallowed?”your rights. It is done—she has been taken, and there’s no point in violating our laws regarding your bond by sending her back now. The questions from the humans will be the same regardless.”

I stiffened, even as part of me exhaled with relief. I was disgraced since Anielia had committed her crime, but I caught the layers under the High Artist’s words—forcing an angel to send his mate back would cause a stir he couldn’t ignore. Not when he needed us united.

The High Artist paused, watching me from behind his desk. His words were kind enough, considering, but that was the thing about the High Artist—he was always kindest right before he struck, a predator who comforted before he killed. Truly, it was impossible to guess what he was thinking, what course of action he’d take. He was either going to let me leave this meeting with nothing more than a lecture, or he could just as easily be getting ready to throw me into the mountain’s prison with Anielia. Considering that she did try to murder him, it wouldn’t have surprised me if he wanted to get rid of the reminder I embodied. History and friendship with my family or not, my father wasn’t here to protect us, and her crime shadowed me from the moment she committed it. I wouldn’t be the first inconvenience the High Artist decided to remove rather than navigate, especially with the tension that came from guiding a community in exile.

“We’re preparing to go home,” the High Artist suddenly said.

I blinked hard. Why was he saying this to me? And why now? “We’ve been scouring the archives, High Artist,” I said. “While some promising documents are indeed missing due to them being in the other library, and their records on the elves of the Darkening Woods in particular likely have—”

“No.” Slowly, the High Artist leaned back to study me, the Artists flanking him as impassive as ever. “We don’t need anything from those gruesome creatures. We have a way to return on our own. And it will only be around a month before we’re ready.”

“You do?” My heart leapt as the High Artist nodded. “How? Why hasn’t this been announced? Instead of the summit—”

The High Artist held up his hand, silencing me. The other Artists didn’t react to anything he had said. Obviously, they already knew. “We will announce our plan formally, soon, and more details will be revealed as the pertinent time becomes closer and such revelations are necessary. The stakes are too high to risk our pursuits being contaminated.”

Contaminated? By who? Who here would want to stop us?

“As for the summit,” the High Artist continued, “you of all people should understand that one needs contingency plans. If our plan—the ritual—fails, we need to ensure that we will have a place here, and that our needs will be met as we consider another path. We’re going to find a way home—no matter what it takes.”

“This is wonderful, High Artist,” I said, bowing my head. “I am thrilled.”

Thrilled was an understatement, and the reality of what he said took time to comprehend .

How was it to be done? What did the High Artist discover? The elves of the Darkening Woods had the most extensive knowledge of how magic bonded with the earth, since they had used such magic to extend their lives, as merely one example. If anyone knew the roots of the world, and detailed records of such things when it impacted their Woods, it was them. This was hardly a secret, and I wasn’t alone in mourning that out of the millions of texts we had brought with, we were still missing

the few that could possibly help us. Unfortunately, it seemed the texts were in our sister library, the one we had left behind when the worlds split.

But what other options existed? What did the High Artist discover that could be done? I was dying of curiosity to know. Was it a matter of triggering the right conditions for the worlds to revert? Did it take some sort of magic? The High Artist's use of "ritual" implied a form of magic. Maybe it was something simple, that the right amount of weight needed to be placed at the right spots at the right time, and we just had to hop to trigger a shift, like a puzzle pushed into place.

Oh, that was a foolish thought, but sometimes foolish ideas worked.

"I'm sure you are," the High Artist said, never taking his eyes off me. "As are we all." He took a deep breath and glanced at his acolytes before continuing. "Zariel, you may keep your human for now. Maybe she can help you with your work—she was one of those humans from the university, I believe?" When I agreed, he continued, "You are correct—forcing you to abandon her now would be against our laws, as bizarre as this situation is. But my other statements stand—her people may insist on her return."

"You would make me give her back?" A primal growl stirred deep within me, and I had to take a deep breath and bite my tongue to restrain it. The ferocity shocked me, the sudden willingness to taste blood. To kill. I would've attacked the High Artist then and there, if he had ordered her to be sent back. I would've fought the entire mountain if it meant being kept from her.

And I would have lost.

Such wrath over someone I didn't know.

Mate bonds truly were illogical things.

The High Artist smirked, as if he knew the torment swirling within me. Maybe he did—he was mated, too. The current Lady of the Ashen Mountain enjoyed her title from our capital without ever having set foot in the mountain itself, and she was left behind when the worlds twisted. Mate bonds tended to be more manageable over time, allowing partners to separate. “I will do what needs to be done,” he said. “For all of us. Surely, you understand.”

For all of us, because Cat being here would complicate things with the humans? Or was it just because he didn’t want a human in the mountain?

I nodded, pretending to agree. Of course, I didn’t understand what he wanted. What he wanted was to take her away from me, and I couldn’t comprehend why someone would want to do such a thing. I was already picturing my hand in his chest, ripping out his still-beating heart. Give up Cat? I’d destroy everything first. She was mine.

Mine .

I shuddered.

This wasn’t me. These feelings, this wrath enveloped in lust—wasn’t me. Yet I feared that now it was.

The conversation lapsed, and I knew the High Artist well enough to know that I had been dismissed. I bowed and turned to leave.

“Zariel?”

Slowly, I turned back to face the High Artist, doing my best to continue to ignore the others who scornfully watched.

“I say this as someone who has looked after you since you were a novitiate, and who

was— is —your father's friend. And you've been a true friend to my son. Be careful." His eyes darkened. "I do not want to see you suffer certain fates."

Chapter eleven

Cat

“How did it go?” I nervously asked once Zariel came back to his rooms. I had behaved while he was gone, doing little other than skimming some of the books he had piled in the corner. Fascinating tomes, really. Poetry and legends from what must have been his world, each one carefully scribbled with what were likely his translations. I cursed that I didn’t have my laptop or my own notebook—the information in this room alone was enough to make my thirsty PhD-candidate head explode. The budding otherworld literature program at the university would have literally slaughtered me for access to these. Academics could be ruthless.

Unfortunately, I had a concern other than academic deprivation, and that was the gorgeous angel who said I was sharing a room with him. Room s . Where was I going to sleep? More importantly—where was he?

Zariel didn’t return barehanded. Gossamer dresses were draped over his arms, and in a wicker basket hooked over one forearm was some sort of pastry whose delicious, sweet smell made my eyes water. The basket also contained a few flasks, their contents unknown.

Then there was Zariel himself, his muscles visible through the drapes of his flowing robe and cloak. He had changed before the meeting with the High Artist, and now he was a Renaissance artwork brought to life. I bit my lip. His dark eyes sparkled when they looked at me, and he stilled, as if he was as stunned by me as well. An angled jaw highlighted a perfect mouth, which was shaped into a pleased grin.

“You’re here,” was all he said.

“Yes.” My mouth went dry, especially when he set the items down on a table and approached, crouching down next to me.

Now he was close enough that I could smell him, and the urge—the rightness—of what it would feel like to be pressed against him—what it had felt like—roared within me. As quick as the urge came, it left like smoke blown away in the wind, though the memory remained.

I couldn’t indulge in such daydreams. They wouldn’t help. I took a slow breath, forcing myself to listen to the words that came out of his mouth and not focus on his lips .

“You’re able to stay in the mountain for the time being,” he said softly. “The Artists will give us time to determine what happened, and there are no apparent restrictions for your visit. You’re free to stay and go when you wish.”

“Good.” I nodded vigorously. “That’s very good.”

“They’re worried the humans will look for you.”

I grimaced. “Yes. They probably will. Silv, one of my friends—he’s a satyr—he will know what happened. Or will guess.”

“A satyr?” Zariel raised an eyebrow.

“Yes. He works at the university.”

“Interesting choice, for a people normally so ... wild.” He gestured at the items. “I brought you clothes for your stay. And dinner, when you’re ready. The garments can

be adjusted since you obviously don't have wings. I can show you how to tie your belt to manage the excess fabric." A kind reminder that I lacked wings, and was also short compared to angels.

"Thank you."

A silence grew between us, as imposing as if it were its own presence, carrying within in it a thousand unsaid words. A thousand that couldn't be said. Silv warned me about the angels and the myriad of rumors that surrounded them. He never warned me about what would happen if I found myself mated to one.

Silv. Did he know what happened to me? Somehow, I guessed he would know where I went. But would he put the pieces together that I was with this angel who was driving my mind and body to extremes, even when those extremes made absolutely no sense? It was similar to when I was a teen around my high school crush, the intensity and obsession overriding reason, adding layers to every look and interaction. If this was a mate bond, no wonder the angels accepted it—it was probably less painful for all parties that way. Including those around the mated pair.

"How long can I stay?"

A soft growl escaped him before he quickly stifled it, followed by reddened cheeks. "As long as you wish." I didn't know angels growled. But I also didn't know that they decorated with cannibalistic carvings, so this was a day of new experiences.

"I ... are you sure?"

"Yes."

"That's ... perfect." I closed my eyes. I couldn't give into my feelings, no matter how I wanted nothing more than to touch him. Even just his hand.

Absolutely not, I was not touching him. I couldn't make things more complicated than they already were.

For his part, Zariel shook himself, as if he were awakening from a dream. He moved to his own chair, leaving the space next to me emptier than it had ever been. I clasped my hands in my lap. The mate bond was bothering him as much as me—that was clear. Likely even more. Yet that knowledge just spurred the useless sensation of pleasure further. He wanted me. At least as much as I wanted him .

He wanted me.

And such wanting was pointless. It was purely physical, and would do nothing but complicate everything.

What was I supposed to do with this angel? I needed to learn what I could from the library. I was here to learn, to complete my dissertation. But this was—

“You were reading,” he said, a hint of surprise creeping into his voice.

“Of course.” My face burned, even as I was glad to be discussing anything else. “I mean, I'm sorry if they were private, but they were here, and you didn't tell me I couldn't ...”

He flicked his wrist. “No. Anything I have here is yours. I brought you here, under slightly misleading pretenses. At the very least, I wish for you to learn what you desire.”

“Really?”

He smiled. “Yes. I will take you to the library tomorrow, where I work in Morven Hall. The High Artist said that you're allowed to be with me as I work.”

“Morven Hall?”

“Yes. Named for the king who donated his entire library to us after his death, much of his personal collection is still kept in that same hall. What is it?”

“There’s something in Princeton named Morven. It just surprised me.” I sat straighter. “Of course I will go with you.”

He grinned. “While we’re there, you can read whatever you’d like, and take your own notes to bring home with you. I’m just happy to have company for once. Especially company as beautiful as yours. That is, if you’d like to.”

I smiled, and my face burned hotter. “Of course. But can I ask, why are they called Artists? Why not masters, or librarians or ... professors?”

Zariel shrugged. “Because knowledge is an art. Knowing how all the pieces fit together, how to delve further into study, using it to benefit society, it’s as much an art as drawing or music. Creatures like certain elves may mold their art from bones, and some fae may fuse their bodies with metal, but we angels mold our minds.”

I laughed. “That’s the opposite of what I’m used to. There’s no arena more vicious than academia. The battlefield is littered with failed tenured professors, the ground watered with students’ despairing tears. Only the well connected, or truly masochistic, survive to wear the victory tweed.” My lips quirked. “Silv said that to me.”

A grin crept across Zariel’s face, and my traitorous body responded too well. I had to focus on his words, and not what his mere smile was doing to me. “The title of Artist is more aspirational than truth. It takes a lot to become an archivist or scribe, and that is nothing compared to becoming an Artist.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Even though my family is well-connected at court, I had to excel in my studies for years. This included a test where I was introduced to a language—in this case an extinct sprite dialect—and then given a month to study before I was tested on it. I was expected to be very proficient, enough to translate works.”

“That sounds impossible.”

“Our minds are trained for this from a young age—I didn’t have access to my runes at that time. And that’s just languages. We’re tested in mathematics, astronomy, literature, the sciences, and magics.”

I gasped. “Magics? You learn magic along with science?”

“Yes. That and more. Those two topics are far more similar than you think. You’re going to enjoy the library,” Zariel said, enthusiasm now working into his voice with every word, the passion of discussing something he cared about. I loved it. He was reminding me of ... me. But with more feathers. “Magic has its rules. They’re nearly impossible to understand entirely, but its workings did not come from nowhere. I can show you what we’ve already translated. Most of it isn’t a secret—you couldn’t do anything directly with the magic even if you tried. Especially not in this world—we suspect that the conditions are just not right, not for our magic. Even angels sometimes have difficulty with runes acting as they are supposed to. There’s no point in showing it to you, other than for your own knowledge.”

“Oh my god.” At my fingertips I had more knowledge than I could hope to absorb in a lifetime. Culture, legends, history, magic ... I had unparalleled access to everything about the world that had invaded our own. The excitement of so much information being right here for the taking was enough that I stopped picturing what Zariel probably looked like without his robes, if the rest of him was as muscular as his

forearms. If that tantalizing v at the bottom of his abdomen, that I had seen when he showed me his runes, was chiseled further, deeper under the fabric. What those muscles would feel like against my bare skin, those hands touching mine, grazing my body ...

Zariel caught my expression, as if he could feel the absolute giddiness that ran through me. As if he could read my mind and see my illicit thoughts. He smiled. "I think we're going to enjoy working together, Cat."

Dinner was a delight. A pastry-filled delight.

This was turning into a dream come true.

We talked for hours. About our studies, our lives, our interests. Zariel wasn't just book smart, he was ... clever. And funny. And he was fascinated by my research, and quickly assured me that the angels who had come to our world had absolutely no interest in manipulating the earth's political powers, but was fascinated by the question. He candidly told me that some angels back in their original world would gladly pretend they served a god to reach their goals. Gently, he suggested I rephrase my dissertation to focus on what humans might do by interpreting the angels' actions, and not the angels themselves, using records of human and angelic interaction from their old world to form my study's backbone, and include relations between humans and other creatures. "The potential influence from your world's religious history and imagery, intended or not, cannot be ignored," he had said. "As time passes, those from our home will engage with humanity more and more, and yes, there are some creatures who won't hesitate to become involved in your politics if given the chance. It's best that you prepare for that. Your topic is relevant. And needed."

Blissfully, he agreed to help me find documents on angelic military philosophy, tomes that covered not only the angels, but every documented creature in their world. My dissertation was primed to write itself.

My studies were just one topic of discussion that night. If someone had told me what I'd be doing when left alone with a gorgeous angel, I wouldn't have guessed discussing angelic sciences. But that's what we did.

After hours of conversation, I couldn't keep my eyes open. I had already changed into one of the robes he brought me, and I tried to ignore how I caught his gaze lingering.

"Would you like to sleep?" he asked.

"Yes. I think I should."

"Come," he said, standing and offering me his hand. I took it and my breath caught. He was leading me to his room. His room .

Once inside, he lit a lamp, illuminating the space. But I couldn't focus on what was around me, there was just him. "Use whatever you like," he said, "there's more blankets in the gray chest. I'll be in my sitting area if you need anything else."

"You will?"

"Yes." He paused, his eyes roaming to his bed and then to me. Was he regretting his decision? What if I asked him not to leave? "You will be more comfortable in here," he finally said. Was he trying to convince me, or himself?

"What about you?"

"I'll be fine. I sleep out there all the time."

I nodded, too tired to argue. Why did I think that he'd want to stay with me? We barely knew each other. He was right—him staying out there was for the best. Even though his couch had to be way too small for him to sleep comfortably.

We said a short goodnight, and once alone, I curled myself under the thick blankets that were heavy with his scent, mixed with a hint of pine and mint. Softly, I groaned, my hand yearning to reach between my legs and give myself relief, my body and mind surrounded by reminders of him . The incessant urge that made thinking nearly impossible.

I wouldn't act. He was too close by—and I couldn't let myself think of this angel as anything but a friend. This mating bond was horrible, though I could see how it was effective for continuing the species. If Zariel was feeling anything like I was, it was a miracle he could function.

Bond aside, Zariel wasn't what I expected for an angel. He was articulate, intelligent, and humored my questions in a way that wasn't belittling.

The library. I had to focus on the library.

The library.

Not the angel who was overwhelming every single thought.

Chapter twelve

Zariel

I could hear her breathing and shifting in my room.

In my bed.

She was curled up on my pillow, that perfect body spread out under my sheets, covered in my scent. That brilliant hair was strewn over my pillows like golden rays. That silky night robe was tight against her in the most perfect places. I no longer had to imagine certain curves, and my imagination was more than happy to fill out what it was missing.

Meanwhile, I laid alone on my couch, a thin blanket tossed over me—and stiffened, pushing against the limits of my robes. Before I could think my hand slipped between the folds of fabric—

And then I yanked it away.

I couldn't. Not with her so close that she could hear. I'd respect the boundaries she had set. That we had set. Besides, we had a mating bond—nothing would satisfy me until it was her clasped around me, taking me inside her. Rumor was that the urge to complete the bond would only get worse if I tried to seek pleasure without her. I didn't want to test it.

With a frustrated sigh I adjusted my pillows, maneuvering wings that weren't meant

to rest on something so small. I told her I slept out here all the time. I lied. But uncomfortable sleep was the least of my problems.

What had I done to deserve this?

I had a mate that I could never be with. She was human and wasn't going to stay in the mountain. She had a home, a life, and her own society. She had a brilliant, curious mind and dreams that didn't deserve to be trapped here. And here was the bond, driving me to fantasize about each and every thing I wanted to do to her. At least she didn't seem as affected as me. One small mercy.

I wanted what I could never have, and every bit of my body craved for it to be otherwise. To drink from the cup of my desire, to consume her and make her mine in every way.

And beyond that, why did I have to like her so much? Some people detested their mates, even as they were compelled to be together. This was so much harder to bear with her being so delightful to talk to. To admire ...

I closed my eyes. Tomorrow. I had to think of tomorrow. And the library. The places we were going to see. The things we were going to discuss. All the knowledge and books I could provide her .

I was absolutely not going to think about how it would feel to have her sliding up and down my length, calling out my name ...

Chapter thirteen

Cat

The library filled my dreams, so much that when Zariel woke me the next morning with a gentle touch on my shoulder, I leapt out of bed like a child on Christmas. For an academic, this was better than Christmas. Who cared about a mate bond when there were otherworldly treasures to explore?

The library was something out of my deepest academic fantasies. It wasn't just a place of books—it was a temple for them. The upper levels of the mountain were a sea of documents and staid tomes of every size and color, set in clearly labeled rows that went on as far as I could see—spanning through tunnels and halls. Silently, Zariel guided me through one of the halls, a relatively small one compared to the vastness around us. There was no light here, other than from the encased lamps, but the glow was enough to make the hardened ash on the walls sparkle like snow. There were no pines or other plants in this part of the mountain—probably to keep the humidity at a perfect level for the books—but the same jarring, grotesque pictures weaved their way across the walls. Something like art of a dancing fairy couple would a few steps later be a depiction of that same couple dancing without their skin. What would be angelic children playing in a garden would later be an empty space, the art depicting nothing but barren branches and toys splayed on the ground. That same balance between the beautiful and the macabre followed us even in here.

None of the libraries' rooms were empty of people. In each room there were at least two angels wearing leather armor with swords fastened at their sides, watching the occupants with rapt attention. For the guards to be staring that intensely at angels

spoke to how seriously they took their task. The two guarding this room narrowed their eyes when they saw me, but Zariel kept his hand on my lower back and met their challenge, daring them to say anything. They didn't.

Zariel had given me three options to choose from when traveling to this level of the library. The first was having him fly me up, bypassing the stairs entirely. The second was using the set of stairs in the main atrium that had no rails—with nothing preventing me from falling to my untimely death. The third was a very narrow stair/tunnel combination that wound around the mountain .

I chose the stair tunnel, even though it took a half hour of walking on a noticeable incline.

“Why is it so dark?” I whispered, gathering the skirts around my legs and sneaking a pat to console my sore thighs. “Aren't there windows here?” I was dressed like the other librarian angels, in gauzy robes that enveloped me in airy layers. A belt was tied around my waist, tucking up the fabric and hiding the fact that this garment was made for someone much taller than myself. I had tied my hair back in its customary braid, grateful that some part of my routine had stayed the same. I had no makeup and no moisturizer, but I had a braid.

“Light ruins the manuscripts,” Zariel whispered. “There's a few areas here that do have windows, and the books there aren't valuable. Mostly popular fiction tales and such, things that can be easily replaced. And they”—he gestured toward the guards—“are here to make sure no harm comes to the books.”

I tried not to stare, even though Zariel had warned me about them. It was a very different thing to see armed angelic guards in person. “Are those the same guards who work in the prison?”

“Yes. We rotate them, so they don't lose their minds below ground. Angels aren't

meant to be confined in the earth—we belong in the sky.” That last sentence was uttered with a hint of something I couldn’t place. Bitterness? Regret? “And then they’re given frequent leaves, where they are encouraged to fly outside. Being inside the mountain itself is difficult enough for us, but here, in the library, we are level with the clouds.”

“Who are they?” I eyed a particularly tall one with a square chin. “I mean, how does one end up as a guard here?”

“Nobles’ sons and daughters, their second or third children. Or the younger children of those who are wealthy and well-connected. Certainly, a fair number are also from the lower classes and proved themselves.” He leveled a look at me. “It’s an honor to serve here, in any capacity. When their service is done, the guards receive a pension and a recommendation that does much for any other path they wish to pursue. The guards protect the books, but all of us are prepared to do so, if needed.”

I listened ... and I didn’t. My head spun with the wealth of knowledge around me. And this was only half the mountain. There was also that vast enclave underground, the one even Silv knew only through rumors. “Can I see the prison?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. “Not necessarily the prisoners, just ... I want to go down there.”

Zariel didn’t answer me, not until we were concealed behind a few rows of books—as alone as we could hope to be in this place. The steady echo of scratching pens reached us in the silence, a perpetual humming like bees in a hive, even though the scribes were working in their own section where I couldn’t see them. “Why would you want to go down there?” he asked .

“I’m curious.” I looked around the hall, emphasizing my point. “You told me this is merely one section, one piece of the library. If this place is such a marvel, what is the prison like?”

A shadow fell over his features. “Torture,” he said. “You don’t want to go there, Cat. It’s dark, a maze full of despair, and it’s no place for you.” He gripped my hand tightly. “You belong here, in the light.” With him , he seemingly left unsaid. Suddenly, he dropped my hand, as if remembering who I actually was to him—someone he just met. His mate, but also a stranger.

“I’ll never get another chance to see it—no human will. Can we just go down to the entrance, even? Please?” Why was I prodding him? I didn’t want to see beings in misery, either, but I hated that there was knowledge I couldn’t have, and that I might return from the mountain having only seen the beautiful part. A minor character flaw. If I was in the Garden of Eden, I would’ve eaten that apple long before the serpent came around.

Zariel watched me for a moment, as if making sure I was serious, and then finally answered. “It wouldn’t be good for me to be seen as having an interest in the prison.”

“Interest? From just going to the entrance?”

“Yes.”

“Alright.” I frowned, confused.

“Cat ...” Zariel sighed. “I may as well tell you. My sister, Aniela, is in the prison. ”

My heart stopped. “You have a sister?” He hadn’t mentioned her when he told me about his family.

“Yes.” Zariel then explained how she was an archivist and scribe, like him, and how after the worlds merged, she was accused of attempting to murder the High Artist, which she admitted to, and was now incarcerated far below. “I’ve done nothing wrong, nothing to make them think ill of me,” Zariel said when he finished. “Until

now. But I need to keep it that way. I know others are watching what I'm doing, and searching for any sign that I might be like her."

"Murder isn't genetic," I said. That was true. I had a great uncle who murdered his neighbor after the mass destruction of his rose bushes and buried the body where the roses used to be. But as far as I knew, no one else in the family had done such a thing. And the uncle himself was long dead, in circumstances I couldn't get anyone to tell me. I liked knowledge, but sometimes family secrets were better left undisturbed.

"Among our kind, familial ties are everything," Zariel said. "When we return to our world—if we ever do—my family will face consequences for what Aniela did."

"Like what?"

"It will be subtle, but they will lose favor. Business opportunities. Marriage bonds. Until you, I expected that I'd never have the freedom to go out of my way to find—" he coughed. "What I mean is, I gave such things no thought and focused solely on my work. But as I said, we should avoid the prison. Just in case. I'm sure we are being watched, and such a journey will be reported. I don't need them suggesting to the High Artist that we might be trying to help Aniela escape or something ridiculous."

"I see," I said. "Alright. But ... why is a bond with me such a bad thing? Something that would make them think you did something wrong?"

"Because it shouldn't have happened—angels don't deign to mate with non-angels." A blush rose to his cheeks. "We're an isolated people, in many respects."

"Your kind never ... love others?"

"I didn't say that. A mate is family, beyond family. For me to bring a non-human with me, to the areas of the kingdom that are due my mate by right, they might

wonder what was wrong with me to make this happen. Or if I did something to cause this—dabbled in some magic that I shouldn't have. And if I did, what else could I be planning? It was only the novelty of the situation, I think, that the High Artist ordered that we be left alone.”

“But you didn't do anything ... magic.”

“No.” Zariel took a deep breath. “I did not. But that doesn't mean everyone will believe me.”

“I can't ask you to risk anything, especially for something so frivolous,” I said. “Forget I asked about the prison.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course. I feel bad pushing you to answer things you weren't ready to tell me. ”

“Never feel bad for that,” Zariel said. “There's nothing you cannot ask me.” We exchanged a hesitant smile before I went back to investigating my new surroundings.

Matter of the prison conceded, as far as I was concerned, I took a few steps along the aisle over the stone floors, tracing my fingers over a few of the books' gilded spines. Runes similar to Zariel's own lined the stone and wood shelves, etched under the rows of tomes.

“What sorts of books are these?” I asked. I couldn't decipher the language. Language S .

“History,” he said. “I couldn't tell you exactly of what, but this section held the history of the water races.”

“And the runes?”

“Merely decoration. Our magic unfortunately doesn’t work by etching it on a surface.”

“Oh?”

“Our runes need a body to work their magic—and stone is not flesh,” he teased at the end. I snorted lightly in reply, and then faded to a somber silence.

The weight of the space pressed around me as if trapping me forever. There was so much history. So many different kingdoms and creatures. So many lives upended and destroyed by the merging of the worlds. And what I could see here, in this one part of the library, was merely the start of the knowledge of an entire world, one larger than anything I could hope to imagine .

“How many different creatures are there?” I asked. “In your world. Human-like ones, I mean.”

“That is more of a spectrum than you may think, but the number is incalculable. Many more creatures are likely undiscovered, or are so adept at hiding themselves that they may as well be so.”

“Do you think ... do you think that the worlds will ever return? That you will be able to go home?”

Zariel took a quick look around him before answering me. “It is our dearest hope. But as for the how, promise me that you will only mention this—the worlds returning—when we are in my rooms. I don’t know how the Artists would react to a human knowing our ultimate goals.”

I nodded, though why was this such secret knowledge? Anyone would want to return home, if they had the choice. At the university, we already suspected that the angels were researching just that. And if the rest of Zariel's kingdom was like this—with the grandeur of the library—then this mountain was a poor substitute for what the angels here had lost. No wonder they wanted to go back.

"I understand," I said. "And despite everything, thank you for bringing me here. I am very excited to see, well, everything." I grinned, one that he returned. A now-familiar heat worked through me, mixed with satisfaction at getting another smile from him.

Was it only the research I was interested in, why I was excited to be here? Or was there more?

... What if there was more?

"In that case," he said, oblivious to the war stirring within me. He offered me his arm, and I took it gladly. "Let me show you my work. I have no doubt they already have an assignment for us to prepare for the next summit."

He did have an assignment—translating something that seemed to be ... a recipe book? Zariel and I sat next to each other in a hall filled with other scribes, who were scratching along and pretending not to stare. He was trying to work, and I was trying not to bother him. But curiosity got the better of me.

"What is that?" I asked, keeping my voice low and pointing at the illustration on the page. It showed a unicorn's fleshless head in a stew pot, bobbing along next to onions and potatoes.

"A recipe book."

"Yes, I gathered that. But that appears to be a unicorn."

“It is.”

I paled. “Um ... alright. Yes, that’s a unicorn. For dinner.”

He let out a soft chuckle. “The humans wanted a copy of one of our recipe books, probably to get a better idea of what is consumed in our world.” He looked down at the image again. “You don’t eat unicorns here?”

“We don’t have unicorns here. Aren’t they magic? ”

“Well, yes. Makes them taste a little peppery. But we don’t eat the talking ones. At least, angels don’t.”

I blinked hard. Talking unicorns? Peppery? “I’ll have to take your word for it.” From his smile, I suspected he was teasing me, but we were interrupted by a female angel who approached our table.

“Zariel,” she said, “can I ask you to help me with translating this sentence?”

“Of course.” He moved aside his own work before taking hers, not noticing the narrowed expression the angel gave me. She was pretty, with silvery hair and high cheekbones, but I didn’t get the sense that she was jealous of me for being with Zariel. No, she disliked me on a more basic level.

“I didn’t want to bother you,” she said, “considering that you have this ... human.”

“This human is my mate,” Zariel said, turning from the project to focus on her. “And if you want my help, you’re going to be polite. And not treat her like she isn’t here.”

“I am as polite as can be expected.”

“We both know that’s not true. And that had better change. Now.”

I froze, watching the verbal sparring about me end in frozen silence, which was echoed by dozens of pens stopping momentarily. I wasn’t welcome—that I knew—but generally the angels so far had just avoided me. Unfortunately, she probably didn’t have a choice, not if she wanted Zariel’s help .

A few painful minutes later, which were spent without anyone saying a word, Zariel handed the angel back her book and went into a long explanation about ... planets? Rocks? Something that I didn’t even try to follow as half of it was in a strange language. The matter apparently resolved, she thanked him and then left, giving me a grudging nod when Zariel glared.

“You’re able to translate that quickly?” I whispered once she left.

“My rune, the one for memory. It bonded with me extremely well.”

“What does that mean?”

He took a long breath. “Well, just because an angel receives a rune does not mean that it will affect us each the same. My illusion rune is weak, for example. While my memory rune is ... I excelled at my studies before. Now, I have ... a reputation of sorts.” He must have had a reputation, if an angel asked him for help like this, with me there.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, wringing my hands. “I made everything harder for you.” He had been kind to me, beyond kind. He didn’t deserve what my being here was doing.

“No. Never think that.”

“But she—”

“—Does not matter.” He picked up his own work, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. “You wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want you to be. And I want you here.”

My hands gripped my robes and my mouth dropped open. His eyes peered at me, soft blue crystals under the dim light. He wanted me here. Me . I was just beginning to understand the depths of what that meant.

“Let me focus on everyone else, and you focus on your studies, alright?” Zariel’s wings fluttered, and I noticed one crept closer to me in the last several minutes, sheltering us. What would happen if I touched one of the metallic-edged feathers? Would he let me?

I smiled, taking a book off the table. I couldn’t think like that— of him —like that. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t enjoy being here. He wanted me to study? Why, I would. With pleasure.

Chapter fourteen

Zariel

She was everything I dreamed of. Literally, she filled my dreams. And my days. And every waking thought. Each accidental or intentional touch of her sent a rush of delicious heat through me, the cessation of contact leaving my soul begging for more.

It was getting worse—because I found I liked her. The physical part of the mating bond was quickly joined by my mind. She was human, but what human was like this, ravenous to learn everything?

Liking her would change nothing. I was an angel, she was not, and indulging in anything between us would only complicate things. It would only make whatever we had more painful when it ended.

We spent several days in an easy companionship while Cat worked on her studies, scribbling notes on her papers. She wrote about things like the topics of tomes in the library, architecture of the mountain, and angelic habits—nothing that was a secret. She followed me to my tasks and sat next to me each day while I worked at transcribing the mountain of documents the Artists selected for the next summit. I gritted my teeth—we should've been working on returning home, and yet again our time was being wasted. I couldn't complain too much, though—the monotonous project gave me time with her, without having to worry about her learning something she shouldn't. Something that could get us both in trouble.

Did the High Artist ever announce the plan to return home? I didn't dare speak a

word of it to Cat. If the High Artist kept his word about revealing the details of this ritual, it wasn't something that reached me, and such a secret would be hard kept in this mountain. This was true even if my friends and friendly acquaintances were keeping their distance, likely in part since interfering with a male who had not yet completed the mate bond could be ... risky. And partially due to how they were apparently assigned work that meant they were practically sequestered.

I hadn't seen Cael since the day Cat arrived. A pity—they would like each other.

I should've been more unsettled at his absence and the High Artist's silence, but it was hard to care. Not when her blue eyes were focused on the papers in front of her, her hands stained with ink. The front of her gown was draped low, revealing a tantalizing bit of pale skin. She was still sleeping in my bed. Alone. And after a week of doing so she smelled of me, always. The scent of me mixed with her was more than I could handle, leading to some almost embarrassing moments. I had to think about potatoes—a lot. White potatoes, purple potatoes, orange potatoes. Baked, mashed, fried. Lots of potatoes.

The mating bond was overwhelming. My sense of smell was never this strong before. Being this obsessed with someone wasn't me. As was thinking about tubers.

Cat never asked me about any plans to return home, other than those that were hinted at during her first full day with me. Wise. But there also wasn't much I could say at this point, because I didn't know.

“Are you sure I can't take a different manuscript?” Cat whispered. Today I was transcribing a catalogue of weather patterns, something that the humans were interested in for some reason, which meant Cat was trapped reading those same patterns. We sat with the rows of other scribes, each of us plucking away at our documents word by painful word. And, in some cases, drawings.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s the policy in this particular room that the only materials on hand are the ones being worked on at that moment. We will be moved back to another hall with more lenient rules once these materials are done.”

“Why? That’s a ... dedicated rule. ”

“Less chance to damage or lose the items.” I inclined my head towards the guards. “They’re here to protect the books—not us.” By now the guards had stopped constantly staring at us. After a few days of realizing Cat was going to do nothing but read and write, they gave her as much attention as any other scribe. I hoped it stayed that way.

“Well, back to my book,” Cat said, pulling out the single tome she had brought with her. It was a floppy book with a gray paper cover that depicted a rather opulent apple tree.

“What’s it about?” I asked, keeping my voice as quiet as possible and ignoring the irritated stares from the other scribes.

“ Paradise Lost ?” She frowned. “It’s on how to murder Literature students through boredom.”

“Ah. One of those.”

“You’ve read those too?”

I nodded. “One angel meticulously recorded every dream he ever had in great detail. It’s considered a masterpiece, so I had to study it. But one can only read so many descriptions of teeth falling out before the effect is lessened.”

Cat grimaced. “This isn’t as bad as that. It’s a poem about how God cast humanity

from the Garden of Eden. When the world was first made, the earth was a paradise. But mankind ate forbidden fruit, gained knowledge, and was cast out as punishment.”

“Cast out of paradise, for learning?” My brow furrowed. “That sounds ridiculous.”

“I gave the simplified version, but yes.” The conversation lapsed, and my mind wandered. Cat apparently caught on that our conversation was attracting attention from disturbed scribes.

But her tale stayed with me. The humans had a story about gods casting out humans, forcing them to leave a paradise?

Could it be?

No. It was impossible. Cat’s story was a human one, and that story belonged to humans.

But ... what if gods had played a role in this story too? Not that they cast us out of paradise, but rather changed it? Changed the world?

I was just about to ask Cat more questions about the book when an unwelcome presence strode up to us, the thunderous steps announcing themselves on the hard stone.

Great. And this day had been going so well.

“Zariel,” the Artist said, his black hair flowing over his shoulders, much like my own. Fortunately, that was nearly the extent of what we had in common.

“Artist,” I said, bowing my head in faux respect. Gadriel. He wasn’t an enemy—not exactly—but there were friendlier Artists in the mountain, as there were varying

levels of venomous snakes. He always went out of his way to make me miserable after what happened with Aniela—currying favor with the High Artist, perhaps?

Regardless, I didn't like how he was looking at Cat .

"The rumors are true," Gadriel said, eyeing Cat who straightened her spine under his gaze. "You mated with a human."

"I did."

"Foolish."

"The mate bond is not known for wisdom." I forced my breath steady.

"No, but it can be overcome, should the victim be strong enough. But you don't seem to have a problem bending the rules when it suits you." He stepped around the desk, closer to Cat. She turned her body so that her back was to me, facing him directly. And then they paused, inspecting each other.

"What is your name?"

"Catalina," she said calmly.

"And do you know what it means to be here?"

"Literally, or are you looking for some vague answer that I'll never be able to guess?" she quipped. She was wonderful.

Gadriel's eyes narrowed, and my admiration turned to something much more bitter. "Humans have never been allowed in this part of the Ashen Mountain before," he said.

“I know.”

“But there are some below, in the prison. You know about the prison, don’t you?” he asked her. Before she answered, he continued with a sick smirk, “Did he tell you that the prisoners are each left with a small saw chained to the wall? Should they remove a limb, or a wing, they gain their freedom. You should see it. Intimately. I think, that with the right words to the High Artist—”

Faster than my mind could comprehend, I reached over and jabbed my ink pen into Gadriel’s hand—moments before his fingers made contact with Cat’s shoulder.

He cried out and lurched back, blood trickling out of the wound. With a growl he yanked out the pen, tossed it to the floor, and strode toward me, eyes aflame with fury. I stood and maneuvered a stunned Cat behind me and away from him, our chairs clanking on the ground. Angels moved from their desks, a clamor breaking out. All of this occurred before I could register what I had done.

What I had done.

I was not a warrior.

But for her, I would ruin them all. Cat stayed behind me, watching the scene. Was she alright? She seemed numb, deathly pale and silent.

Moments later, the library’s guards ran up and restrained Gadriel, wrenching his arms and yanking him back. “Unhand me!” he yelled as he thrashed in their iron grip. “I’m an Artist.”

“We saw everything, Artist ,” the guard said with a sneer. “An Artist should’ve known better than to risk an encounter near these tomes.”

“I did nothing.”

“You know that is not the case,” the guard said disapprovingly. “We heard everything.” Yes, there was a reason my friends were staying away, and Gadriel’s bleeding hand was proof.

With a gesture to me they all but dragged him away, and I followed shortly after, guiding a shaking Cat wrapped under my arm. “It’s alright,” I whispered to her. My anger flared. How dare he make her feel like this, making her tremble? But it was also making her press herself against me ...

“He hates you,” she whispered.

“Yes. Though that’s nothing new. You’re safe, and that is what matters.”

I didn’t fool myself into thinking that the guards interfered out of some kindness—they protected the books, and only the books. Cat was merely a side effect. She could’ve been murdered in front of them and they’d only stop the blood from splattering the pages. Though Cat being the instigation meant that I didn’t have to worry about retribution from the Artists—not officially. Touching another’s mate without permission was grounds for violence under our laws. I’d done nothing wrong in stabbing him. But such technicalities were beyond the guards’ care.

They protected the books, not us.

And once Gadriel decided to seek revenge, they wouldn’t raise a wing to help me.

Chapter fifteen

Cat

“Y ou mean to tell me that humans have an entire study devoted to ... politics?” Zariel asked me.

I took a sip of the bitter red wine that Zariel brought with dinner and reached for another of the sugary rolls. With sugar, the encounter in the library was now only a troubled memory. I had no idea that Zariel was able to get so ... feral. And all to keep someone else from touching me. Me.

“Of course, we do. I can guarantee you have the same study, but maybe it’s called something other than ‘political science.’”

“How so?” Zariel reclined on his chair, his wings draped casually over the back and sides. He somehow seemed unfazed by the encounter with Gadriel, or how there was now an angel who hated us .

After the encounter, Zariel had guided me to his rooms, with me pressed against him in the halls, and then he carried me through the air—I didn’t mind. Anything to get away from the library faster. I certainly didn’t mind how he practically fussed over me, shielding me with his wings. Nor did I mind when he brought me to his rooms, set me on the couch, and buried me in a pile of blankets, no matter how much I assured him I was fine. Nope, I didn’t mind that at all.

“Well, you study history, correct?” I asked.

“Obviously.”

“And laws?”

“Yes.”

“And government actions?”

“... Yes?”

“See? You do have a similar area of study. To my point, countries and even businesses need to anticipate what others will do, in order to develop strategy. Humans are, unfortunately, rather predictable.”

“Oh.” Zariel seemed to think for a moment, while I tried not to think about how sexy his slightly disheveled hair was. “You mean that you’re training as an advisor,” he finally said.

“Yes. But we can’t exactly call it ‘advisor school,’ now, can we?”

“Why not?”

“... Tradition?” I grimaced jokingly.

I picked at the dinner some more, the tasty roll doing little to make me feel less worried, despite the sugar .

Zariel noticed. “What’s wrong? I told you that you don’t need to worry about the Artists. I did nothing wrong. And you certainly didn’t.”

“I know.”

“Then what is it?”

I paused, trying to find the right words. It wasn't Gadriel, though he certainly wasn't a fun experience. It was something else, something deeper. “The angels don't seem to like me, or even want me around,” I finally said, “as today highlighted. I understand there's some distrust, and likely some sociological reasons from your old world, but I was hoping you would give me further understanding as to why . I've been here a week already—am I going to be ignored by practically everyone this entire time?”

Zariel's face went blank, which told me he was trying to find the right thing to say. “I do not know. I have friends that I'm sure would like to meet you, but there's conflict at the moment. They're busy, for one.”

“Too busy to just stop by?”

Taking a bite, Zariel shook his head, and then, once he swallowed, said, “No. It's a matter that some assignments require those involved to stay isolated.”

“What on earth could require that?”

“I'm not sure.”

“But you suspect.”

He raised an eyebrow and grinned. “I do. You're too smart for your own good. But I don't want to spread rumors. Can you settle for that I'll tell you what the assignment is once I know for sure? I will answer all your questions once I can.”

I smiled. “If I must.” Something was bothering him. Something he wasn't telling me. Alright, I could live with that. He may like me—even desire me—but that didn't mean he trusted me. We were still getting to know each other, in many ways.

“But to your question—to angels, indifference is an insult.” His jaw clenched. “They think you’re beneath them. Not all of them, but ... that is why they aren’t interacting with you.”

I expected as much, but it still stung. That explained why nearly no one even bothered to greet me. A few gave me hesitant smiles, but they were scarce compared to the glowers—or being ignored altogether.

“Please don’t take offense,” Zariel said, “but we consider ourselves superior to almost every other being.”

I brushed some sugar off my lip. “I just don’t understand. You have other peoples and creatures at the universities, living in your kingdom. Working in your cities.”

“That doesn’t mean we consider them one of us.”

I cocked my head. “You don’t agree?”

“No. Not like I used to.” He took a deep breath. “There are humans in our kingdom. Most of them live in the lowlands near the border. They grow our crops and facilitate trade. Those particular ones are ... not known for their academics. And these are who most angels think of, when they think of humans at all.”

I frowned. “Were they ever given the chance to study?”

“Yes.” Zariel broke into his own roll, separating the flakey white layers. “There are some realms and kingdoms where the humans are different—they are wise. Cultured. But these particular humans ...”

“Are not.”

“Precisely. They can be intelligent, but they are not us. We have, in the past, attempted to work with them and it has never gone well. As far as I know, the effort has been given up entirely.” Zariel leveled a gaze at me. “At our home, we want nothing more than to preserve knowledge, no matter what. Our strength stems from it. We do not risk it for anyone.”

I couldn’t tell if Zariel was justified in his assessment of the humans in his kingdom. Were the humans in his lands some sort of stereotypical Viking, known mostly for farming and pillaging? Or were they simply not given the chance to do more? Did they even want to do more? Regardless, without having seen or met them for myself, I’d have to go on what Zariel told me, and that was that the other angels likely considered me a quaint annoyance at best, and a horn-blasting marauding beast at worst.

“So angels don’t like other creatures. Apparently, that’s not uncommon with those who came from your old world. Are there any who ... do live with others, like, where creatures live in the same space? ”

Zariel took a long drink and then set his cup on the side table. “I’m not sure of every creature who came here, but the Dawn Fae live with humans and treasure them. Keep in mind that the lands that came here are often just a small piece of our homes—even if the creatures share it with others, that doesn’t mean that the others came along to this one.” That was a valid point—if a fast-food restaurant was transferred to another world, people would think we had a world made only of fast food.

I leaned back in the chair, watching Zariel eat. Apparently, we had another trait in common—we both switched topics when things got uncomfortable. In my case, there were a few things I didn’t want to think about. Such as his fluid gestures, smooth and practiced as a dance. Or his towering presence that I now knew would protect me. Or the way he focused on me when he thought I wasn’t looking, as if he could see under the layers covering me. I dug my nails into the tips of my fingers. Indulging in those

feelings wouldn't do any good.

"Alright," I said, "so we have the fae who like humans."

"Some fae."

"It's a start. Maybe there's others."

He raised an eyebrow. "How many lands came, exactly, when the worlds merged? I assume the Artists were given a list, but as you can tell, they wouldn't share such things with me. "

"In the United States alone? Thousands, but most of them were smaller than a city block."

"And the larger ones?"

"There are 45 that are 500 square miles or more."

Zariel blinked. Hard. "Your land must be massive, if you have any land left."

"It is." I took a long breath. "The largest one in the United States is actually in Alaska, near the Artic, but the state's natural terrain makes it almost impossible to investigate. And, frankly, we've had other problems."

"I see." Zariel took a long drink of wine. "Tell me, where there is a larger parcel of land that came from our world, are the smaller ones arranged around them in any particular fashion?"

I cocked my head. "Yes, actually. They seem to shrink the further away they are from the larger parcels. Almost like ... a rock splashing into water, causing splattering

around it.”

“And is there any relation in the areas? Like, does it seem that ones from the same area of our world arrived together?”

“No. Not that we can tell. It doesn’t seem like there’s any alignment with where they were located in your old world. Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s in my nature to ask questions, even when there’s no answer.”

I understood that all too well.

We gently changed the topic, discussing what we’d have for breakfast and what he was going to transcribe tomorrow. Yet I couldn’t forget his speech about what angels valued ... I knew one thing from my studies. No culture valued knowledge except for that it led to one thing—power.

The meal done, we settled in for another night of light chatter that lasted until I struggled to keep my eyes open. The sitting room was perfect for sleep, with its dim lights, soft furniture, and Zariel sitting there, musing over his books while I sat near him, his even breaths lulling me with their steady rhythm. I wanted nothing more than to place my head on his lap and have him rub my head until I fell asleep. But that wouldn’t be. It could never be. No matter what, I would have to leave here eventually, and he would stay.

“I’m going to bed,” I said, rubbing my eyes. “I feel awful that I’m taking your bed. You barely fit on the couch.”

“Don’t,” he said. “I wouldn’t have this any other way.”

I hesitated. “There’s room in your bed for two.”

He looked up from his manuscript. He had seemed distracted for the last hour or so, lost in thoughts he didn't voice. Something smoldered in his gaze as it honed in on me while my breath caught in anticipation. He might say yes. In just a few minutes, I could be next to him, lying next to him.

—And then it was gone an instant later, leaving me swallowing a bitter disappointment. “I couldn't impose on you in that way,” he said gently. “Rest, Cat. I'm perfectly comfortable out here.”

My chest constricted, like all the air was sucked out of me .

“Alright,” I said, forcing a smile. “The offer is open if you change your mind.”

It was for the best. What he decided was for the best.

I awoke the next morning to find the space next to me cold and empty. With the night now behind me, I was only left with my dreams, of soft lips touching my hands, and murmured promises of fulfilled desires.

Chapter sixteen

Zariel

When I was a boy, barely old enough to start my formal lessons, my father took me to the capital's city market. We were noble, so going to where our dinner was purchased and butchered wasn't something we did. Even with all our knowledge, we angels were still vulnerable to greed and status, and there were many who toiled in as base a manner as any human peasant. In fact, most of us did so.

That day, I couldn't wait to see the market, and it didn't disappoint. There were weapons crafted by the leshi, jewels made by the sirens, mirrors from the rusalki, not to mention the myriad works of art made by humans—the rugs, pottery, and clothing. I had never imagined such an assortment of things or creatures in my life.

But then we saw the butcher. And the cattle. And the blood .

When the tears flowed from my eyes and my dreams of the market dashed, Father explained that I had to understand the ugliness and brutality of the world before I could appreciate its beauty. He was gentle, but he was right—it was a lesson I had to learn.

For a similar reason, around a week after our encounter with Gadriel in the library, I finally decided that I needed to take Cat to the places that I had been so reluctant for her to see. Gadriel complicated things, and his resentment could manifest in unknown ways. If she was going to stay with me for the foreseeable future, it wouldn't help her to be ignorant of what surrounded her. And that included the prison.

And where our magic was made.

Our mountain was a temple of knowledge, and the most valuable things were always paid for in blood.

“Would you prefer to fly down?” I asked Cat. “Otherwise, there are footpaths.”

Cat peered over the edge in the atrium, her hand clutching mine for safety, the other hand tugging her skirts high so she wouldn't trip. There was no railing, just a sheer drop hundreds of feet to the ground. She went to me for safety. Me . Who cared that it was probably just my wings that made her cling to me? I'd take any touch she'd allow me, and live that precious moment over and over until the memory abandoned me. Cat turned to me, eyes wide and cheeks flushed. “Would you be willing to take us down?”

“Of course,” I said, trying to contain my excitement .

In one movement, before she could read anything on my face, I took her into my arms and was almost undone by the nearness of her. The way her scent mixed with mine, the sound of her breath, the way her eyes focused on me with a trust I had not yet earned. Her arms wrapped around my neck and her head pressed against my chest, her form fitting against me as perfectly as ice nestled against water.

What would happen if we did give into the bond? Would it be such a bad thing?

At least then I'd always have the memory of her, even after she left this mountain and we returned to our world. Now that Gadriel was involved, I had another danger to be wary of, and another reason why she couldn't stay. I'd get permission from the Artists to leave and take her home to her people tonight if that was what she wanted—if the prison made her think twice about staying with me.

Effortlessly, I jumped off the edge, gliding downward, ever downward, past endless levels of apartments, meeting rooms, galleries, kitchens, and everything else that made the Ashen Mountain a kingdom unto itself. The mountain changed with each bit of the descent, turning darker and colder, until we were overcome with shadows, like clouds passing in front of the sun. Cat held me tighter, and it wasn't from fear of the fall—it was because of where we were. Did she sense the wrongness about this place, feel the same urge to leave ?

I landed on the ground with a soft thud and set her down in front of me—all to meet the stares of four angelic guards.

“She was curious, and the High Artist didn't restrict the parameters of her stay,” I explained to them. No, he didn't restrict her, but he didn't give permission, either. Hopefully she wouldn't want to go inside. That could've pushed the High Artist's “generosity” too far.

One guard nodded, though their faces were impassive. They knew who I was. After Aniela's trial, everyone did.

Cat stood next to me, frozen like a rock from the mountain itself. Distant screams echoed from within the prison's depths, the tunnel that led even further underground. The only light was from the guards' torches, a smoldering glow from deep within, and the distant light from the outside that shone high above us, not daring to reach so far into the darkness.

None of the beauty of the atrium was here, none of the trees and vines, none of the artwork that decorated our home. There was nothing here but death and despair.

“How”?she coughed?“how many prisoners are there?”

“Thousands, human,” one of the guards replied. “Guilty of everything from

trespassing to murder.” The last phrase was said with a pointed gaze at me.

“All of them are angels?”

“Of course not,” another guard said. “While the library covers every topic, our prison holds every creature. I think there’s even a human or two that are likely lonely by now, if you’d like to see.”

Cat paled, even for her, though the guard told her nothing she didn’t already know.

“Let’s go,” I said, stifling the anger that rose in my chest. Taunting Cat, with prison? With torture? For what? Only my familiarity with the guards’ crassness—abrasive at the best of times—and knowledge that there was nothing I could do that wouldn’t ultimately hurt Cat, restrained me. Instead, she ducked her head and stepped closer, her body all but pressed against mine.

“Goodbye. For now,” one of the guards said.

No, I wouldn’t attack the guards. But if they took a step towards her there was nothing I wouldn’t do to make sure that was the last step they took.

Cat and I turned and walked in silence through the dim tunnels, slowly making our way back up through the mountain. I’d fly her to my chambers, but there was something else I wanted to show her first.

“Thank you,” she said to me once we were far away from the guards.

“What for?” I asked.

“I wanted to see the prison. Turns out that was a mistake.”

“Never think that. You’re my mate, there’s nothing in this mountain that you are not welcome to. Even its darkness.” My throat caught. I hadn’t meant to call her my mate. She blushed, but didn’t seem offended .

She didn’t seem offended.

Maybe ... maybe we could spend the time we had together as we wanted, long-term consequences be damned. I’d make her no promises I couldn’t keep, but would it be such a shame to indulge in what nature had given us?

“Is everything alright?” she asked.

“What do you mean? Oh, the guards? That was just posturing, and even before Aniela, they were never friendly with me. They’re noble born, yes, but spend long enough in the darkness and you become part of it.”

“But you said they are rotated out. To avoid this.”

“Yes. But some are not moved as often as they should be.” I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “Do not worry. They won’t harm you.”

We fell silent, and my thoughts returned to the prison. Yes, the guards were always callous, but now there was something more behind their words. Their looks. Or was I just imagining things, fed by my own fear and Cat’s worry? By the threat of Gadriel?

I wish I had Cael to talk to, but he was still gone, sequestered wherever the High Artist kept him. And now that I thought about it, Cassiel, Daniel, and Muriel were still gone as well. I thought they were avoiding me because of the mate bond, but I hadn’t even seen them in passing, too long for normal assignments that required constant attention. I had been so distracted by Cat that I hadn’t paid much attention until now. Were they on the same assignment as Cael? The mountain was massive,

and it wasn't uncommon for someone to go weeks without seeing a friend, but all of them, absent from me right when I brought a human mate home? Something was off.

And then there was the High Artist's announcement, lurking behind it all. An announcement that had been repeatedly delayed.

"We're here," I whispered to Cat once we came to a non-descript door in the tunnel.

She inspected it, lips pursed. "Where's here?"

"Where our magic is made."

Cat whipped around to face me, eyes wide. Her golden hair shone even in this muted light, ethereal—a perfect match for any angel. "It is?"

"Yes."

It was time to show her that there was more to us than beauty, and that we traded in death as well as knowledge.

Carefully, I twisted the handle and opened the door, revealing a dark chamber that was large enough to hold hundreds comfortably. Unlike the rest of the mountain, this room was made of a polished black rock that we called bloodcatcher, which lined every surface and encased us entirely. In the center of the room, barely visible in the light from the few torches that were perpetually lit, was a wide altar, its polished surface marred with long gashes .

"What happens here?" Cat asked, breaking the reverent silence. Her hand still clutched mine desperately, her breath coming out in short gasps.

"I will tell you in our rooms," I said, looking around to make sure that we were, in

fact, alone. “For you to understand us, you need to know everything. And because of what I’m going to tell you, I need you to see this to make sure you believe me.”

“No worries there,” she said, “I’d believe you regardless. But why risk telling me? You could get in trouble for telling—showing—me this. Even I can see that. There’s no way that the Artists would be ok with me knowing their secrets.”

She was right. And I suspected that our freedom to wander—for her to even be here— came from two possible things. One, that the High Artist knew that he would be successful in bringing us home so that he didn’t care what one human knew. Or two, this was a test. He wanted to see what I would do with her, and what I would share. Here we were, engaging in a risk to my reputation that was so precarious after Aniela, and yet no one had intervened. Was I failing this test? Probably. But her safety was at risk. The High Artist was plotting something, I was sure of it. But what? And why?

I straightened my shoulders. Technically, I was doing nothing wrong. As my mate, she was entitled to go where I went, and I was allowed to be here, and thus, she was too .

“Let me worry about the Artists,” I said, but the furrow in her brow remained. “Do you want to stay here? Because I swear, I will help you off this mountain now and bring you home, if you desire it.” I would, though a part of myself would be leaving with her.

“I want to stay with you.” My treacherous heart leapt, uncaring at the deeper danger it was falling into, the pain that would only be stronger when she decided it was time to go.

I forced a smile, fighting both joy and sorrow, relief and worry. She would be with me, but in doing so, she would possibly be in danger. The mate bond constantly

called to me, but it was now guided along by something more subtle, something that would eventually grow to overshadow the bond should I allow it. I cared for her, this human who had become the star in my night.

“If you’re going to stay with me, you need to know what we’re capable of.” I swallowed. Would she hate me, be disgusted by me once she learned the truth? Her jaw set, preparing for whatever I was going to tell her once we were back in the safety of my rooms. “I can’t protect you if you don’t understand the dangers that you could face—and what angels are willing to do for power.”

Chapter seventeen

Cat

After we quickly left the ... ceremony room? We silently rushed back to Zariel's chambers. For once, I was glad that none of the angels spared me a passing glance—it spared them from seeing the fear that I was sure was plain on my face. Did someone see us? Would we be stopped? If they knew what I saw, would they let me leave? Not soon enough, the familiar surroundings of his rooms embraced us, settling my racing heart.

We hadn't gone anywhere strictly forbidden, but it still felt illicit. There was an altar, for fuck's sake. With gashes. In an ominous dark room made of stone, perfect to muffle screams. I didn't have to be a crime scene investigator to know what happened. Silv was right—the angels were dangerous, their magic possessing layers no one expected. And I was now solidly within their grasp .

I could still leave. Zariel had said that he'd take me home. But ... I didn't want to go. I was staying for my research. My dissertation. Not for Zariel himself.

No, not Zariel at all.

Zariel couldn't be like them. I lived with him, saw him nearly every waking moment. He'd never do whatever brutal things I was imagining would he?

We didn't speak in the sitting room, and instead we stayed silent until we went deeper into his apartment. Not a word was spoken until we were in Zariel's bedroom, the

door shut quietly behind him. Whatever he was about to say, he wanted that extra layer of privacy. My mouth went dry. If I hadn't been nervous before, I certainly was now.

I spoke first, settling myself on his familiar bed and its blue comforter, with him remaining standing and taking his place a respectable distance from me. Even in here, the ash covered the walls like snow, a permanent winter. Though its beauty did nothing to make me feel better now. "Don't tell me anything you're not supposed to," I said. It was obvious that the angels had many secrets, and would likely do anything to protect them. Even kill me.

Zariel let out a curt, mirthless laugh. "That's the thing—no one has given me any guidance for what they do and do not want me to tell you. And at this point I'm wondering if it's on purpose."

"Zariel—"

"You wish to stay here, right? "

"Yes. I don't want to go now."

Relief passed over his features, an expression quickly buried in sadness. "You're not in immediate danger, Cat. I wouldn't allow you to be here if that were the case. The angels know better than to have anything happen to you when negotiations with the humans are so new, and the humans surely figured out by now that you might be here. But there's no denying that my family's name has been ... compromised. And I cannot explain it, but something doesn't feel right ."

"But why would they treat you like this?"

"Our pride and our families are everything. Our reputation. Where one acts, we all

act. I am now tainted, considered a traitor in the making.”

“I’m the one who is putting you in danger,” I said. Would they bring Zariel into that prison, to live in the darkness? It was likely that there was more that Zariel wasn’t telling me, either on purpose or because it involved the intricacies of being an angel. It felt like I swallowed ice, the awareness of his situation painfully boring into me inch by painful inch. If not for me, he’d still be a scribe, transcribing whatever records that they sent his way, with no other concerns than getting ink stains out of his clothes. He would’ve been ignored. I never should have come here.

“Stop,” he said. “I never want to see that look on your face again.”

“What look?”

“Regret. Not me, Cat. Please. Never regret me.”

“Never,” I said. “Never regret.” Our eyes locked, and my worries faded. Zariel was a friend. Over the last couple of weeks, we had spent every moment together, talking about everything. Well, mostly everything. Under the surface lingered the truth that brought us together in the first place—we were mates. It explained the initial pull we had to each other, but didn’t explain that I didn’t just want him. I liked him. A lot.

Maybe ... maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad thing if we just did what the bond wanted. Would it?

But first, I needed to understand why Zariel acted as if he was about to tell me that he had murdered a village.

Seemingly buying himself time, he made himself comfortable on the bed, wings splayed around him. The mattress bent under his weight, and for the first time I saw him at home in his own bedroom. I glanced at the rumpled comforter and pillow, the

spot that had been clearly mine all these nights. And only mine.

Without taking his eyes off me, he undid the front of his robes, revealing the toned muscles that lay underneath. Heat throbbed through my body. Could I touch him? Would he stop me? But that wasn't why we were here—it was to see the runes on his skin. The magic that granted the angels their powers.

“Oh my god,” I said.

There they were, again, the magic so intense that it was literally burning in him. The row of runes lay at the bottom of Zariel's stomach, each one glowing like embers under his skin, pulsating as if each had its own heart. They were nearly as tall as my fingers and a couple inches wide, and they circled him from hip to hip, a belt of pained and burning flesh.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Sometimes. But it's a side effect from the magic. You can touch them, if you like. The pain they can cause is internal.” When I grimaced, he continued, “It feels like a fire under my skin, when it hurts. It isn't bothered by touching. And most of the time I never feel them at all.”

Touch them, he said. Touch him .

Before I knew what I was doing, I reached out a finger and slowly traced the unfamiliar designs. His breath came out in short gasps and the muscles of his abdomen clenched, firm and supple. “Am I hurting you?”

“Not directly,” he said with a hint of a growl. “But it's taking everything I have to resist touching you.”

I met his piercing gaze. “That sounds like the opposite of what we want to do.”

“Want to do?” He shook his head. “Never. What my body wants and what my mind thinks is right aren’t the same. As I said that first night—I’ll pursue nothing. Until or unless you want something more.”

It didn’t pass my notice that his phrasing changed since that first night. He wanted me. And seemed to be struggling with resisting the mate bond, too.

Again, why were we bothering to resist it ?

Damn, he was exquisite. His muscles tightened with each movement, his skin glistening in the lamplight. For a librarian, he was uncommonly fit, likely due to flying. I tried to pretend that I didn’t notice how he stared at me, like he wanted to devour me. The deep heat coiled within me, settling low in my abdomen, begging to be allowed to grow. A pleasure and a torment, he was both the poison and the cure.

He wanted me.

No. I couldn’t think like that. I had my goal—my research. And to try to get Zariel out of whatever mess I had brought him into. Eventually I’d have to leave the mountain—whatever we would have would be painful and fleeting. I didn’t know what the answer to our “situation” was, but I wouldn’t find the answer in his perfect abs.

“Can you tell me about your runes?” I asked, swallowing hard. “How they work?”

“Of course.” Zariel shifted, sending a new series of muscles in motion, my eyes glued to their every movement. He pointed at the rune on the furthest right side, an angular shape with circles at the ends of the lines. “This is how we can survive in the ashen clouds. A volcano was here, thousands of years ago, and formed many of the same

tunnels and halls that we use, but it spilled a substance into the air that will likely never leave. It is caustic to everyone, except us.”

“Making it the perfect place to defend.”

“Indeed. ”

I shifted. “You said that your magic doesn’t work when carved in stone—but how does the interior of the mountain work? The ash is ... neutralized. I can touch it.” It left everything appearing as if in perpetual winter.

“Part of that is the mountain itself—the same stone that causes the ashen clouds to stay here forever, no matter the wind.” He took a deep breath. “But part of it is our magic. The High Artists maintain the mountain and keep the volcano and the ash dormant.”

“High Artists?” I asked.

Zariel’s lip curled in that way that meant he didn’t have a complete answer. “Somewhere in the mountain, there are three prior High Artists who aren’t exactly alive but they are ... maintained. They’re hosting the magic.”

“How—”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you more—because I don’t know. It’s a secret guarded by a select few Artists, and they’re the only ones who know who they are.”

Fair.

So we had sacrificial altars, burning runes, and zombie angels. This couldn’t get any worse.

“How do you get one?” I asked, deciding it was time to focus on why we were here, and what Zariel didn’t seem to want to tell me. “A rune.”

“How we obtain each rune is different, but they all have one thing in common—blood. From a fresh source.” He flinched. “And a lot of it. ”

“Oh no.”

He had murdered a village.

My gentle scholar, my protector—a murderer?

Zariel bobbed his head, a matter-of-fact expression on his face. “Blood carries the essence of a being, and their magic. With the right conduction of that essence into us, we can form it into a sequence that will enable our natural magic to react—”

“Can you use normal words?”

“Sorry.” Zariel coughed. “As I was saying, blood carries magic, or at the very least, it carries the ability to manipulate it. Thus, when we drink the blood of an angel who has been exposed to the clouds and who died from it, their blood is contaminated with the ash. And then that blood can be used to create a protection magic from the ash.”

“Oh, it becomes a sort of ... ash vaccine?”

“I don’t know.” After I quickly explained what vaccines did, Zariel agreed that it wasn’t an awful analogy.

And then it hit me.

“Where does the blood come from? The dead angel.”

Zariel squirmed. “ Dying angel. They’re prisoners sentenced to die. After they’re left on the mountain to the point of nearly expiring, their blood is harvested. The ritual performed to fuse the magic is gifted to the mountain’s new initiates. Their actual death occurs on the altar, in the room you were just in. And as part of the ceremony—we drink. ”

The blood left my face. Whatever I learned about the angels, cannibalistic blood drinking was not what I had in mind. The grotesque act was starting to make horrifying sense. Angels drank prisoners’ blood for their magic? I studied Zariel’s stomach—he had four other runes. What else had he done? Who had died for him?

“How many ... deaths for each rune?”

“It takes at least one life for a single rune, with exceptions. Some magics can support a rune on two or three different angels. It depends on the strength of the ... dying. And the magic at issue.”

“How many ... for yours?”

“... Four. Four sacrifices, and I will have their magic for the rest of my life.”

Slowly, I shook my head. This couldn’t be real. The angels did this , and saw nothing wrong with it? “This is horrible. You know that, right?”

“Cat—”

“Angels are murdering people, for magic.”

“Condemned prisoners.”

“And can you say for certain that each one deserves death? Fuck, you’re murdering

other creatures too, aren't you? Not just angels." That was why the prison was here—easy access for their magic supply.

Zariel didn't answer my question. He didn't need to. Instead, he took a moment before speaking, the pause punctured by the thudding in my heart. "There are things I'd change, Cat, if I could. But here is the truth of our kind—you comply, or you die. You've seen only scholars in a library—in truth, our society is like any other, with murderers and such that certainly deserve death. You come from a world where the only creatures who are punished are the same, and despite your differences, you have a relatively similar moral code."

"That's not true."

Zariel leveled a heavy gaze at me. "Your idea of justice is a luxury of peace, of knowing that, at their core, humans abhor the same conduct. Like murder."

"There's sociological differences for sure—"

"Is there a part of humanity that collectively hunts and eats each other's young? That painfully murders their elders because the pain strengthens the magic released upon their death? That would gladly herd every member of your family into a pen and eat you, taking no mind of the pain you would suffer?"

"Well ... no." I frowned. Maybe there were exceptions, but that was his point—they were exceptions. "Creatures from your world do this?"

"All of this, and more. Some pixies are particularly brutal. They will swarm and consume children if allowed to do so, little bite by bite." He took a deep breath. "My point, Cat, is that while I wish things were different, our world will not allow it. We need to use every advantage we can get, or mark me—they will destroy us."

“But surely some of these brutal creatures have come into our world. Why haven’t we heard of them doing something like this?”

The corner of his lip quirked up in a sad smile. “Many of us have learned to hide from each other, or at the very least, the darker parts. Don’t assume that everything between each of us is as quiet as it seems.” He paused. “Know that I don’t take the cost of my magic lightly. I was there at their deaths, that of the angel and the others, and I remember every moment. I wish there was another way for us to have our magic, but there isn’t.”

No one could fake the grief on his face. No wonder he didn’t want to tell me this, and how Silv himself had heard only whispers. The fact that they murdered wasn’t something the angels would want as common knowledge. This wasn’t something that they’d want analyzed in a dissertation. Zariel had mentioned that his family was overbearing, but overbearing family forced you to attend family dinners—not drink blood. What did I really know about the angels? Nothing. Nothing at all.

“What are your other magics?” I asked.

“Illusion,” he said. “And another is for my memory, as I’ve mentioned before. But my ability for illusions isn’t strong, as you saw, and angels are normally immune. To obtain that one I drank the blood of a condemned siren.”

“A condemned. Siren. ”

His eyes met mine. “As you heard, there are more than angels in our dungeons, and only the absolute worst are sentenced to this fate. And I assure you, most of them are there for valid reasons.” I scoffed, but he continued, “Our society may be harsh and imperfect, but everyone is entitled to the process of law. That siren had invaded our beach and lured a groom off a boat on his wedding day. Only his hands were found—tossed at the bride who ran into the water in grief. She was barely saved. As I

said, our world is beauty coating base brutality. None of us are far from the feral animals we used to be. As much as we like to pretend otherwise.”

He was right—I was in no position to understand the justice of their world when I had never even been there. Yet from what I saw of the angels, how sensitive they were to both real and imagined slights, I had questions. Was everyone in the prison like that siren—a murderer? Or were there some who ended up angering the wrong angel at the wrong time? I had met Artists—I wouldn’t be surprised if some creatures ended up in the dungeons on a whim.

“And this one?” I pointed at the one rune at the center of his abdomen, just below his navel.

His face softened. “That one is the only one I was given from my family—and this is one where no one had to die. These runic magics are difficult to enact, and costly, and my having more than two is due to my status here in the mountain. There are many angels who have none.”

“Why? ”

“Not many angels have the ability to impart them, and they leave the angels that can far too drained to do more than one a week.”

“Ah.” So for angels, magic was for the well-connected. No, Zariel didn’t say that, but I had some common sense.

“This one”?Zariel tapped at the rune?“was a gift to me before I left for the Mountain—to obtain it I had to drink the blood of my mother, father, sister, brothers, and a couple extended relatives. They’re all living,” he quickly reassured me. “If the subject absolutely consents to the magic, they can be alive while doing it.”

“So there you have the option. There’s another option for your magic.”

“... Yes.”

I frowned. “Wouldn’t someone agree to have their life spared?”

“The magic can detect duress, a pressure to submit.” He shifted on the bed, giving me another glimpse of his perfect form. “And thus, the blood has to be freely given, or the taking has to exterminate the source. There is no in-between. If it’s not freely given, then it is a risk for the taker. It will kill.”

Sure, the killing was for the magic, but this was also about witnesses, I realized. Asking for blood from other creatures and gaining their blessing would mean sharing the knowledge of the magic, and leaving them alive to speak of it. But did Zariel understand this? My chest clenched. If the Artists knew he had told me all of this, there was a very real chance they would never let me off the mountain, no matter the consequences.

“But the blood from my family was freely given,” Zariel continued. “And because of their gift, I can find them, no matter where they are. If I think of them, I know where I need to go.”

“Oh, that’s sweet.”

“It is. They wanted to assure me that no matter where I went, I’d always be able to find my way home. Obviously, I can’t use the magic to the same extent since we’re no longer in the same world, but I can find Aniela. I know where she is, and that she is alive.”

Zariel’s eyes met mine, seemingly deep in thought. He opened his mouth, hesitated for a moment, and then said, “You’re my mate. There is a magic we can do for each

other, if you ever wanted to.”

“I could find you?”

“Anyone in my family, technically,” he said. “But you’d absolutely be able to find me.”

“But you just said it’s hard to do.”

“No. Not for mates. If we ... get to that point, our souls will be paired so that it wouldn’t be much work for the magic to transfer. For that rune, at least. And ... I heard there may be a way for me to share some of the magic in the others. That is, you could share in my magic, if you like.”

He spoke, but my mind focused only on one word. Mates. God, I wanted to touch him. And he said—he did say he was interested. I’d have to leave, eventually, but would it be so bad if we gave in and enjoyed this while we could?

“Cat,” Zariel said reverently, moving next to me. His body towered, his head threatening to rest on mine. If he wanted to be a warrior instead of a scholar, I had zero doubt that he would’ve been able to do so. He must’ve done some physical training, with his body as honed as it was—flying didn’t explain all of it. White wings splayed around him, tipped with the silver edge, encasing me. Sheltering me.

Slowly, I reached out a hand and touched the feathers, a delicate finger dancing on the tips. They were surprisingly hard, covered in a texture not dissimilar to glitter. I bit back a laugh. Glittery blood-drinking angels—who would’ve thought? I glanced to see if Zariel noticed, but his eyes were closed, trembling from my touch. I took back my hand and rested it on my lap. The warmth from his body reached me, his scent covering me entirely. That slick heat was again gathering deeper in me, a throbbing that was becoming impossible to ignore.

“Do all angels have this?” I managed to ask. “On their wings.”

He opened his eyes, noting what I was talking about. “No. Just the ones who have become immune to the ashen clouds,” he said. “The magic from that isn’t contained to my soul—it’s on my body. Well, it shows on the wings.”

“Oh. ”

The runes on his stomach glowed, casting us in a dim orange light. What did the last rune do? There was one for illusions, one for his knowledge, one for his family, and one for the mountain.

“What is the final one? The last rune.” I asked.

“Yes, there is one.”

“... What does it do?”

“You will tease me.”

“Never.”

“Do you promise?”

“... Yes.”

He pointed to the final rune. “This was from a condemned nidhogg.”

“A what?”

“A dragon. That eats corpses. And sometimes isn’t picky about how they get to that

state. This one was caught feeding on the human settlement in our lands.”

“You brought a whole dragon into the mountain?”

He cocked his head. “Not all of them are large. We managed. And his death gave me and others a sense of direction. For flying.”

“Ohhh”

“You promised you wouldn’t tease me.”

“I’m not.” I smiled and shook my head. “Never.”

“Your face is saying otherwise.”

“Never. It just wasn’t what I expected.”

“And what did you expect? ”

His question wasn’t about his magic. The way he looked at me, devouring me with his gaze, the way his mouth opened just a tiny bit, changed the air between us in an instant. His chest was still exposed, muscular and sleek under his robes. My heart and breath raced, and that now-familiar ache came impossible to ignore any longer.

Maybe we should give in. What could it hurt?

“Cat ...” he leaned towards me, slowly. He wanted me. If I ever doubted that he didn’t, that doubt was gone, banished by the blatant yearning in his gaze.

“Zariel—”

A knock sounded at the door, shattering the moment. This was a knock that wasn't going to wait.

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Chapter eighteen

Cat

Z ariel rushed back into the bedroom, the guest at the door banished after a few brusque words. I had waited silently, trying unsuccessfully to overhear the conversation. Was it the High Artist? Did the university finally contact the angels? Did I have to leave?

I stood to greet Zariel. There was nothing of the lover on his face now—it was the scholar, the potential warrior.

“What happened?” I asked, resisting the urge to take his hand in mine.

“It was a friend, wondering if I had seen Cael. And a few others.”

“Isn’t that normal?”

“Yes. No. Not for this long.” He sighed and collapsed on the bed. “People do sometimes become hard to find in this mountain. You’ve seen it—it’s a maze and we often are assigned different tasks. But ... I don’t think that’s the reason now, as much as I haven’t let myself dwell on it. My friend heard a rumor that Cael and others are devoted to the High Artist’s plans for us to go home. The High Artist mentioned a ritual himself the day that I brought you here, but I had hoped—now I have a bad feeling about all of this.”

“Why?”

“You know a little of our magic, but you don’t know the High Artist. He can be ruthless. One has to be, to obtain the position. It’s hereditary to a point, but heirs can always be challenged. There was a fight for the High Artist to gain his position, and I wouldn’t put it past him to ask—what else is our magic capable of, if someone is willing to try? What would he be willing to do, if it allowed us to go home?”

My imagination wandered. There was a whole prison of creatures down below they could poke and prod—or worse—if there was some spell the High Artist wanted to perform. And the High Artist was basically a king, so there was no one to stop him. That I knew of.

I sat on the bed next to Zariel, close enough that my arms pressed against his, our thighs nearly touching. Even now, it was impossible to stop thinking of what his closeness meant, how it made my senses stir.

“What can we do?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I’m not sure there even is anything. I wish we had time—you gave me the idea that gods are involved with the worlds shifting, but I have no way to research that idea efficiently.”

“Are you sure? There are thousands, if not millions of books here.”

“Tens of millions. If you’re counting scrolls as well.” His pride in the library remained, despite everything.

“My point stands,” I said. “There has to be something about it in this library.”

“There might be, but we don’t have time. I’ve spent all of my adult life here. I know our collection—which is meticulously organized—and I know that the other half is with our sister library. Back in our world.” He paused, deep in thought. “The elves of

the Darkening Woods would not only have the document I'm thinking of, but they'd have a way to find it quickly. However, would they be willing to send it to us?"

"You're sure it's not here?"

"I ... may have already been looking since you gave me the idea. Just in case my memory of our catalogue failed me. Despite this." He gestured to his rune. "And unfortunately, I'm correct. We have the tomes on the Darkening Woods' connection to the trees, including 36 volumes of maps documenting significant trees in that forest through the millennia. The elves are an old society, one of the eldest, and they keep their records. But any documents regarding the worlds' prior shifting as recorded by the elves is listed in the catalogue as being in our sister library. "

Of course, he had already looked. I should have known.

"Then what can we do?" When he gave me a questioning look, I crossed my arms. "Yes, we . I'm not leaving you to face this alone. If there's magic being done in this mountain, it could potentially impact the human world, this is my business too. It could impact us, right?"

Zariel rocked his head back and forth gently for a moment. "Anything is possible, especially when we're discussing breaking apart a world."

"Then it's settled. I'm staying. And helping."

He nodded, accepting my answer, though I noted the hint of worry in his gaze. "All we have now are guesses," he said. "And who knows, my concerns might be for nothing. For now, we proceed as normal, and keep our ears open. At this point, there's nothing else we can do except try to learn more."

I agreed with him, but I couldn't shake the unsettled trepidation that worked through

me. Zariel was in danger, because of me. The angels were sneaky bastards, who were desperate to return home. There might be a true danger in the magic they were thinking of performing, and I couldn't guarantee that they'd let me leave the mountain, knowing what I did about their magic.

And here I was, in the middle of everything.

All of this because I didn't listen to Silv.

Chapter nineteen

Zariel

I never expected that having a mate meant vacillating between crippling fear and devastating lust. Fear of the dangers that I could sense closing in around us. And lust, because I craved her more than a bird craves the sky.

It wasn't fair that I had found such a woman, one that stirred and overrode every sense—and she was also someone who'd never want to stay with me, not after her time in the mountain was done. Besides the fact that a mate bond was purely physical, if it became more than that, we angels were working to return to our home, one way or another. I couldn't force myself to stay here, away from my family and life forever, and I had absolutely no right to ask her to come with me and do the same.

Several days passed after I told Cat my fears, and there had been no dire proclamations from the Artists, no threats, and no hint that anything wasn't as it should've been. Maybe I was worrying about nothing, and it was just the mating bond making me extra sensitive to any threats. While no one was outright rude to Cat—word of what I did to Gadriel spread quickly—I was the only one who didn't ignore her existence. Even Cael, the coward, was still apparently locked down on that assignment and was unable to escape even for a meal to talk to me. Cael would be a blessing of normalcy in this chaos, something to remind me that I had a life before her. Even though I feared I'd never be able to have one without her.

Not that Cat wanted anything of that nature to do with me. Right? Despite taking

meals together, sharing chambers—I was always on my couch—and spending our days in the library, discussing my work and everything else, we fell into an easy companionship that was anything but romantic. At least for me.

I tried to stay away mentally—to not think about her like that . I couldn't. Instead, I was left alone with dreams in the dark, haunted by the sounds of her breathing nearby and doomed to remain far away.

“Isn't this enough books?” I asked Cat teasingly. I was carrying a couple untranslated tomes pertaining to flora that I needed to work on, and she wanted one more that was known for its artwork. Of course, I would do anything she wanted, especially if I could sneak this one to her on the pretense that it was for me .

“Please?” she asked. “I promise I won't bother you for the rest of the day.”

I chuckled softly. Even when she behaved perfectly, there was little chance of that. Just her sitting next to me, in her delicate, gossamer robes, was enough to drive me to distraction. I wanted nothing more than to trace the delicate lines of her neck and shoulders—where the panels parted to reveal her arms, and let me envision what it would be like if there was nothing except that flimsy fabric between me and her.

“And I can read what you translated later, right?” She beamed at me. We agreed that in the library, in public, we would act like nothing was wrong, that we weren't concerned about the High Artist. Things would only be made worse by making people suspicious. And in the meantime, I still had to work. Sure, angels were given time for leisure, but we had our duties.

I smiled. Hers was an easy enough request. I was working on translating a short history of the races of our world, something that was little more than a list of what creatures lived in which lands, their rules, their magics, with a few notable anecdotes. It was something that we were going to give to the humans during the next summit,

and they agreed to give us several works of theirs as well. Knowledge for knowledge.

“My translation will be incomplete,” I warned her.

“You know that doesn’t bother me. ”

“It should—it’s disjointed. I don’t have a perfect translation yet for every word.”

“Maybe I can help,” she said.

“Maybe,” I said sincerely. She was brilliant, her experience bringing new interpretations to things that I never considered. I never thought that I’d enjoy such things with a human, but I never thought I’d be mated to one, either.

I placed the books on an empty space on a shelf and reached above us for the tome. When I lowered my arms, book in hand, she clasped it, preparing to take it from me, her fingers touching mine. Suddenly, our eyes met and we both stilled. I clutched the book, the only thing between us, as we now stood far closer than we had before, our bodies almost touching in these hidden aisles.

Slowly, she took the book and set it aside with one hand, while still holding one of my own. Everywhere she touched me burned, as if she was the dawn, awakening me after an eternity of night.

“Cat—”

Then she leaned forward, towards me—and stopped. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I know we agreed not to, and I respect that if you don’t want to, but I—”

Was this really her, saying such things? I had spent weeks forcing aside all thoughts of that as best I could, and now she was offering?

She was offering.

“I know,” I said .

I kissed her, and everything changed. What was first an urge to hold her—possess her—turned into a maelstrom of feeling. I needed her. All of her. Every single place she touched, every sigh she made, stirred me higher. I stiffened under my robes, and I had to carefully position myself, lest she feel what I was thinking. The craving for her turned into a painful ache, one that had only one way to be satisfied—and would that ever be enough?

Her lips explored mine, slowly, but then she consumed me, drawing me into her with both her hands and her mouth. Buried in the stacks she explored me, her hands moving, as if she, too, were frantic to feel every part that she could. I’d let her do it—fuck—I’d let her do whatever she wanted, as long as she never stopped.

“Zariel,” she whispered as she broke away from the kiss. “I’m sorry. I know that it doesn’t make sense that we feel this—”

“Then why fight it?” I asked, I wound my fingers in her hair and looked at her. “We don’t have to do anything you don’t want do.” I pushed her golden tresses behind her ears and traced my knuckles down her face, satisfied at the way she briefly closed her eyes. “I’m enjoying getting to know you. I want whatever you are willing to give. And no more.”

A kiss was her glorious answer.

And footsteps ended it too soon.

We abruptly broke away and she covered her mouth, stifling a giggle. What did it matter if we were caught? She was my mate. No one would think twice about such a

thing. But from the red that flushed her cheeks, I wasn't about to press her. Maybe humans were more conscious than angels about such things.

"It's alright," I said, pushing down the joy that she was letting me touch her, even as my hands were desperate for more. "They won't come here." The rush of her scent made me heady, lost in nothing but the thought of taking her ... and claiming her. Any worries at all were gone, banished by her. I needed her. Now .

She reached out and brushed a hand over my feathers, and I froze.

"I'm sorry," she said, drawing back her hand. "I didn't mean—"

"It's alright," I said, "they're not painfully sensitive. It's just that touching an angel's feathers is intimate, and having them removed is the greatest shame."

"Why?"

"It means that you're too weak to protect yourself. That you let an enemy lay you bare. And in some cases, removing another's feathers is a crime punishable by death—or being kept here." I rested my head on her forehead. "But I don't mind you touching them. In fact, I like it."

"This isn't the place for this," she said, her eyes sparkling.

"No," I agreed, "it is not." I leaned down to whisper in her ear, pleased at the shiver that went through her at my touch. "When I take you, if I do, it will be as the angels claim their mates." I gestured above us. "Out there. I will not take you in any other way until that time. And until you ask me to."

She closed her eyes and her mouth parted, as if she were imaging it. "But I can't fly."

“You can do anything.” She had my wings, she had all of me. Bond or no bond, illogical or not, I was swiftly being wrapped around her body, mind, and soul, and I prayed that she would never let me go.

A rough cough sounded from a few rows away. That was right. We were in the library, and I had work to do. If I wanted the High Artist to continue to allow her to stay with me, I had to complete my work. If we wanted to do anything, I had to complete my work.

“Come,” I said. I swallowed. Was I brave enough to ask her what I wanted? “Do ... do I have your permission to stay with you tonight? I mean next to you, and only that.”

She agreed enthusiastically, and my heart leapt as if it were already soaring through the clouds.

Perfect. I wouldn’t claim her—as painful as it would be, I would resist—but I had tonight to start to show her exactly what she was beginning to mean to me.

And how, more than anything, I feared having to let her go.

Chapter twenty

Cat

The day ticked by, second by painful second. How could I focus on anything, including the book in front of me? Normally I'd have been fascinated by the illustrations of flowers that didn't exist in this world, including flowers with feathers. Instead, I caught myself looking at the feathers next to me—attached to an angel.

Zariel.

I had to stop watching him, memorizing his face. His brows were knit together, focused on the task in front of him, translating words from otherworldly languages with the ease of an expert musician, plucking out words like notes of music.

Was he thinking about me, about how we were going to spend the night together? I couldn't tell. He focused on his task with the same concentration as always. What would he feel like, pressed against me, my back against his warm chest? Would his wings stay over us, encasing us in an intimate cocoon? What would his hands do in the privacy that he created? Would he just hold me, or would he do more?

Each moment brought me closer—Zariel was going to spend the night next to me. In his bed.

Tonight.

My robes suddenly felt too small, the fabric tight against my breasts. I had to steady

myself. In this silent room, he'd hear my breath catch, and if he asked me what was wrong, what could I say?

After hours that had stretched into an aching eternity, now—finally—we were on our way back to his apartment. As we walked, I gripped my dress's gauzy fabric, worrying it through my fingers, eying Zariel cautiously when he wasn't looking. Tonight was a turning point, a moment that would separate before from the after. Everything between us was going to change.

But what would be left when it did? Would he still want me, once he had taken me? Would we still enjoy each other's company?

"Zariel," a male voice called out. We turned to find the angel, who had flown from the levels above us to land by our side. The sun was already fading and throwing a dim glow over the mountain's interior, forcing the pine trees to cast stately shadows against the white crusted ash. The ash reflected the light, making it shine like millions of little stars dancing on the edge of darkness.

"Cael," I said, out of surprise.

He grinned. "You remember me."

"Considering you're the only other one who has bothered to talk to me, how could I forget?"

Cael frowned, smoothing his long brown hair that was tousled from the flight. "It's been that bad?"

"About what we could expect," Zariel said, crossing his arms. "Not that you were here. Or all that friendly yourself the last time that we met."

“Can you blame me? I’ve been worried about you for years, and then you arrive with a human—”

“It’s done,” I said, moving closer to Zariel. “I think it’s fair to say that Cael was just surprised. As were we all.” Was I entirely warm to Cael when we met? No. I was terrified. And I didn’t know how I felt about him now. But hearing Zariel say such nice things about Cael over the last few weeks made me realize his earlier frostiness wasn’t personal—it was born of fear for Zariel. That made two of us.

Zariel searched my face and then relaxed, facing Cael once more. “I’m just glad you are here,” he said. “There’s so much I want to tell you.”

“I’m sure. I wish I could say that the others will get better, but they won’t,” Cael said. “Not unless something drastic happens. She is still a human in the mountain.”

“I didn’t expect to see you for some time,” Zariel said, an eyebrow raised. “I heard you were sequestered on a project. Along with pretty much all our friends.”

“I am. We are. And I can’t talk about it.” A strange expression passed over Cael’s face, one that made me step even closer to Zariel out of reflex. He protectively put his hand on my lower back, drawing me against him, wings fluttering behind us. I couldn’t appreciate how close I was to him, not when there were so many possible dangers building under the surface. Was Cael’s announcement going to make all our fears become real? People generally didn’t frown for good news. Cael watched our interaction, the obvious familiarity that was now between us—that we were something—but didn’t comment.

“I’d never ask you to betray their confidences,” Zariel said solemnly. His hand tightened on my back.

“And I’d never dream of doing so. Just, Zariel?” Cael paused, as if searching for the

right words. “Do you remember when we first learned about runic magic? What was that book called?”

“ Bound in Earth ?”

“No. Not that one.”

“ Azarlius’s Folies ?”

“Certainly not that one.”

“Bindings: Blood and Bond ?”

“Yes. That’s it. ”

Zariel coughed. “How could I forget?” He turned to me and said, “It’s a manual for learning our magic, they gave it to us right before the exams for joining the library. We were expected to memorize it.”

“Not all of it, not even for the best student in our class.” Cael gave Zariel a pointed look.

“Zariel was the best?” I asked.

“By far. Even before his rune.”

“He never told me that.”

“Of course not. That wouldn’t be like him. And he should have a better position than he currently does—don’t let him convince you otherwise.” Cael turned his attention back to Zariel. “So you agree, we didn’t memorize the entire tome?”

“Well, no, not all of it was relevant to our study. Most of the editions didn’t even have certain, more controversial chapters, especially since they are theoretical. No point in making students memorize something that may not exist.” Zariel paused, but not before delving into a long rant about the origins of the book, its authors, and discussing how it was responsible for transforming magical education. I understood maybe one word in ten. “I’m not sure I’ve even seen the full version,” he said to me once he started speaking coherently again, “since we were never given a complete copy.”

“A pity.” Cael gave me a smile. “I’ve always wondered what it said.” Cael locked eyes with me. He was trying to say something. But why me? Why not try again with Zariel, who had apparently missed the cue ?

“I should’ve expected nothing less, Cael,” Zariel said. “This is the first I’ve seen you in weeks, and here you are, reminding me of awful memories.”

“I’ve enjoyed the library,” I said, letting Zariel distract anyone who might’ve been close enough to listen to us. And Cael was trying to tell me something. What in the hell was in that book? All I knew was that I was going to find out. Zariel and I had, in some respects, been listless for days, unsure of our next steps for discovering the High Artist’s plan, and now we had a direction. If I could figure out what Cael was trying to tell me.

“It’s a marvel, isn’t it?” Cael said, waving a dramatic arm at the atrium’s open air. “I doubt you humans have anything to compete with it.” There was a sudden clamor above us, and a stream of angels poured out of the upper levels, flying in predictable paths. Cael gave them a quick look and then turned to leave. “I’m sorry, I have to go. They will want me back now. But Zariel, if you haven’t taken her to see the mirror, you need to.”

“The mirror?” Zariel seemed ... confused. “Alright. If she wants.”

She wanted. She wanted a lot. Thanks, Cael. But how was I going to convince Zariel that there was something there that we needed to see?

We said goodbye and Cael flew off with a gust, joining the streams of other angels who were settling in for the evening, eerily reminiscent of pigeons flying back to their coops. Silently, we made our way back to his rooms, buried in thought. Once we were inside, with the door shut behind us, I took a deep breath, bracing myself for what I was going to have to say.

“So,” Zariel said as he deftly struck a match and lit the lamps, “the secret project is apparently in that book and Cael thinks there’s a copy in the forty-fifth alcove. Though why he risked so much to tell me that is beyond me.”

My mouth dropped open.

“What?” Zariel said, noting my shock, flame still in hand. “Did you think I didn’t know what he was trying say?” He shook the match, extinguishing it. “I have my moments, but I’m typically not that dense. Cael despises that book. The fact that he mentioned it without a string of curses was by itself suspicious.”

“I didn’t think you’d suspect the Artists of doing anything you would deem worth spying on,” I finally admitted. “That is, it’s one thing for us to talk about it. It’s another for us to actually try to find answers.”

“I don’t—well, I didn’t.” He frowned. “I’m not sure. It could still be nothing.”

“What changed?”

“You.” He took a step towards me, the air tightening around me. My breaths ran shallow. He was close to me. So close. “I’d do anything to protect you, and if that means making sure that Cael is just trying to show me something amusing as opposed

to a threat, I absolutely will. ”

“Oh.” Unwillingly, I glanced over to his bedroom, where the corner of his bed was visible through the doorway.

“I think we should go to bed early tonight,” he said, giving me a knowing look. My mouth went dry, even as every nerve stirred, awakening. “I have a feeling that we’ll be getting an answer to this mystery soon, one way or another.”

We managed to eat the spiced fruit and buttered bread that Zariel got us for dinner, which made the stuff served at the university cafeteria taste like cardboard in comparison. Moreover, the meal was a lesson in how we were both excellent at avoiding certain conversations—and patient. Sure, some people would have rushed into a frenzy of passion and into his bedroom at the first opportunity, but we had two pressing issues. One, Cael’s visit chilled any amorous feelings for the moment, and two, we were both ravenously hungry.

“This is a treat,” Zariel said, picking at the apples that were coated in some sort of cinnamon sauce.

“It is?”

He nodded, wiping the corner of his mouth. “This spice isn’t common at our home. It comes from far away—months of travel. Normally only royalty would receive a dish like this. ”

“Oh.” I laughed. “It’s from far away here, too, but it’s common.” The cinnamon must’ve been included in the provisions that the angels received. The fresh fruit was something I noted had worked its way into our diets a day after the meeting. “I guess I’m surprised the Artists aren’t saving these spices in case they return home. Seems like they’d be valuable.”

“I’m sure they are saving some. Either the humans gave so much they feel comfortable using it for us, or they want to be able to prove that we’re using what’s been provided.” Zariel took another bite and chewed for long moments before swallowing. “Or both.”

“In the meantime, this is delicious.”

“You would love Highest City. The spices, the music.” He laughed softly, and I smiled to see him so relaxed. “Everything is an art, and treated with the mastery and appreciation that art deserves. Even food. Especially food.”

“High City? Sorry, Highest?”

He let out a long sigh. “It’s safe to assume that name is a very literal translation, made from the worlds merging. We don’t recall the exact name, and from what we can remember it comes from a far older dialect than the documents we’ve been able to translate thus far. We could very likely figure it out, but we care more about returning to that city than by calling it the correct name.”

Home. Someday, he would leave me. Someday, but not today. “What will you do when you get home?” I took a long sip of sweet tea, likely another gift from the summit. “Stay with the library?”

He stared off for a long moment. “I’m not sure if I want to go home.”

I had to carefully swallow to keep from choking. “What? But your family. Your friends. Your sister—”

“But our old world isn’t you.” He shook his head slowly. “And there’s no possibility you would be able to come with me.”

“Because the angels won’t allow it?”

“Because I won’t allow it.” He set aside his meal. “Cat, you have goals that you have worked for here . You have your own life and dreams. You have your friends and family. I will not ask you to give that all up for me. Your studies are not less important than mine. And since I’m the reason you’re here in the first place, that you have this bond, it’s only fair that I give up mine.”

“Zariel. I don’t want that.” I set aside my own food and drink.

“No. But one of us has to. That’s the tragedy of our situation. One of us will have to give up everything—or we will have to part. But all of this is moot until one thing is settled. Do you want me?”

I started, unsure if I misheard, but the way he focused on me told me that I had not.

Want him? How could he not tell that I did? I spent my first days here trying not to think of him as more than a friend, trying not to let this go further—and it was pointless. I should have known from the moment that he told me we were mates that I was lost.

As one, we stood and took a step closer to each other. The room had never felt so small, and yet so empty of everything that was not him.

I took a deep breath. “I ...”

Did I want him?

Physically? Absolutely. He approached another step, now towering over me and only an arm’s reach away. His wings moved around my back, pulling me closer to him. He was lithe and powerful, carrying the energy of a building storm.

And emotionally? The bond made me crave him, but even I knew it couldn't make me like him. The bond didn't care about what we had in common, that we were able to spend hours talking of everything and nothing. Zariel had told me enough of mates to know that it didn't make people compatible. The bond wasn't entirely responsible for making me hate the idea of never seeing him again.

Want him? I couldn't stop wanting him any more than I could stop myself from taking another breath.

I swallowed. "Yes."

Slowly, he took my hand and led me into the bedroom. Our bedroom. My heart thudded, outpacing each step, hands moist in his grip. He turned to me, his own face deathly serious, yet staring at me with open yearning .

Once we were standing next to his bed and the comforter brushed against my thighs, he gently took both of my hands in his. And kissed them. He did it again, slowly—taking his time as if trying to make the moment last, and then guiding our hands down in between us. The desire formed between us by the bond swelled into a whirlwind, fed by my natural desire. For him.

"We don't have to do a thing," he whispered, even as his voice broke. "I'm content to stay here with you, holding you."

"What if I don't want to? Do nothing, that is. What if I" —I gasped—"want."

A light flared behind his eyes, his pupils large. "We will do whatever you please."

As one, we sat on the bed, hands entwined. We had known we were mates for weeks, had spent every possible moment together, delved into each other's minds the way only limitless conversation allowed. But our bodies were new to each other, and this

man next to me felt like a stranger again. One I would have to take my time to get to know.

Were we doing this? Were we really doing this?

It was happening. This was real.

With my name on his lips, he kissed me.

Like what had happened in the library mere hours before, every inch of me came alive, yearning to touch as much of him as possible. My core ached with a sudden need that took over all my earlier hesitation. Now blissfully alone, we devoured each other, his lips exploring mine, working their way down my neck while his hands clutched my hair, tugging off the tie that held my braid and winding his fingers through the strands.

“I love that sound,” Zariel said, as he nipped my ear. “That little moan is perfect.”

He went back to kissing me, touching every spare inch of exposed skin that he could. I had no such hesitation. My hands delved into his garments, his body as firm and muscular as I expected. Each of his muscles were worked into divots covering his limbs with a corded strength. One would think that he spent his days in a gym and not a library. Moreover, he was warm, so perfectly warm as to be unhuman.

And then his mouth nibbled on the curve of my neck, and I forgot everything else. Suddenly, my own dress was too hot. Too tight. The layers suffocated me. I worked to get them off, and instantly Zariel’s hands were there, more than willing to help me with the ties and clasps.

His hand pressed against my back, fingers digging into my dress’s fabric as he slowly traced up the garment and around my neck. That desperate heat in my core grew, and

I trembled. He moved to face me, his finger curving up my neck and then to my lips, which opened a tiny bit. When he placed a finger inside my mouth I sucked at the tip, my body erupting at the feeling of even this barest bit of him against me and the taste of salt from his skin .

“Cat,” he groaned, shifting. “Fuck, Cat. I can’t— please.” His eyes looked at me, pleading, all earlier restraint gone. “I need you.”

I understood. The dress was now both overwhelmingly heavy and awakening fierce sensations, ones that demanded that they be replaced by him . I was not prepared for the intensity that would overtake me, the desperate need to have him. When he touched me, he would find me more than ready.

We should’ve been more restrained. We should’ve waited. We should’ve—

I couldn’t take any more either.

I was lost, but I wasn’t alone.

“Yes.” The word passed my lips, and changed everything in an instant. It was as if the worlds realigned once more, a sense of clarity awakening me. This was where I was supposed to be, and who I was supposed to be with.

Relief crossed his features—he felt it too. He closed his eyes for a long moment, opening them only to look at me with a sudden ferocity. There was no doubt he had been holding back, hiding what he truly felt for me. Now there was no longer any need to hide.

I moved to lay back on the bed, to let him do whatever he— we —wanted, but he stopped me with a gentle hand around my wrist.

“I told you that I’d take you in the way which angels take their mates,” he said, his voice oddly deep. “Will you let me?”

Let him?

There was no possibility I’d say no.

Chapter twenty-one

Cat

Angels claimed their mates outside, in the air.

This meant that we had to make our way out of the Ashen Mountain, every long, painful step. Around other angels. Down halls and tunnels. It was so far away. I was certain everyone could see the desire on our faces and knew what we were doing, his hand in mine my only anchor as we walked—flying only got us so far in the mountain. No matter what beauty we passed in the now-familiar wintery halls, I couldn't stop thinking about what would happen once we were outside. How did he plan to take me, when I couldn't fly? What about the ash?

I didn't care. My core throbbed, the slickness already hot against my thighs. I wanted whatever would bring us together the soonest. At this point I'd let him take me in the tunnel, behind a bookshelf, anything .

And I knew he wouldn't let anything hurt me. Never.

With his cloak draped around me, his scent filling every breath, we walked through the halls that were far from abandoned, yet no one paid us any mind. Thank goodness. By this point I had accepted that I was far beyond the angels' concerns. No, tonight I was glad of it. This was not the time I wanted to be stopped by Cael, or anyone else.

Zariel's soothing hand squeezed mine tighter as my heart raced both from excitement

and nerves. His expression gave nothing away, nothing that indicated what we were about to do. Would the angels care that we were about to be mates in truth? Probably not, or, at any rate, they wouldn't in a way that would make it back to me. They knew we had been sharing a room these past nights—what did they care what happened? Zariel already told me that it was impossible for angels to have children in this world, so that wasn't a concern.

After passing through several long stretches of tunnels, the two of us reached a door that was seemingly made from stone, etched with runes of some language unknown. The wind howled, audible even here. Outside was winter in truth, and not the temperate climate I had become used to in the library. I wrapped the cloak tighter around myself. At this height, it was going to be cold once we were outside. Very cold. I eyed Zariel's bare shoulders, his tunic wrapped loosely around him .

“Don't worry about me,” he said, guessing what I was thinking. “I told you—our bodies run warmer, because we were made to live and fly at such heights.”

“Alright.”

He pushed against the door for a moment and then turned to face me. “We don't have to,” he said, wearing a new determined expression. “Doing this can make complications for us. Ones I should've mentioned sooner.”

“How so?”

He visibly swallowed. “When angels give in to a mate bond, they find it hard to leave their partner's side. The effect usually lessens over time, but it can be quite intense at first. You're human, and I don't know what the effects will be.”

“I'll be fine,” I assured him.

“You may not want to leave me after this.”

Too late. I already didn't want to leave him. This was supposed to be temporary, in every respect. But why was it temporary?

... I knew why. One of us would have to give up everything. Though that didn't make it any easier.

“When I leave, I'd rather have this time with you, and know that we made the most of it, no matter what happens,” I said truthfully. “But what about you—won't it be too hard on you to say goodbye?”

His arm trembled as if he were restraining himself. “Yes,” he said. “I may not ever be able to let you go. Even if I'm forced to.” A new fear clouded my heart—Zariel had mentioned coming with me, leaving the Ashen Mountain for good. But what if the Artists didn't allow it? What if they didn't want an angel living with the humans? There was a whole prison under the mountain that could keep him away from me.

“Then maybe we shouldn't—”

“This is my choice to make,” he said, looking me in the eyes. “And I want to do this.”

Smoothly, he moved and pressed me against him, wrapping me in his arms as if someone were trying to take me away this instant. A firestorm broke out on my skin, as if we never stopped touching in the bedroom, just as ravenous. Everywhere he touched inflamed me further, begging him to go further. More. I needed more. This had to be the mate bond, there was no other explanation for this, how quickly I could go from yearning to delirious with desire, but I didn't care. Mate bond or no, I was feeling this, and I was going to take it to whatever end.

“Catalina,” he whispered when his lips broke away from mine.

“Let’s go,” I said, my whole-body pulsating, my legs weak. “Show me everything.”

Fumbling with his arm behind him, Zariel pushed open the door, revealing the edge of a cliff that showed a drop that was hundreds of feet to the rocky ground below. Snow and ash whirled by in the distance, caught by the mountain currents and tossed higher into the air. Of course, angels wouldn’t have a staircase—their doors led off a cliff. But Zariel was right—the ash was further away here. We could fly without it burning me.

Before I could say another word, he pressed me even tighter against him, and I felt nothing but his arms wrapped around me and the wind through my hair as we crept outside. I gripped his tunic, clutching onto him with everything I had, and he laughed, a musical sound that carried over the rush of air and my panicked heart.

“Are you alright?” he asked, guiding me fully out onto the ledge. “Ledge” was generous for where we were standing—there was a whole two feet from us and falling to my quick death. The mountain splayed underneath and above us, a towering monument of snow and ash. I had been around the two enough to tell what was ash and what was snow, as the former glittered more brightly in the moonlight. At this height, both were present, shading the mountain with shades of glistening white. Here, away from the ashen clouds, the stars lurked above us, and since the clouds blocked the view of New Jersey, we could pretend that we were the only people in the world. My stomach heaved, and the world shifted. Alright, maybe I wasn’t great with heights.

I tilted my head back, looking up. Only up. At him. “I think I’m alright? As long as I don’t look down.”

“You should,” he said, his glorious wings spread behind him as he closed the door and positioned himself between me and the edge, holding me tightly. “The world doesn’t look much better than this. And don’t worry—I’m being careful to avoid the

ash. I know where the currents don't go."

With one last breath, he lifted an arm to support my legs and jumped. We fell—and then we soared.

The Ashen Mountain spread to one side of us, no less impressive for flying so close to it. Around us were the clouds of ash, and as promised, it did not come near enough to harm. Instead, the air glittered, the perpetual snow and ash blanketing the mountain. Thick layers of snow and towering evergreens lined the mountainsides, even at this height. I wondered how they were able to live here, with no summer and the ash, but plants in their world often followed different rules. I took in the mountain face, spotting some of the library's windows, and for the first time I realized just how much higher in the mountain the library went than we normally did. It could take years for me to see everything, and that wasn't counting the city that was a prison under the ground.

A cleft in the mountains seemed to be what maneuvered the wind and stopped the ash from getting close, and it was there that Zariel took us, a place where the ashen clouds wouldn't go, a place that was hidden from the view of the hundreds, if not thousands of windows that lined the stone. The pine trees were even thicker here, blocking everything, including the harshest of the winds.

"Here," he said, gently setting me down on a rock in a gash in the mountain, where the stone walls folded into a massive v that could've held a couple skyscrapers. The snow rested around us, somehow little to no ash in sight, other than what was in the clouds hovering high above us. I had no idea how high up we were—a thousand feet, maybe? Possibly two? Or more? I had to lean my head fully back to see the top of the mountain, and we were nowhere near its crest. I breathed in the heavy, fresh scent of the pine, and noticed a couple unusual trees that bore white berries like little pearls, another sign that everything here had truly come from another world.

“Rest,” he said to me, rubbing my back gently.

I blinked hard. “That was ... that was ...”

“Terrifying?” he offered.

“Perfect.”

He smiled and sat next to me, sheltering us under his wings, making a cocoon where there was nothing but him and me, us against the cold night. There, pressed under his body, I warmed quickly, despite the frigid rock beneath us. As I had noticed earlier, he ran very warm. I settled next to him, trying to ignore how his firm hand graced my sides. No, relishing how they graced my sides. I was past the point of denying how I felt, and I wanted to feel everything. His wings were gentle against my skin, tapping my back and sides, and I traced them, taking my time to admire their silken beauty, and the firm metallic tips that graced each one.

“You weren’t ready to fly,” he said. “I’m sorry, I should’ve warned you—”

“If that’s how you see the world, I think I can get used to it,” I said, giving him a reassuring grin, anything to wipe the concern off his features. His hands rubbed my back, reigniting that early fire, one that was done being ignored. With him so close to me, I couldn’t stop anticipating the next touch. The next kiss. “In fact, I think I’d still like to try flying again tonight, if you’re willing to ...”

A broad smile spread across his face. “Of course. I’d love nothing more.” His gaze darkened in a way that made my thighs clench. “But there are other matters to attend to first.”

He leaned forward and consumed me with his lips, his delicious kiss stirring that fresh fire within me. With one hand holding me upright against the cold stone, I used

the other to caress his face, guiding him closer to me. When I nibbled on his bottom lip he growled, moving me so that I sat on his lap, his wings spread out around us, keeping us warm against the wind. His member jutted against my core, prodding against me, only a couple layers of fabric separating us. I ground against it through our clothes, and smiled at the resulting hiss as he lightly gyrated against me.

“No one will see us?” I asked, right as his mouth worked its way down my neck and one of his hands went back and forth between my breasts, teasing them gently.

“No. I know where we can go.” He adjusted the neckline of my dress and pulled it down, exposing my breasts to his gaze. “These are for me to see. And me alone.”

He parted his robes, and the runes on his stomach illuminated in the dark, like molten embers under his skin. The light cast against his perfect features, highlighting them in flames and shadows, giving us both enough light to see in the darkness created by his wings. It was him. His magic, his body, everything that made him— him . And I couldn’t get enough.

Attending first one breast and then another, he rubbed and pinched them lightly in turn. I whispered his name, blessing and cursing the mate bond that sung to have him so close, and the fact that I was finally giving in. I didn’t ask for this, but it gave me everything that I didn’t know I desired. That I needed.

His hands worked over me, brushing and teasing the sensitive parts of my skin under my robes, a dance designed to bring me to the cusp of pleasure—just for him to stop and bring me back to painful reality again. Each movement stirred me further, sending a tight coil into my greedy core that wanted more, so much more. Each time he found a new area of me to explore, it made me all too aware that something was missing. He was missing.

“Perfect,” he whispered, his eyes roaming my bare chest. “Absolutely perfect. And

mine.” He shifted, and his length swelled against me—those annoying layers of fabric were still between us. My hands wrapped into his hair, twirling the dark strands around my fingers, and then I pulled him against me—his hot, bare skin colliding with mine. I let out a sigh of contentment. This was how it was supposed to be. Together. We gently explored each other, our hands roaming and touching places on each other’s bodies for the first time, and with each discovery the ache of desire grew, because it meant I knew more of him. The muscles on his shoulders. A scar on his chest.

“Flying accident when I was a toddler,” he said with a smirk when I traced the little white line.

Then I traced a new line from his neck, to his chest, to his abdomen, each indentation making my fingers dance over his body.

“Let me touch you,” he said.

“You are touching me,” I teased.

“You know what I mean.” He gave me a long kiss, as if he were going to consume me, but then he broke away suddenly. “The part of you that’s yearning for me.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I’m desperate for you.” He kissed me. “And I can feel the way you’re rubbing against me.”

Obligingly, I pulled up my skirts and rested entirely bare on his lap, the fabric of his robes smooth against my tender skin, showing him all of me. After a short pause he slowly ran a path with his fingers along my bare thighs and stared at me with the intensity he normally devoted to his manuscripts, as if he was savoring every new

inch, in a slow and painful order. “You smell so sweet,” he said with a sigh.

“Good?”

“No.” He smiled and chuckled. “You don’t understand—we don’t typically smell others like this—our sense of smell isn’t that strong. But you, I would know you anywhere by this alone. It tells me that you’re mine.” He reached a hand between my legs, making me gasp. “As is this.”

Without warning, two of his fingers delved within me. With a small cry I adjusted and let him enter me deeper, as far as he could go. The discomfort at their entry quickly gave way to a heady fullness. “Zariel,” I cried, clenching around him and leaning forward against his shoulder, sliding over his fingers, taking every bit of what he was giving me.

“This is just a taste,” he said, working his thumb on the outside of me, rubbing it over my clit. His other hand grabbed my ass, moving me to where he’d be able to manage me best. My thigh brushed against his member, making me think of what was coming next. If what I could feel was any indication, I would need every bit of what he was doing in order to take him.

“You’re so slick,” he said in my ear, his words unsteady, “and I can’t wait to have you stretched around me.” Was this the same formal angel who had spent all those hours with me, discussing politics, classics, and philosophy? Now he was someone else, someone completely overcome with desire.

And I loved it.

When I reached my hand between his legs and his still-covered cock, he bumped my hand aside before I could even touch with more than just the tips of my fingers. “No,” he said, determined. “This time, it’s for you.”

“What about you?”

He nibbled at my ear, right when he worked yet another finger into me. My wetness was spreading, making it very clear how I felt, and how much I still craved. “Don’t worry,” he said softly, “all of this is for me. Hearing your cries, feeling you. All of it.”

His clever fingers worked harder, pulsating in me and winding around my clit. He knew my body so well. Too well. With him, I burned. Even in this world of winter and ash, I burned.

“Zariel,” I moaned, throwing my head back against his feathered wings, which braced me. The metal tips pricked my skin, a delicious friction that reminded me exactly where I was. Who I was with. My body cried out for him, knowing that us being together was right, it was exactly where I belonged.

And I was starved of him.

Suddenly he removed his hand, leaving a bitter emptiness where he had been. Those nimble fingers brushed aside his tunic revealing himself— all of himself—taut and ready. In this dim light I was able to make out every curve and angle, the fact that he stretched me with his fingers was definitely for a reason—his size was proportional to his height. Was I going to be able to handle all of him? I was going to find out. Then something else caught my attention .

At the base of his member were small white feathers instead of hair, a light down that rested on his skin. At the top of it all, his runes burned, reminding me that this man I was with wasn’t human, no matter how easy it was to forget.

“Can I?” I asked, reaching a trembling hand towards him.

“Of course.”

Gently, I stroked the small feathers that were around his cock, biting back a smile as he shuddered. “I didn’t know about this,” I said.

“I—couldn’t think of a good time to mention it,” he said. “Do they bother you?”

“Not at all.” And it didn’t. It surprised me, but they were so soft they may as well have been hair.

That was enough. There was something far more important for me to pay attention to. With a certain movement I gripped his hard shaft, moving my hand up and down, careful to adjust my hold so that I was able to smoothly slide. His cock was extra warm—was Zariel getting even warmer? Or was it both of us, sheltered in his wings?

Without thinking, I moved and hovered over him, positioning myself and rubbing my wetness over the tip. He whispered my name like a prayer as I lowered myself onto him, inch by inch as he stretched and filled me. Bit by bit by bit.

I groaned. His hands didn’t do nearly enough to prepare me for him—not nearly enough. But any discomfort quickly faded as it was replaced with a perfect fullness. This was ... this was ...

Finally, I finished sheathing myself on him and rested on his hips. Now there was no separation between us, nothing to keep us apart.

Zariel’s eyes were locked on me, his mouth opened a tiny bit as he watched me move on him. “I wish you could feel how perfect you are to me,” he whispered, moving his hips just enough to send jolts of pleasure through my core. “You gripping me—around me.” He juttet harder. “Perfect.”

I moaned, beyond capable of any other reaction. Perfect to him? What about what he was doing to me?

Every bit of me, from my core to the tips of my fingers sang. He barely moved, and already the pleasure within me was building to a crescendo, ready to overtake me at the slightest touch. The tension and desire of the last few weeks slammed into me at once, pushing me to the edge. I had him, and it wasn't enough. I needed everything.

As if he knew what I was feeling, he reached for my breasts, massaging them—and then he moved in a languid rhythm, using one hand to minister to my clit. Instantly my pleasure spiked, threatening to make me come undone.

“I’m going to come,” I said with a whimper. “Too soon.” Impossibly soon.

“Never,” he said and bit my lip. “There will be more. So much more. It’s the bond—enjoy it.”

“Zariel,” I cried out, my release overtaking me. Seconds stretched into a glorious eternity as I lost myself within him, this feeling, this . Zariel pressed his head against my neck, placing tender kisses as I clenched around him in a steady rhythm.

Who cared that there was a mate bond, that what I initially felt for him wasn't my own feelings? It gave me him, and what we had was real.

When my orgasm faded and I collapsed against him, the heated desire grew yet again. More. I needed more. Already. How was this happening—I just came, and already my body was coiling, preparing again. Out of instinct I rubbed against him, seeking that desperate relief. A guttural moan escaped my lips as he moved in me with a stronger rhythm, yet he was restrained. Measured. He was savoring this, drawing it out as much as possible, studying my reaction to him with the dedication of any of his other research.

“Remember I told you I would take you like angels claimed their mates?” he said, his hips thrusting beneath me, driving me harder onto him. Now that I was stretched, and I had taken my pleasure once, he was moving me with far less restraint, giving a small hint of exactly what he was holding back.

“Yes,” I said. How could I forget?

“May I?”

“I’ll fall,” I rushed out between the slick thrusts .

“No, you won’t,” he said. “And I’ll protect you—I will not let you feel any discomfort this night. I promise. But let’s get a little more clothing on you first, as much as I don’t want you to.”

I grinned. He was right, I’d freeze as we flew. Though I found it hard to care. As long as he didn’t stop thrusting, he could do whatever he wanted. I obeyed, moving my dress back up to my shoulders, tugging my cloak around me, savoring feeling every bit of his hard length delving into me.

He suddenly stilled, holding me against him, still buried deep inside.

And then we flew.

Moments later the pine trees and bushes were small beneath us, the city near the mountain smaller still. Yet again I saw why he brought me here—we were in a bubble created by the mountain’s sides, where the ashen clouds were blocked by the mountain and its currents and did not come here. In the place he was taking me, I was able to enjoy the clouds, air, and snow, and not have to battle the fiery ash invading my skin.

I had little time to wonder at the view, because Zariel was thrusting within me—the friction from his torso rubbing against my clit, dragging me to a another release. I didn't care that I was in the air. I didn't care that it was cold. Zariel's body kept me warm, his wings letting us glide around the mountains, his arms mastering me and positioning me so that I pounded against him as thoroughly as if he were on the ground.

He thrust with each beat of his wings, and the tension grew inside me, a drum beat growing louder in my ears.

“Grip around my neck,” he said. I obeyed, reaching my hand around, pushing aside his flowing hair.

One hand cupped and gripped each side of my bare ass, and, far stronger than any human, he moved me against him, meeting each of his thrusts, while holding me solidly in place. I looked down between us. My dress blew up just enough that I could see a glimpse of him sliding in and out, and beyond that, the small world underneath.

His eyes were closed, squeezing extra hard each time he slammed into me. Carefully, I reached up and kissed him, and was met with an almost feral sound when he kissed me back, biting my lip. There was no doubt about it—I was being completely and utterly claimed. Zariel kept up his steady movements as the building pleasure gathered within me, throughout my core, my limbs, and my release which would overtake me again. Soon.

“Cat.”

I answered him by kissing his neck, his hair and mine tangling and blowing across our faces. His wings moved steadily behind him, each beat echoing like thunder. The stars were above us, and everything else was below and far away. Nothing else mattered .

His breath was heavy in my ear, and he let out deep moans punctuated with my name. Then he spilled into me with a heavy groan, right as my climax overtook me a second time. My pleasure fused into his, and for a moment I felt as if I could sense his body, his limbs, so that we were in truth one.

As he came, his wings set into a glide, and we moved silently through the crystalline night air, catching our breath. We did not speak. There was nothing that needed to be said.

Whatever we had done, it had changed everything.

Chapter twenty-two

Zariel

She was tight around me, gripping me with her delicious heat, even as I spilled out of her and dripped to the frozen ground far below.

My mate. My mate. My mate.

My body sang at the sweet relief that I had finally claimed her, marked her. Angels are in truth no different than other creatures, and how I felt in this moment was a testament to the base animal that still lived within us. She was mine.

Mine.

Even though I had just taken her, had felt her grip me and throb as I made her go over the edge, that feral side of me stirred to do it again. And again. I'd never be able to get enough. Her every movement echoed through me as if it were my own, her pleasure a mirror to mine, her desire reflected back to me. This wasn't enough. Never enough.

The mate bond chose a partner for me, and I thanked the heavens that it chose her. Soaring above the ground, with her wrapped around me—this was how it was supposed to be. She wasn't an angel and she'd never have wings of her own, but she didn't need them. As long as I had breath, they, along with every other part of me, was hers. And her not having wings let me hold her against me, fully pressed, gripping me out of both necessity and desire. We didn't have to perfectly time the

beats of our wings or risk knocking each other off course. No, she fit my body as I held her, and I'd never let her go.

Then the moment I should've been basking in bliss became shadowed clouds covering the moon. From hundreds of feet above the ground I faced the mountain, and all that it entailed.

Damn all of this—I was never going to be without her again. I didn't care what anyone else thought, did, or said. I'd leave everything, even if it meant leaving my hard-earned position in the mountain and never going home. Was that rational? No. Rational thought left the moment she slid onto me. From here on out there was nothing that mattered other than her.

Angels were warned about what taking a mate could do to oneself, the absolute insanity. The warnings were not nearly enough. She was now a piece of my soul, and I'd happily give whatever it took to have her with me. I'd surrender everything that I worked for, suffered for, if it meant that I'd be guaranteed to see her face next to me every morning, forever.

Her head rested against my shoulders, her eyes languid, body sated. Light brown eyelashes fluttered, revealing her brilliant pale blue eyes. Her scent overwhelmed me, and now, mixed with my own, was driving me to oblivion once again.

I had to take her again. Soon. Not soon enough.

But my mate was human, and she needed rest. She needed to be indoors, where it was warm. She'd stay in my bed, and I'd take the time to explore every inch of her, and worship her as she deserved.

Was she feeling this as intensely as me?

“That was ...” she said languidly, wind rushing past us. “I mean, that was—”

“Everything I had dreamed of, and more.” I kissed her perfect pink lips, lips that I imagined would soon be around my cock, sucking on me. And that would only happen after I tasted every bit of her. The flood of desire reared, but I forced it back. It had to wait. I needed to take her home, and then I’d face whatever was trying to keep us apart.

“I don’t want this—us—to end,” she said. “I can’t let it end.”

“It won’t,” I said. I drifted to a glide, aiming towards where we had left the mountain. Someday I’d take her flying, truly flying, and we would see everything the world had to offer, far away from here .

“Zariel—”

I met her gaze and cut off her protest, doing my best to convey to her in looks what my words could fail to do. “You are mine,” I said, “chosen by fate. I refuse to have it any other way.”

I meant every word.

Chapter twenty-three

Cat

Could one become numb from pleasure? Yes. Yes, one could.

Sated and exhausted, I slept that night with my back tucked against Zariel's chest, his hands possessively around my waist and wing draped over me. Even though I was naked, I didn't need any blankets—he kept me more than warm enough. Instead, the familiar comforter of his bed was wrapped around us, creating a fluffy nest.

When I woke the next morning, it took me a second to remember who was next to me. And then I remembered what happened—what we did—right as the distinctive soreness made itself known. Smiling languidly, I nestled closer to him, focusing on everything about him that I could. The press of his body. His scent. The even cadence of his breath. The way his right arm folded around my lower back and how his wing was my shelter, as if protecting me from the outside world.

His eyes suddenly opened. “You're awake.” His thumb traced along my jaw, making me close my eyes to focus on the sensation, having every bit of his attention on me.

“I don't want to be. Waking means that it's time to get up, and I want to stay here. You have to go to the library today, right?” Angels didn't have to work every day, but their work schedules and hours weren't consistent, and understanding the order was beyond me.

He sighed and nodded. “Yes. But I don't have to do much today. We can be done

early.”

“Good.”

“There will be many more nights like this last one, and just as many mornings,” he said, kissing my forehead.

I hummed in agreement, and my freshly opened eyes found his looking deep into mine.

“This wasn’t what I expected,” he said. My heart lurched until he continued, “They never explained the peace that comes with completing the mate bond. The contentment from having you next to me. Like everything is right . There’s no doubt that there is nowhere else I should be other than right here. It makes” —he swallowed—“it makes me grateful that the worlds shifted, or my heart may have gone forever without finding this, without finding you.”

“You told me angels have many potential mates. ”

“Yes. But it’s impossible that I’d be feeling this way with anyone else but you. I could end up not liking my mate, once I got to know them. It happens all the time. And I know I will not have that issue with you.”

“How are you sure you like me?” I half-teased.

“How could I not? We’ve spent hundreds of hours alone together. You’re kind, clever, and far too patient with me than for your own good—not many can listen to me go on about star colors, qualities, and theories for an entire morning.”

“Keep going.”

“Well, you’re also—”

I kissed him in answer. Whether what he said about me was true or not, or was merely the mate bond, I couldn’t say, and it didn’t affect that I was feeling how I did, which was that I couldn’t get enough of him. I wasn’t as good as him at putting things into words, but I understood what I felt—that with him, I was something better than I was before. Complete.

But dawn had arrived, and we had a task to accomplish—figuring out what the High Artist had planned could affect everything. Plus, Zariel had to work. My dissertation was no longer nearly as important as potential world destruction. If Princeton was annihilated, that would make completing my degree a bit more difficult.

Reluctantly, we left the bed, dressed, ate, and then went to the library. He didn’t have to ask for permission to carry me, nor did he offer for us to take the stairs. Instead, I opened my arms to him and he lifted me—understanding what I was offering, and flying me to the library in mere easy minutes. When we arrived at the upper levels, he gently set me down with a kiss on the top of my head, and then we were back to normal behavior, as if nothing had changed.

We spent a couple hours in our familiar routine so that Zariel could complete his assignments, and then we were on our way to where Cael hinted that we needed to go. No point in making the Artists suspicious that there was something going on by having Zariel miss work.

“Do you know where we’re going?” I whispered. We were in a part of the library I hadn’t seen before, though I had a feeling that was true of most of the library.

“Yes. If anyone asks, I’m finding you a book on elvish fashions.”

I raised an eyebrow. “... Do you want people to know you’re lying?”

He shrugged and smirked, his feathers rippling. “It would explain why we’re wandering, and those books have pictures, so no translation is necessary. And it would explain why we’re in this general area. And some women like dresses and fashion.”

“What? I like dresses just fine.”

“Then why the protest?”

“It’s just not ... very academic of me.” I surveyed the endless rows of shelves before us. “Then again, maybe I should expand my interests.” Since entering the mountain, I’ve worn nothing but gauzy white, blues, and/or silver robes, and I often felt as if I’d fit right in on the top of a Christmas tree. Fashions of the other worlds did interest me. Maybe I should ask him to grab me one of those books. Thinking of elvish fashions helped distract me from the fact that we were seeking an unaltered text on ritual magic that would probably get us in trouble if someone discovered us looking for it.

“They’ll just have the text out in public?” I whispered as we passed rows that had guards methodically placed nearby. As I learned these last few weeks, they’d rotate through the library, scanning every inch of shelves and every visitor. Their dependable heads turned to watch us as we passed, but no one stopped us. Zariel’s back was straight, his hand holding mine, while we strolled through the rows, like he did know exactly where we were going.

“Yes. They will.”

“If this is something secret, surely they wouldn’t—”

“It’s a training text. Moving it to someplace protected would attract more notice than being out in the open,” Zariel answered, his voice barely above a breath. “They’d

have to explain it to the archivists, the guards, the cleaners—far more people than they'd want if they were to remove the book, and there's more than one copy here. This library is full of millions of illicit magics and secrets—until recently I had assumed we were intelligent enough to leave them purely to the realm of the mind. I like to study magical experimentation, not become the subject matter of such.”

“Cael didn't seem to like the book.”

“That's another point. We've all had enough of it during our studies, why would we want to see more of it, for something that was deemed hypothetical?”

I considered this. Alright, if it was part of a common textbook, one that students hated, it would make sense they'd just leave it out in the open. But would we find the book? I'd struggle to find a hot pink book with blinking lights and a glitter bomb in this place, much less a nondescript text.

Zariel suddenly stopped at one bookcase, crouched to his knees, and muttered under his breath, reading the edges of the shelves, which were etched with what I assumed was an angelic Dewey Decimal System. Now we were far away from the guards, far away from other occupants, and the absolute silence weighed over us, to the point that I could hear Zariel's fingers rubbing over the books' spines.

While we searched, I moved up and down the aisle, painfully aware that I was useless to him. Instead, I took in the hall, as no two places in the library were the same. At this moment we found ourselves in an area where the ceilings rose to around a dozen feet above Zariel's head in a gentle curve, with carved arches decorating the sides and meeting in a peak in the center. The same ashen snow effect was on the stone as it was the rest of the library, surrounding us with a muted light that was amplified by the steady enclosed lamps. But there were a few things that were unique to this area, such as the open-mouth bust of an angel perched on a stone column. That was ... quite the pose to be captured in for all eternity, unless it was meant to depict someone

after their execution. From what I'd seen of angels, that was a possibility.

"There's the mirror Cael mentioned," Zariel suddenly said, gesturing behind me, towards the wall at the other end of the aisles. It was an artsy mirror, full length and adorned with pearls and silver wire.

I strolled back to Zariel, admiring the mirror that would have fit in at a bridal shop in Brooklyn. "That's lovely, but hardly worth the trip here."

"It was made by the rusalki," Zariel said. "The mirror is said to show your fate."

"That's ... ominous."

"The rusalki are ominous. Their victims never leave their water. Even after death." He paused. "The very water they live in is called the Fated Surface."

"Damn."

I wasn't familiar with rusalki, which were basically bloodthirsty water nymphs from Slavic mythology, other than that they had caused a commotion when their swamp appeared in the Sonoran Desert just outside of Phoenix. Silv didn't like them—they weren't common near his home, but still, he tended not to like creatures that would be willing to eat him. And the rusalki apparently weren't picky about what they had for dinner.

"Have you looked in it?" I asked.

"Of course."

"And?"

“Nothing. I was here, as always.”

“Do you know anyone who has seen anything else?”

“I know some who claimed to. I’m skeptical of the whole thing, myself. I asked Cael and he had the same experience as me.”

“Oh.” I eyed the mirror. Should I look? What if it showed me something I didn’t want to see? Though, Zariel seemed to think that it was just a legend, and it seemed like he couldn’t be bothered to test the mirror further, not that he didn’t have lots of other things to distract him. It wouldn’t hurt if I looked, right? Zariel was digging through books on one of the shelves, still crouched cursing to himself. I’d be no help to him.

Slowly, I wandered to the mirror, stopping mere feet away. It did have an odd surface, like cloudy ice that seemed to move, despite it being glass. How did it end up here?

I looked at my reflection.

And I saw myself staring back at me.

That was it. Just me. In the library. With Zariel, still searching for the book.

For magical creatures, the rusalki seemed to have left the magic part as something to be desired. Though this mirror, the way the pearls wrapped around the wires, made me think of something else, something from the time Zariel and I spent outside last night, wrapped in each other.

“There’s a plant on the mountain,” I said quietly to Zariel once I made it back to him. “I only saw a couple, but they were large trees, with no leaves and small white berries. What are those?”

“Oh, those aren’t real.”

“What?”

“They’re not living trees. They’re landmarks that we placed here. Well, not me, but other angels. Most of them are to mark an entrance to the mountain, though I can’t say how accessible any of them are. Or where they even lead. We’re requested to leave the trees undisturbed when we fly around the mountain.”

A marker for entrances? Disguised as trees? And here, Zariel mentioned it as casually as if he was describing candlesticks. Though, he had a point. The trees were on the Ashen Mountain, and without Zariel’s help, there was no way I’d be able to make it to the trees without wishing for death, much less find an entrance.

“Found it,” Zariel whispered, sitting on the ground and splaying the text open on his lap. “I hate this book. I really, really hate this book.”

I crouched to join him. “I can see why.” The tome was filled with diagrams, scribbled notes, arrows—it looked like a scholar’s fever dream. “They never bothered to organize it?”

“This is organized,” he said, not looking up. “Magic tomes are ... different.” He flipped through one page after another, searching for something. “This cannot be it,” Zariel said, finally focusing on a page. This particular section had large sigils similar to Zariel’s runes, with additional notes. “Maybe Cael forgot something, or has the wrong book.”

“What is it?”

“It’s ... so you know how our runes are a binding, where it binds someone’s magic and essence to us?” I nodded. “Well,” Zariel continued, “this is another version of the

same concept, but it's basically on how to bond with the earth. No, more than the earth."

"Universe?"

"Not quite. I'm sorry, but I need to focus to translate. I don't know how long we have here, but I'll tell you everything when I finish." Zariel kept reading, turning whiter and whiter, as my heart beat faster and faster. What was he reading? What was so horrible that it was making his hands shake as he flipped the pages? Finally, he looked up at me, eyes wide, and said, "I think the High Artist is going to become a god."

Chapter twenty-four

Zariel

This couldn't be. I couldn't be reading this. There had to be a mistake.

A god?

It was ridiculous. The High Artist would never. He could never.

But ... would he try? The ritual described in the text was intense, to say the least, and wasn't something he could do on his own. He'd need help, and a lot of it. No one would help him with something like this, to do something like this. Right?

Then again, what if he promised everyone that he'd use his new powers to right the worlds and send us home? Would that be enough to convince angels to help him? Probably. There were enough of us here who might think that being a deity was an ample reward for such a feat. Bringing the jewel of our kingdom back home? If he succeeded, there was little the High Artist could ask for that would be denied.

But the cost if he failed.

And danger if he succeeded ...

I shoved the book back in horror, grabbed Cat, and rushed her from the aisle as fast as I could without drawing attention.

This couldn't be.

It couldn't.

But what if it was?

"In here," I said, nudging Cat from the narrow hall and into a study alcove. I needed to tell her now—I couldn't keep this to myself any longer. I shut the door behind us quietly, guiding her to two chairs that were placed next to a round wooden table. There was nothing else in the room, which was designed to grant angels an opportunity for even more privacy and quiet, if needed. If found by anyone, I'd say that I couldn't resist my mate, that I had to be alone with her. Easy enough. And true.

Quickly, while we had the benefit of thick walls, I explained to Cat what I had read. And what I feared.

"Seven sacrifices?" she asked. "Of actual, living creatures?"

"Yes."

"And that's supposed to let him become a god? "

"If it's in that book, that means it has been utilized somewhere, sometime, to that effect. Or someone had a very good reason to believe that it would work."

"How could someone come up with that idea?"

"A god might have told them."

Cat blinked. Hard. "Alright, we'll talk more about that later. Are you sure that is the ritual he's planning?"

“Yes. Setting aside Cael’s clue, it’s the only one that fits our situation, and the only one that could conceivably result in something as powerful as being able to send pieces of a world to a different plane.”

“And it only takes seven sacrifices? Isn’t that a little ... cheap?” She rubbed her eyes for a moment. “I can’t believe I just said that.”

I smiled grimly. “It’s more complicated than that. Each sacrifice represents a different part of the world—air, earth, water, fire, wood, metal, and spirit. Though, I should note that the elements in question may change according to the ritual, and there’s thoughts that technically metal and wood are part of earth and that spirit doesn’t belong at all, in most cases. And then there are the potential aspects of one for each direction, because under some schools of magical theory ...” I continued until I noticed she had stopped listening, her eyes glazed over. Cat loved to hear about magic, but there is never a good time to be lectured about magnetic poles. “There are complicated steps that need to be taken after their deaths, to ensure that everything goes to the correct place. ”

“Ah. So that’s why he’d need help, besides the mechanics of obtaining and killing seven people.”

“Indeed.”

She looked at the wall, her mind working. “Murder aside, couldn’t this be a good thing? If he succeeds, everyone could go home.” She shook her head. “What am I saying? This would never be a good thing.”

My poor mate. She came here to learn, and instead she discovered the dark undercurrent of my people. “You’re not a bad person for wondering about the end result—everyone else involved will be, and dreaming of it. Despite the cost.” I took a deep breath. “Could his success be a good thing? Absolutely. That is, unless he

makes a mistake and takes us someplace else—and what would come here in our place when we leave? Would the world even stay intact? Could he perfectly exchange the pieces of the two worlds, or even just this mountain?” I tapped my finger lightly on the table, my short nail catching on the worn wood. “He could give us everything we want, or it could destroy two worlds in the process.”

Cat slowly shook her head. “Angels are intelligent. Surely, they can’t be foolish enough to risk this.”

“I think you’re underestimating how desperate some of us are to return home,” I said gently. “And how capable the High Artist is. He didn’t get his position through connections alone.” Some angels had mates and children waiting for them back home, ones they adored. Some missed the prestige and place we had in our world, where we imagined ourselves the masters of our kingdom. And some angels, understandably, wanted to be able to leave the mountain—truly leave it—without having to contend with the humans. The mountain was massive, but after five years of confinement, it could feel stifling, especially for creatures born to fly. The space near the mountain was a poor substitute for our kingdom’s skies.

She thought about what I said for a moment, and then ventured, “Maybe we can talk him out of it. You said it yourself, the High Artist is smart.”

“Doubtful. If he’s gone far enough with this plan that Cael and others are sequestered away to work on it, then I think the time of simple suggestions is over. And for him to then suggest to the other angels who have agreed to help him that we’re returning home and then walking back that promise would be too much. He’d lose far too much support.” I shook my head. “He would never agree.”

“So what if he lost support? He’s in charge.”

“Cat, you said yourself you study politics and history. Is anything ever so simple that

one man is in charge no matter what?”

“Oh,” she said. “It’s like that.”

I crossed my legs. At some point I’d have to talk to her about how angels balanced connections with competence, and that wasn’t going to be today. “Yes. This position isn’t strictly hereditary, but Cael is his son, and if he felt like it, he could assemble the support necessary to replace his father, should the need arise.”

“Why doesn’t he do that, then?”

“Other than that Cael has disappointed his father constantly by making it clear he doesn’t want the position? I’m going to guess Cael’s doubtful he could do anything about it now.” I took a deep breath. “I haven’t had a chance to discover what Cael’s thinking, but it wouldn’t surprise me if he knows it would be next to impossible to use politics to stop his father now, not when hope is being literally dangled before so many.”

“But what if we found another way?” She sat up straighter. “What if we have another way for you to go home? One that isn’t so dangerous.”

“Cat—”

“You said the elves know something. If this was done, it can be undone. It has to be. We can find a way for the angels to get what they want, and not potentially kill billions.”

I bristled. “I said the elves have records—not a guarantee that whatever happened last time would work again.”

“It’s better than nothing.”

“Cat—”

“We won’t know until we try. Zariel” —she reached across the table and gripped my hands, cupping them as they rested on the surface— “our only other option is to let the High Artist do what he wants. Do you really want to stand by and watch as he does whatever he has planned? It sounds like it includes murder, in addition to everything else. If these creatures are alive after five years here, after your supplies were so scarce before the summit, I have a feeling that he’s being creative with the sudden need for executions.”

“No,” I had to admit. “I don’t want him to even try this. You’re right—at best, he’s taking lives and justice into his own hands. Few creatures are in that prison under his order. We are just the prison, not the court.”

“Then do you have a better idea than mine?”

I shook my head, defeated. “There’s nothing. The library—”

“You’ve spent the last few years in this library. I’m doubtful you can find something else in a couple months. Or weeks. Or” —she frowned—“how much time do we have?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “My guess is that Cael and the others are researching the exact time necessary to perform the ritual, considering the differences in celestial bodies here, but I don’t think we have long. Too many people know about this, and he will want to perform the ritual before anyone has a chance to change their mind. He will gamble speed against compliance.”

“For what it’s worth,” Cat said, “I don’t like this either. I came here for research and to wear angelic robes—not to interrupt cataclysmic magic rituals.”

“Cataclysmic is unfortunately a good word for what could happen.”

We fell into silence, our attempt at dark humor fading, until Cat said, “You mentioned something earlier. Do you think it could be gods that moved the worlds? What are these gods?”

“They ... I don’t know. They’re old. Rarely encountered, even in our old world. They’re more a base elemental than intelligent being. But I’m starting to suspect that the location of the pieces of the worlds are not a coincidence, and if that’s the case, I wouldn’t be surprised if someone was behind it.”

“How so?”

“Well, I just happened to appear close to my mate, for one, in a planet of billions. And for another, remember how you mentioned the first day that Princeton had a landmark called Morven too?”

She crossed her arms and raised a brow. “Yes. It’s a museum.”

“Well, that could be another sign. In magic, like goes to like. So I suspect there might be more behind this than just some random splitting of the worlds.”

“Damn.” Cat let out a long breath. “You’re right—that sounds too convenient to be nothing. Then we’re agreed? We’ll send a message to the elves and ask them what they know?” She leaned forward, her eyes alight with a spark that spoke to her determination to get this done. There was no way she was going to stand by and let the High Artist act unchallenged, her clever mind already moving to the most efficient steps—and I loved her for it .

But I didn’t like this. Cat shouldn’t be involved in this. Despite my growing suspicion that there was more behind this situation with the worlds than anyone contemplated,

if we were caught attempting to send messages, there'd be consequences, and Cat would likely be exiled immediately. Or worse. And who knew what would happen to me after? But she was right—what other choice did we have? The High Artist could potentially destroy the world. It was worth risking time in the prison to prevent that. Whatever the consequences were, we would manage.

“Well,” I said, “it looks like you’ll get to see the aviary, where we keep the birds.”

Cat smiled.

Cat and I left the study hand in hand, giggling and flushed, doing our best to close the door silently—and failing.

It was all an act. Not that I didn't want to take her—was counting down the hours until I could—but this lack of decorum was a ruse to get us past the guards, who were going to wonder why we were spending so long in this section of the library. And guards gossiped. Cat played her part perfectly, her hair coming loose from her braid, her smile wide with silent laughter. She could have done with a little less giggling, though. Cat wasn't quite the giggling type. But she was the type to sneak her hands into my robes, running her fingers down my bare sides, sending my senses stirring. Was this as much of a game as we were pretending?

A sudden rush of steps stopped us.

“There you are.” The High Artist walked into the hall, alone, for once. There wasn't another scholar or guard in sight.

The High Artist. Here?

My heart jumped into my throat and I resisted the urge to push Cat behind me.

What was going on? The High Artist beamed at Cat, who returned his friendliness, forcing her own grin. I stifled a soft growl that welled in my throat. This wasn't the time or place.

"I've been looking for you," the High Artist said.

"I apologize for the inconvenience." I bowed. "I have attended to my duties."

The High Artist flicked his wrist, not bothering to look at me. "Yes, yes, none of that. This is more important, or I would've had someone find you. How are you enjoying the mountain, my dear?"

My dear? What was going on? Gone was the angry master, livid at my having brought a human here. He was now all charm and smiles and ... no. Something wasn't right.

"It is beyond anything I could've imagined," Cat replied. "Thank you so much for allowing me to stay."

"Yes, I see that," the High Artist said, watching how Cat and I were still holding hands. I resisted the urge to tuck her next to me, to hide her in my wings. "I'm pleased that you have found such happiness. Zariel has been too long without a mate."

Pleased? Something definitely wasn't right.

"Thank you." She gave me a wide smile that showed far too many teeth. "I cannot believe how lucky I am."

"You were searching for me, High Artist?" I asked. Cat needed to be back in my rooms and safe. Quickly.

“Yes,” he said, finally turning to me. “Are you aware that Cael has been assisting me on a project?” I nodded, trying to keep my face impassive as he continued. “Well, I wanted to see if I could count on your loyalty and assistance, when the time comes. You’re such a good friend to my son, and our families have so much history.”

My heart froze. He came here to say that ? How much did he know about what Cat and I were thinking? How much did he suspect? He wouldn’t be here to just exchange pleasantries. Or maybe he heard where we were and put the pieces together ...

The High Artist raised an eyebrow, each second of delay adding mountains to the tension between us.

“Of course I will assist you,” I said. “I’m sorry, I’m just a little confused as to what the project is.”

“Cael said nothing?”

“Cael said plenty,” Cat said. “I’m glad to see someone who isn’t afraid to tease Zariel.” She smirked. “It’s been fun. ”

The High Artist studied her, as if he was searching for some lie. Thank goodness Cat was smart enough to continue acting like a foolish lover and not like we had discovered that the High Artist wanted to make himself one of the primal rulers of the universe. “Well,” he finally said to me, “I can assure you that when the time comes, your mate will be with you, should you desire it.”

“Of course I do,” I said.

“I’ll send word of the project soon,” the Hight Artist said. “I am glad I can count on you, Zariel. Loyalty is a precious thing these days.”

“You have it. Always.”

The High Artist smiled, every inch a benevolent mentor. “Your father would be so proud to see how much you have grown these last few years. It will be enough to push any other disappointments from his mind.” Disappointments ... like my murderous sister?

“I look forward to the day that I can see him again,” I said sincerely. Yes, I looked forward to the day where I’d learn if the High Artist could explain to Father why Aniela wanted to kill him.

“As do we all.”

The High Artist left us, his steps down the ash-crusted hall more measured than they had been when they rushed towards us. Soon they faded entirely, leaving us alone in the silence .

My breaths steadied and I gripped Cat’s hand, reassuring myself that she was fine. The encounter went well. That is, well enough. Things could’ve been far worse. He didn’t tell me what the project was exactly, but he seemed content with our replies. Though ... damn, that was a strange conversation.

How did he know where we were? Did one of the guards tell him? Were we being watched even closer than I thought?

He had to have known that if I found that ritual in the book, then I would’ve put the pieces together. The ritual required seven sacrifices, particular ones. And we just happened to be sitting on a veritable bank of creatures.

The angels were going to execute—sacrifice—prisoners, ones who most definitely didn’t deserve it, in the most brutal of ways. Like Cat pointed out, if the prisoners

were sentenced to death, they would have been dead already, not kept alive with precious stores all these years.

A jolt shot through me.

Aniela. She was a prisoner.

The spell needed a creature of air. Angels were creatures of air. Would the High Artist kill Aniela in order to finish his greedy revenge?

Were there other angels in the prison? Yes. Most of the prisoners were angels. But as far as I knew, none of them had angered the High Artist quite like she did. Something told me that the High Artist wasn't going to miss this chance to remove Aniela for good .

Cat readjusted her grip and gently tugged me along the hall. Silently, we moved past the guards guarding the door and into the network of tunnels.

It wasn't until we were in the atrium and flying back to my chambers when I dared to whisper in her ear, trusting that the rushing wind would keep anyone from overhearing. "Tonight. We're sending the message tonight."

Chapter twenty-five

Cat

“ N o one is going to wonder why we’re going to see birds?” I asked, keeping my steps even while matching Zariel’s long strides. We were high in the mountain, higher than we had ever been before. It was after dinner and near the hour when we would normally be in bed, and the halls were desolate. The air up here was thinner than where we generally stayed, and I found myself out of breath. Zariel had debated leaving me in his chambers, but he said that a newly mated male, walking at night without his mate, would cause more questions than if I went along. Even though I was huffing and puffing the whole way.

“They might wonder.” Zariel gestured for me to keep walking.

“And if we’re stopped? ”

“There’s a viewing window on this floor where we can see out of the mountain, flanked with statues carved from mermaid tears. The effect is that there are little images on the glass, reflecting the moment that they fell from their host.”

“... What? Tears?”

“Yes. Needless to say, they’re quite valuable.”

“Of course.” I coughed. “Solid tears and all. Who wouldn’t want that in their home?”

“Better than the statues in the White Hall. The ones carved out of giants’ bones.”

Those I knew of. The moment I learned about that was when I stopped assuming that anything here was carved out of rock. “I’m not arguing there. Anything is better than bones.” I put a little pep in my step. “I’m excited to see the statues,” I said, mostly to get into the character of a frivolous human.

He gave me a coy grin. “Don’t worry, the birds typically aren’t guarded, and their caretakers are off duty. Who are we going to send messages to here?”

“So no mermaid tears?” I whispered.

“Probably not.”

I had to trust that Zariel knew the workings of this mountain. He didn’t want us to get caught any more than I did. “So the plan is ...”

“Go inside, admire the birds—pet the birds—tie one of the message pouches on a bird once we’re sure no one is looking, and send it on its way. ”

“Right ... because the bird is going to find its way across the country, to a place they have never been before.”

“They don’t travel fast, especially if this land is as large as you say, but these are rooks. They know where to go.”

“Rooks. Right.” They were smart birds from Zariel’s home that understood speech, and not basic Earth pigeons. Still, it would take the bird a good month or two to get to its destination, from what Zariel said. And then we’d have a couple more months of waiting to hear anything back, or get what we were looking for. That was assuming the elves even had the manuscript in the first place and were willing to help us. The

angels' kingdom was originally too far from the Darkening Woods for them to have any strong feelings about each other, but that didn't mean they were allies. We were counting on the fact that the elves probably wanted to go home just as bad as the angels did.

I glanced at Zariel's cream tunic, where the short letter we had scribbled in his room was tucked against his breast. It was addressed to King Vanir, the elven King of the Darkening Woods, a realm where the elves bonded with death itself. Their realm was cloaked in an eternal fall, and each one of them had a skeleton for their non-dominant hand.

Sounded quite grisly.

"Here we are," Zariel said, not bothering to hide our entrance. This was a situation where it was best to move in the open—if someone was here, it was better we find out right away .

"Wow," I said, taking in the aviary. It wasn't an aviary so much as a giant atrium crafted in the same stone and snow-like ash as the rest of the mountain, home to dozens of birds the size of bald eagles. Alright, "rooks" definitely meant something else in Zariel's world. The birds cocked their heads and watched us come in, blatantly curious about who had interrupted them, and I had the feeling I was being judged. It was like walking into the cafeteria in high school, suddenly being aware that your clothes weren't in style. But from birds.

"We raise them from eggs, and we take steps to make sure that they're immune to the ash," Zariel said. "And we do our best to give them as much autonomy as possible. Hence, they aren't trapped in the mountain. They are free to go."

"How are they immune?"

Zariel squirmed. “You’ll see.” He looked around. We were alone, except for the birds who stared at us, still judging. Apparently, no one stayed on hand to tend to the birds at night. Though Zariel was right—it wasn’t like there was anyone for the angels to send letters to. Have these birds even flown away from the mountain in the last five years? Zariel said that a few letters went out here and there, especially in the beginning when they were trying to make sense of what had happened, but nothing like the stream of communication they were used to.

“I have a task,” Zariel said softly to them. “Who wants to go to the Darkening Woods?” A pause, and then chaos. The rooks rushed towards him, pecking at each other, fighting, tearing feathers, and raising a storm of cries and feathery down. Should we stop them? Should I say something to Zariel? What if they hurt each other?

Suddenly one bird screeched, sending a chilling cry that made my skin crawl. The other birds instantly backed away, heads bowed. Our messenger was victorious. The rook, whose head came up to my waist, waddled to Zariel and stuck out a leg, offering to receive the message.

“Alright. Thank you.” Zariel quickly tied the message around the bird’s foot and then offered the bird his hand, fingers outstretched.

“What are you—shit!” I cried out.

The bird bit Zariel, drawing blood and somehow lapping it up with its hooked beak, all while Zariel grimaced.

“Are you ok? Zariel—”

“It’s fine, Cat,” he said with a wince. “Sorry, I should’ve warned you.”

I covered my mouth with my hand. Damn. If anyone saw the blood on Zariel, they'd know what happened. That bird was going to leave a distinctive mark, with a hooked beak and all. I looked around the atrium. Were we alone? Yes, we were alone. Except for the birds. But something was off. Was someone watching? We had to go.

"Zariel ..."

"Thank you," Zariel said to the rook, as politely as thanking a favorite waitress. With measured movements Zariel guided the rook over to the window and opened the slit, which hung loose on a hinge. That was apparently it. The bird took off into the night, and with it, our message and our hope.

"We did it?" I asked.

"We did."

There was no point in staying to watch the bird—that was a job for the jealous rooks who weren't chosen. Instead, he took his clean hand in mine and led me out of the aviary and down the hall, away from the chattering birds, whose screeches when we left matched the frantic pace of my heart.

That couldn't have gone any better. The message was on its way, and no one stopped us. We still hadn't met anyone. We succeeded.

Yet I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

I frowned when we didn't go back the way we came and instead took a right at a fork in the tunnels, taking us deeper into the mountain, away from the path that would've let Zariel fly us down.

"Where are we going?" I asked. All of these tunnels were eerily similar, for all that

the carvings varied. There were only so many ways one could carve conquering, dancing angels. Though I had to give them credit for creativity.

“Do you trust me?” Zariel asked.

“Yes. Of course.”

“Do you trust that I will only act to protect you?”

My brow furrowed. “Yes ... why? ”

Zariel stared straight ahead. “I have an idea to keep you safe, to give you what protection I can. And to possibly keep us together. I spent most of the day thinking about it, and I’m afraid that tonight might be our only chance to do it. It could easily be now or never.”

An idea? A chance? What was he talking about? What could he possibly do—

“The runes,” I said.

He paused. “You’re my mate, bound to me. We can do things with magic that others cannot. And if you’re willing, I’d like to share them with you.”

Share his magic—angelic magic—with me? It made sense why he was offering—why wouldn’t he want to share his magic, such as it was, if it could keep me safe? At the very least, it would bring us closer, maybe let me know where he was. And it would be a part of him , something placed on me forever, no matter what happened with us.

“I’d have more experience for my dissertation,” I said, mostly because if I could count on one thing, it was being painfully practical. Hell, if I had the runes, I’d have

enough material for a dozen papers.

Zariel chuckled. “And that is why I treasure you. Your studies come first.”

“No, you come first. But the studies are a close second.”

“Fair enough.” He moved behind me and rubbed my back with his hands, careful to avoid touching me with his injured finger. God, what I wouldn’t give to have those hands someplace else at that moment. Someplace with bare skin.

“Are you willing, Cat?” he whispered in my ear. A tingle worked through me, my body quickly shifting to desire.

“Will it hurt?”

“... It’s bearable.”

That was exactly what my gynecologist told me before inserting my IUD. She lied. This, at least, would give me magic.

“What the hell,” I said, my mouth braver than my mind. “I’ll do it.”

Chapter twenty-six

Zariel

What I was preparing to do was unheard of. Possibly dangerous. And yes, it would anger the Artists beyond measure if they discovered it. As far as I knew, no angel had shared our magic with another creature. It may be impossible to share.

But Cat was my mate. My heart. If there was a single thing on this earth that I could give her, it was hers. If she were an angel, this would've been permitted without a second thought, and I wasn't about to deny her what was hers by right.

She was going to be the first non-angel to bear our magic.

There was no reason she couldn't have it, other than tradition. I never came across a single source that indicated that it was unsafe for her, or that the process was different. It was tradition, and not practicality, that created this custom. And the reality that it just might not work. If it did, it was possible that it was only the fact that she was my mate that permitted it.

But I had to try. Who knew what was going to happen? Meeting the High Artist reminded me that what we were doing had real consequences, ones I would protect her from at all costs.

Seemingly oblivious to the turmoil in my head, Cat turned to me and grinned, making my heart soar as if we were above the clouds once more. Those clouds where she was clutched tight around me, bringing me to release. Trusting me. I hardened under my

robes. And what did it matter that I was making no effort to hide it? I knew my way around this mountain better than I knew my childhood home—the odds of us encountering anyone here at this time of night were unlikely. Pretty much everyone was either in their rooms, or one of the communal halls. If we were back home, some would likely be flying, but flying outside of the mountain's vicinity was forbidden by the Artists, and few found flying in the ashen clouds to be anything but a poor substitute for the real thing.

This wasn't the world I was meant to be in with her. Oh, the places I'd take her if she were home with me. Lakes with flowers that bloomed under the surface, glistening under the placid water. Fields where one could see the millions of colored stars in the sky, glistening like perfect gems, and our moon that had its own people, beings we knew little of but loved to wonder at. Ancient buildings that were now all but abandoned, carved with languages and symbols forgotten even by us and made by creatures now lost to memory. Our world was old, far older than this one, with many secrets lost to time that had yet left such wonders.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked quietly. "You look ... sad."

"Not sad, exactly. It's just that there's so much I'd love to share with you, and I never will."

"Never say never," she said. "You're here with me, and that's a miracle unto itself." She squeezed my hand. "We live in a world where anything can happen."

She was right. I had to hope that someday, with her, I'd have everything that I dreamed of. Even if it wouldn't be in my original home.

A few minutes later we came to the familiar door that led to the black stone ceremony room. A familiar weight settled in my chest, heavy with the memories of what I had witnessed in here. The beings that took their last breaths, gifting me magic as they

lost their lives.

Cat touched my arm before I could open the door, stopping me. “Won’t they find us?”

“No,” I said. “Only a few Artists like to come here, and they usually come in the morning. It’s lit inside only out of habit, and the fact that any fire in there isn’t going to damage anything.” How could it, when the room and everything within it were stone? No, I was confident we wouldn’t be bothered—I wouldn’t have risked bringing her here otherwise. This wasn’t exactly a room we liked to visit without reason.

With Cat seemingly pacified, I led us into the room and took care in closing the door behind us. The stone trapped sound, making every noise seem extra muffled under our feet. This black hall of stone wasn’t the only ritual room my people had, but they were all the same, even the ones outside of this mountain. They were all made from the same black stone, they all had that balcony that lined the space just under the ceiling, and they all were lit by torches, the stone reflecting the light like a dark lake of fire.

“We have to do this here?” she asked. Despite her frown, her blue eyes sparkled from the torches’ glow.

“Yes, unfortunately. It’s the best way to ensure this works.” This place carried horrific memories, but the room was made the way it was for a reason—everything was for the magic.

She grabbed my other hand, giving them both an extra squeeze. “I trust you.” She leaned forward and kissed me, all her trust and affection placed into that tender gesture. Unwilling, I shifted, preparing to touch her. I wanted her. My need overrode all reason, all caution, the mate bond doing its job of making me think of nothing but

being buried inside her, claiming her. And I had other things to think of.

More important things .

“How will this work?” she asked once we separated, for now. Suspiciously, she eyed the room, surveying everything with her perceptive gaze.

I pulled out a small cup that I had tucked under my robes, one meant for holding a tiny mouthful of liquor to sip. “I will bleed into this, you will drink it, and I will take care of the rest.”

Cat paled, noticeable even in the dim light. “You’ll ... bleed? Zariel—”

I cocked my head. “Unless you prefer to drink from me directly?” I grinned, teasing as Cat’s eyes widened. “Some angels will drink directly from each other for this ritual, yes, but I figured that you’d rather drink from the cup.”

“It has to be blood?”

“Yes.”

“And not ... another substance?”

My cock fully hardened at the thought, and she noticed, biting her lips. “I ... I wish. But no. Our magic is all in the blood.” Fuck, I needed her. Now. No, I had to focus. This was an important ritual, normally done with supervision. Preparation. I had to focus.

She swallowed hard. “If I have to drink blood, the cup is perfect. I have no desire to be a vampire.”

I frowned. “You’ve met one?”

“They’re real?”

Unfortunately. “Another time—we don’t need to discuss those disgusting creatures now.” I took out a small knife that I used to cut fruit—a freshly sharpened one. I wasn’t absolutely sure that we were going to do this, but I didn’t want to pass up the opportunity, so I prepared.

I set the cup on the altar, placed the knife over my palm, and slit my hand. A hot fire tore through my skin. Damn, that was worse than the bird, that wound still fresh on my finger. Wincing, I let my hot blood trickle into the cup, a sticky red path roaming over my skin. Slowly, the cup filled, bit by bit. We didn’t need a lot, just a mouthful. But that little bit felt like a gallon when it was dripping out of me in a stinging stream.

“Zariel?” Cat asked, eyebrows knit together.

“I’m fine.” I was, but poor Cat seemed to be taking on a tinge of gray. I had cut carefully, knowing where to slice to obtain blood without going too deep. I did well—the cup was filling. Slowly.

Once the desired amount was in the cup—I had to squeeze out the last bits as the wound was already sealing—I placed the cut into my mouth to dull the pain and pulled out a roll of gauze.

“What else do you have in there?” Cat joked nervously. “Chocolate?”

“Unfortunately, no.” I smiled, just to show her that I was alright. What was a little blood in exchange for granting her some basic protection?

While I wound the fabric around my wound, I explained the rest of the process, enjoying the redness that bloomed on her face. The way her breath raced. Her scent wafted over me, washing me in thoughts of her and only her. The worst part was over, and the focus was shifting entirely. “Now,” I said, trying to keep the anticipation from my voice, “all you have to do is enjoy yourself.”

Cat stepped closer to me. “Is doing that necessary for the ritual, or is it something you added for yourself?”

“Would it be bad if I did?”

“No.” Cat’s eyes roamed around the room, at the overwhelming darkness that surrounded us. “But this is hardly the most romantic spot I can think of.”

“Well, it’s necessary, I’m happy to say—you’re gaining this magic by virtue of being my mate.”

“If we must,” she said, with a smile and a dramatic sigh.

“Yes.” Finally, I’d be able to do what I had spent the entire day anticipating. “We must.”

Pain forgotten, the blood safely resting on the altar away from us, my eyes roamed from her face to her breasts, to her abdomen ... every bit of her was something that I’d enjoy to the fullest. The sounds I’d elicit, the quivering I’d cause ... I was going to claim her, own her. This was my mate, the second half of me, and I would do whatever it took for us to be one. Forever.

Slowly, I approached her and took her into my arms, placing a solemn kiss on her forehead. She pressed against me and sighed, moving her legs so that she was rubbing herself on me, the damn fabric in the way. We were doing this for the magic, yes, but

that didn't mean I wasn't going to take my time squeezing every drop of pleasure from this that I could—for both of us.

In one smooth movement, I swept my arms under Cat's legs and set her on the altar. She laid back, on display, and watching me warily.

I stepped to the side, admiring the way the gauzy fabric laid against her form, revealing her curves. "Afraid?" I asked. "You shouldn't be. I'd never let anything harm you."

She thought for a second. "Nervous. I've never done any sort of magic before. Or seen anything like this." She rubbed her arms. "And I'm a little cold."

"Soon there's going to be no reason for either. The worst that will happen is nothing," I said confidently.

"You said the magic itself might hurt?"

I tried not to grimace. The thought of what was to come for her was awful, but in the long run it was for the best. Better pain from the magic than pain from the ash. "The runes will burn some, yes, as they form on your skin. That can't be avoided. If you like, we can—"

"No." She swallowed. "I'll do it. I'm going to guess that they will look like yours?"

"Yes." Probably.

"Good. I like the thought of having this—because it's yours."

She was brilliant, white and silver in the darkness, an offering displayed just for me. The light cascaded off her gown's gossamer fabric, making her sparkle like stars in

the clear night. Her nearly white hair was strewn over the black stone, like rays of moonlight against the void. That was what she was to me—light. Direction. Peace. How had I been so content before her, when I was missing half of myself?

“Alright,” I said. “Let’s begin.”

I retrieved the cup that held my blood and placed it on the altar closer to us, and finally, blissfully, I kissed her.

“Cat,” I whispered, the taste of her unraveling something latent within me. She tasted sweet, like winter’s air over a pristine forest. She returned my kiss and let me sit her upright, moving her lips languidly against mine. Nibbling on my lower lip, she took both hands and grabbed my head, pulling me towards her. Soft fingers wove through my hair, commanding me to move even closer, to obey her as she took what she wanted.

My wings flared up out of instinct, and I almost knocked the cup over. Despite my best efforts, there were still little drops of blood on my clothes, staining them in a trail of red and already fading to brown. What if someone noticed? What if someone asked what happened?

But Cat was here—and wanted me. Who cared? I’d lie and say that I fell and cut myself on the ash.

Cat let out a little gasp, pulling me back to what mattered—her. I gently laid her back on the stone altar, the focal point of the magic, her skirts in a beautiful disarray, as if she were a princess displayed in the snow. Thousands had died in this exact place over the years, their deaths serving magic. But Cat was pristine, and innocent. Darkness lies at the depths of knowledge, and magic could only be worked with a painful price. To be an angel was to live on the balance between enlightenment and devastation, power and corruption. Beast and Artist. And now, dressed in white

diaphanous fabric and splayed before me, the black stone altar stark under her pale hair and skin, she embodied that very conflict.

“You’re so beautiful,” I said, running a finger over her face and down her cheek, to her neck, and down the valley between her breasts. She shivered underneath my touch, my fingers drawing a delightful trail of goosebumps over her skin. Her breath quickened when I lowered my mouth to follow what my fingers had started.

With my name on her lips, her legs shifted, and I took that as an invitation to lift her skirts up, revealing more and more of that smooth skin. I was already hard—painfully hard—but this wasn’t something I was going to rush. Last night was too hurried for my taste, spurred on by the desperate need to claim my mate for the first time. Tonight, I’d take my time, and that would involve tasting every bit of her, savoring everything.

I moved away from her face and crouched so that my head was above her center, my mouth hovering just over her. I breathed onto her core through the fabric, letting my breath warm her chilled skin. A heady scent welcomed me, hers mixed with mine, an echo from the days when we angels were desperate creatures, driven solely by our instincts.

Instincts that I appreciated once I lifted the fabric, exposing everything. What a perfect sight, those lips so sweet and beckoning. Her breath caught, her legs shifting in anticipation. I didn’t have a chance to study her last night, all of her, and I was going to rectify that now.

“May I?” I asked, tracing a finger along her already slick slit, and was rewarded with a little jerk from her hip.

“Please,” she said, voice rushed.

Using my index finger on each hand, I explored every bit of her—utterly flawless—admiring for a long moment before I took her into my mouth. I never understood why one would want to do such a thing, until her. I needed to consume all of her, in every way that I could.

“Zariel ...” she moaned after a short gasp of surprise, covering her mouth with her hand. Her pleasure heightened my own. There was nothing but her sweet taste, the song of her gasps and moans, the way she twitched and thrashed when I did something she particularly liked. Her wet center fascinated me, and I used my finger to part the outer flesh before driving into her, making her clench. So tight, and yet she had managed to take all of me. Would take all of me.

“Is ... am I supposed to come during the ritual?” she asked between gasps.

“Yes,” I said, lifting my head to smile at her. Her hair was disheveled, her skin a pale pink and lightly covered with sweat. Her robes were askew, one perfect breast visible. “Now would be too soon. And, unfortunately, you will have to climax with me inside you.” I could bring her to the brink twice—I was more than capable of it. I’d enjoy it. But my understanding was that the magic demanded the first time. It demanded craving. Need.

“Fine by me.”

She pushed herself up, and slowly removed her dress. One strap after another fell over her shoulders, baring her breasts above the clouds of her fine dress. She then knelt on the altar and pushed it down the rest of the way, revealing herself.

My mouth went dry.

Then she swung her legs over and slipped off the altar, landing on the stone ground with a soft thud, letting the dress fall the rest of the way to her feet.

The rush of blood filled my ears with my heartbeat, and a thin layer of sweat broke out under my robes as she faced me, entirely naked. A queen of snow, beautiful and pristine. Her normally perfect, braided hair was mussed, her face flushed. Yet she commanded me, her loyal subject, with a mere look—I stayed exactly where I was.

She approached me, and before I could react, she knelt with her head barely reaching my waist, moving and parting my robes so that I sprang free. The cool air hit my cock, and if I thought I was hard before, that was nothing compared to what I was feeling now, with the sight of her, combined with the tenderness with which she stroked me in a languid rhythm.

Wait, was she—

“Cat, you don’t have to—” Any protest died as she took me into her mouth, sucking and rubbing my shaft, spreading her spit to help her hands glide over me. So perfectly smooth. I cursed. She smiled with me still in her mouth, and before I knew what I was doing I ran my fingers through her hair, adjusting her so that she went over me in an even rhythm.

I released her and she kept that same pace, and suddenly my garments were far too warm. I threw off the robes, letting them crumple on the ground. My wings flared harder behind me, threatening to lift both of us into the air. Her hands gently worked their way through the little feathers surrounding my cock, teasing them and making them send little jolts of pleasure that made me desperate.

Damn her. If she kept this up, I’d come far too soon, and we’d have to re-do the ritual at a later date. I had to do something. Now.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I bent down and guided her up, taking her mouth in mine as I carried her back to the altar, her legs around my waist and her sweet wetness touching my skin. My cock.

Carefully, I rested her on the altar so that she sat upright, both feet braced on the black stone. A moment later I joined her, kneeling in front of her. I picked up the cup filled with my blood with one hand, spreading her legs with the other, unable to resist the urge to run my fingers gently over her swollen flesh.

“Drink this,” I said, gesturing with the cup, careful not to let it slosh over the side. “And when your pleasure threatens, don’t fight it. The mate bond is doing what it is supposed to. Trust it.” She nodded. We didn’t have to hit our climax at the same time for this to work, but it had to be close. Our souls were what was connecting—not just our bodies. Everything else was just designed to help the process go easier. The important part was that we were open to each other, accepting what each had to offer. But the window where that acceptance would be at its peak to allow the magic to transfer was small.

Cat stared at the cup in her hand for a few seconds, swirling my blood, and then she drank. And swallowed. And set the cup down. A drop of my blood ran out of the corner of her mouth, a brilliant red against her skin.

“Done,” she said with a grin, wiping away the blood.

“Lay back,” I said.

A moment later I lifted her legs, positioning her so that I could access what I needed, rubbing my cock on her wetness. As soon as she braced herself, I entered her, the mate bond and the magic already tugging into me. With a small cry she grabbed me, pulling me closer. As if I didn’t need her enough before ...

Her tight heat gripped me, clenching impossibly hard against my thrusts. With the luxury of being on the ground, I leaned us back, admiring how I worked in and out of her, an angle I was unable to see last night. How she stretched to take me. The way her wetness coated me, letting me slide effortlessly.

I rubbed the nub between her legs. And then, once I was rewarded with her moans, I slammed into her, harder and harder. I couldn't hold back—too much was at stake for me to hold back. I had craved her since the moment I left her last night, thinking of doing exactly this with every spare thought. Despite everything that was around us, I yearned to be with her once more, to have her wrapped around me. Her mouth had worked me so close already, it wasn't fair.

I was done being patient. I needed her. Now . I wouldn't be satisfied until I had filled her, and even then, it would only be temporary. I'd need to take her again. And again.

And Cat—Cat was falling apart, biting on her hand to keep from crying out in pleasure. I memorized her, determined to remember the look on her face so that I could recall it later. Dream of it. There were so many things I was going to do to her, my gentle mate. So many places and ways I would enjoy her. We hadn't even scratched the surface of how I could elicit pleasure from her. The things we would explore. Together.

I wasn't going to be parted from her. I refused to allow it. No matter what the Artists decided, or what the High Artist tried to do .

But in order to keep just that from happening, I had to work some of the most complicated magic I'd ever had to do. Magic I wasn't even sure I could do.

It was difficult, lost inside her as I was, but I focused on my runes, calling their magic to life. Like a pot starting to simmer, I felt their magic rise within me, burning, pushing against my skin, like a boil threatening to burst—and then it left me and poured into her in a steady golden stream, like exhaling in a winter's night.

She shivered, and suddenly cried out, gripping me tightly as her release took over her.

Perfect.

I let go of the last bit of my restraint and let my desires take control. If not for the mate bond, it would've been next to impossible to focus on carnal pleasure with my skin on fire, but the bond did what it was supposed to. I was in its thrall, and I allowed it.

I thrust into her, again and again, tasting my own blood on her lips as I spent inside her, forgetting where I was. Forgetting my name. My hands rested on each side of her as I hovered over her, bracing us as I worked to my climax, pouring into her with a guttural cry, her own moans of pleasure in my ear.

And then everything cleared. She was underneath me, my head resting on her damp chest, her legs still gripping my hips. Her eyes closed and her moans changed their song—now they were not from pleasure .

My love ...

I sat up so that I could see her stomach, and the runes that were forming along the base of her abdomen, bright red lines on her pale flesh.

"It's alright, my dear one," I said to her, rubbing my fingers through her hair. "It will pass. Soon." I gently pulled out of her. My body still hummed with pleasure, but I could take no joy in it, not while she was in pain.

I offered my hand and she took it, gripping it with a fierce strength.

"Zariel," she moaned, "it burns."

"I know." I kissed her head. "Be brave, my love. It is working. It won't be long." If only I could bear this for her. I'd do it gladly, a thousand times over. But I couldn't. Magic came from pain and blood, and if she wanted it, she had to pay the price.

Like someone was branding her from the inside, the runes pushed against the skin, lifting to the surface and emanating a soft glow, her moans mellowing to soft cries. Despite her misery, I sighed with relief.

“Cat, it’s working. It worked.”

If she heard she gave no indication, her eyes clenched shut as she emitted harsh breaths.

She had my magic—the ritual actually worked. Now she was truly an angel’s mate. Her magic wouldn’t be as strong as mine, but she’d have it. We were now bound in one of the most intimate ways. I was told that if she didn’t accept me, didn’t have her body and heart open to me, this wouldn’t have succeeded. But it did. She was mine, just as I was hers. And the magic ... my runes were a meagre protection, but one never knew when any gifts would be useful.

A couple minutes later she fell silent, her runes now complete. The embers under her skin were a perfect match of mine, in position, size, and angle. “Is it over?” she asked, her red face beaded with sweat.

“Yes. They will never feel like that again. They will occasionally burn, but nothing like initially receiving them.”

“Good.” She sat up with my help and looked at her stomach. Gently, she poked at a rune. “For some reason I thought they’d be warmer.”

“They usually won’t be.” I inspected her face. “Are you alright?”

“Yes.” She chuckled. “I’m just envisioning trying to explain this to Silv.”

“If he’s your friend, he’ll understand.”

“Oh, he will. But that won’t stop him from being horrified. Admit it—these are a bit unnerving. I’m a human glowstick.”

“I’m ... not sure what that is, but I think you look perfect.” I leaned forward and gave her a long kiss. We were still naked, spent, I had a bloody hand, and she had a drop of dried blood smeared on her face. Not to mention she was still flushed, worn from the exhaustion of having the magic forged in her.

When we parted, she stared at me for a long moment, and then asked, “Can I ... can I take a bath?”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:16 am

Chapter twenty-seven

Cat

“Z ariel, I’m fine,” I said, resisting the urge to flick water at him. “You don’t have to bathe me.”

“Who said anything about having to?” The angel was crouched next to the tub in his winter-like rooms, his wings closed behind him. He was rubbing my hand, working the soap into a lather and caressing every inch while I soaked, relishing how the hot water soothed all my aches. The bandage was already off his hand—angels apparently stopped bleeding faster than humans. It didn’t take much imagination to picture the angel who had just an hour before had worked his cock into me, his wings splayed open as he took me on the altar, his corded arms holding himself up as he exerted himself, focused on pleasuring me. Tasting me.

And the magic. I could still taste his blood in my mouth, shockingly sweet and warm. Did his blood taste so good because he was an angel? Or was it because he was my mate? The runes on my stomach glowed beneath the water and soapy bubbles, a sign that what we had attempted worked.

“I want you to join me,” I said coyly, patting the silver bath. “This tub is big enough for two—it was made for someone your size.”

“And I want to take care of you.” He grinned. “It seems we’re at an impasse.”

“You’re injured. It’s me who should be taking care of you.”

“You just received your first magic. It can be ... a lot.” I moved to sit upright and he slapped a little water onto my chest before he kissed me on the head, gently nudging me back against the metal sides. “Nope. None of that. Your only task tonight is to be worshipped, bathed, and then tucked into bed and forced to sleep.”

“I’m not sick.”

“I never said you were.”

“So join me.”

“No.” He smirked. “If you truly, truly insist, you can repay me tomorrow. There’s a certain something that you did with your tongue that I’m curious about.”

I leaned my head back and admired the white ice-crusting ceiling. “Deal.” I looked forward to it, having that powerful angel completely under my control, while at the same time knowing that I was the one making him feel that way. My core burned already, still sore from taking him tonight. Did we really have to wait ?

A few moments passed before he asked, “Do you feel any different? It will take some time before you learn how to master the illusion ruin, but you should be able to sense ... me. And her.”

That’s right. I should’ve been able to sense where he or any of his blood relations were. Unfortunately, since this came from angels and I was sort of grandfathered in, he told me this rune couldn’t detect any of my family. Probably for the best. I had a half-brother who was obsessed with taxidermy and a plethora of social-media-obsessed cousins. The last thing I needed was their locations popping into my head.

Though ... what could I do? I closed my eyes. Zariel was next to me, as bright in my mind’s eye as a shining beacon. Whether it was the rune detecting his presence, or the

fact that he was massaging my forearm and making me wish he was massaging other things, I couldn't say.

I took a deep breath and tried to block out everything, and sense if there was something else .

At first, there was nothing but the warm water lapping against my skin, Zariel's gentle grip, and the rustling of his wings against the floor. And then I felt it. It was a tug against my senses, dragging my attention downward, far beneath us. A sensation like someone was watching me, only it pulled .

"Do you feel something?" he asked.

"I think so? It almost feels like someone is calling my name, though there's no sound. Underneath us. "

"Yes," he said, somehow both grim and proud. "It worked."

I opened one eye. "You sound relieved."

"I am. I'd never have put you in danger, but I had no way of knowing if the magic would actually transfer. The good thing about magic is that most of the time, there's no result instead of a bad one. Thus, I figured it couldn't hurt to try." With his wings suddenly peppier than they were a few minutes ago, he lathered up his hands and proceeded to massage my shoulders, and I grinned at how he was subtly moving his hands lower, towards my breasts. I relaxed, admiring once again the way that the ash made even this bathroom seem like a winter wonderland. With the "snow" gathered on the walls, even the tub—etched with pine boughs and holly—embraced the idea that this place embodied the beauty of winter, without the cold.

"What's next?" I asked. "I have your magic, and we sent word to the elves, but now

what?”

“We wait. And you can focus on your studies once more.” He kissed the top of my wet head. “There’s no point in starting a conflict with the High Artist, not without support, and we may get lucky—other angels may not agree with his plan and stop him themselves.”

I flicked at a bubble. “Something tells me he isn’t dumb enough to try something like this unless he was sure that he’d have the support. ”

“He isn’t.” Zariel sighed, his movements slowing. “The fact that he obtained this position at all, when his father was not the last High Artist, is nothing short of astounding.”

“Wait”?the water in the tub sloshed as I stirred?“there’s a disgruntled High Artist-in-waiting somewhere?”

“No. She’s dead.” A suspiciously long pause. “As are her two brothers.”

“Lovely. And convenient.” If I wasn’t already thinking that there was something to the High Artist that gave Aniela a good reason for trying to kill him, that definitely sealed it.

Zariel ignored me and continued, but not before giving me a look that said you have no idea . “There is no point in worrying or trying to make further plans. We cannot act until we have more information, and until the time is right. In fact, planning anything now only risks discovery.” He ran his knuckles down the side of my face, the water drops moving over my skin. “Don’t worry, my heart, we will be together.” His voice soothed me, lulling me into forgetting everything. “Even if I have to leave the mountain to do so.”

“You’d give up everything?”

“In an instant. There’s nothing without you.” A soft hum of pleasure went through me. Contentment.

“And if the Artists won’t let you?” I asked.

He paused for a moment. “Nothing will be able to stop me.”

I turned to him, welcoming the press of his lips against mine. He was right—without him, there was nothing. Bond or not, I cared about him. More than that, I couldn’t bear the thought of waking without him near me, of going through my life without him in it. He was the light I didn’t know I was missing, rendering my world brilliant and complete.

My chest hurt at the thought, and then I shuddered. Imagine having Dimmy instead in his place ...

“It will be alright,” Zariel said, his wings fluttering. “Banish whatever thoughts are clouding your mind and relax. Whatever fears you have, they will never come true.”

Chapter twenty-eight

Zariel

For the second morning in a row, I woke with Cat nestled against me, her body stirring with each breath. She was shorter than most angels, and fit next to me perfectly, cupped against my side. Without wings, it meant that her back was pressed right against my chest, her heart echoing the beat of my own. The ability to have her nestled so perfectly against me was undoubtedly a perk of her not having wings.

Though, that made me wonder ...

Would I be able to enter her while lying this close together? I shifted my hips, satisfied as she ground against me, seemingly instinctual. I grinned when I managed to position myself behind her. Yes, yes, I could. We could—

A knock sounded at my door. No one would bother me this early unless there was a good reason. I rarely was bothered by anybody at all.

Groaning, I sat up, doing my best not to disturb her. After quickly draping my thick robe over my shoulders and tying it modestly around my waist, I made it to the door and opened it with an inelegant grunt. "Yes?" I asked, before I registered who it was. And once I did, I frowned.

"Damn, newly mated angels really are feral," Cael said, looking me over. "When's the last time you brushed your hair?"

“It’s not even the first bell,” I said. I peered down the hall—no one else was around. “And I’m not on duty today.”

“I know.” He squirmed. “You think I wanted to come here for a social call?” He looked me over again. “I should be happy that you’re wearing clothes.”

“You’re lucky that I like you, or this door would be the only company you’re going to get.”

Cael didn’t laugh like I expected. In fact, he took a deep breath, his expression morose. “Father asked me to fetch you. And the human,” he said. “Cat, I mean. ‘Human’ was his word.”

My heart sank. “This isn’t good, is it?”

He winced. “I don’t know. I doubt it. When is it ever good when he’s involved? Prepare for anything, my friend. It’s not like he’d say something to me, and I’m supposed to be his heir. You know what he’s like. ”

I did. And I also knew Cael had absolutely no interest in leadership, and barely had any interest in being in the mountain. Prior to the merge, he had wanted to work in the city managing accounts for a glass merchant, of all things. Whether that was a true interest or one he adopted merely to spite his father, I couldn’t say.

“I’m guessing he wants to see us now?”

“That would be best.”

Damn.

I said farewell to Cael after he told me where to find the High Artist, and then I

gently woke Cat, disappointed that I could only kiss her awake. Quickly, we dressed, barely speaking. There was no time. If the High Artist wanted to see us this early, no good would come from making him wait.

“Maybe he just wants to reassign you,” she whispered to me while we made our way to the tunnels that led to the main atrium, which now had a smattering of angels starting their day. We’d be able fly to where the High Artist waited—a small mercy.

“That doesn’t explain why he wants you .”

“Maybe something happened with the humans, and he just wants to talk to me.”

“True. That is a possibility.” Though, Cael should have known if that was the case.

There was also the possibility that neither of us dared mention—that the High Artist outsmarted us. What if he discovered the letter to the elves? Worse, what if he knew that we discovered what he had planned?

For all my knowledge, I was a fool. I should’ve stayed out of the High Artist’s way from the start. How could the two of us expect to change anything? I couldn’t help my sister, and I was powerless now. I endangered Cat, I risked—

“We don’t know what’s going to happen yet,” Cat said, placing a comforting hand on my arm. I covered it with my own, wishing I could protect her from it all. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

“I know.”

“Maybe I’ll be able to take you to Wawa tonight.”

“Who is that?”

“More like ‘what,’ and that ‘what’ is a delightful reservoir of everything a PhD student needs for survival.”

I grimaced. “Survival? And you go to this place on purpose?”

“Yes. Absolutely.” She placed her head on my arm for a moment and grinned. “See, no matter what happens, we will end today perfectly happy. And full of coffee.”

Several minutes later we reached the High Artist’s study, the same place where he had lectured me about bringing Cat into the mountain. It was weeks ago, but it may as well have been a lifetime. We were allowed inside the study by stern guards, the wooden door securely closed behind us, leaving us trapped. Oh, no, we weren’t alone—we were with the High Artist, two of his minion Artists, three guards—and Cael. And not just any Artists—Gadriel.

Gadriel.

I ground my teeth and the angel didn’t bother to hide his scowl. His hand was still wrapped in a pristine bandage from where I stabbed him. It wasn’t that deep of a wound, surely, he was just pretending to milk sympathy. Not that he deserved anything for daring to touch my mate. I should have stabbed him deeper.

Though if Gadriel was here ...

Regardless, this wasn’t good.

He glared at Cat, and she stepped even closer to me, holding my hand, trusting that I’d keep her safe. I squeezed it with a reassurance I didn’t feel. Like we were preparing to walk off a cliff, we ignored Gadriel and made our way closer to the High Artist’s desk, stopping when we reached the dark wood.

Long moments passed in silence, everyone in the room weighing each other. Staring. Judging.

What was going to happen? Why were we here?

“Zariel. Catalina,” the High Artist said, his face impassive. “I have unfortunate news—the humans have demanded your return. Aggressively, I might add.”

She froze and a jolt went through me.

He said it. He actually said it. She had to leave. We expected something like this, but for it to actually happen was as if a dagger twisted in my chest. Cat and I would have to talk, make a plan—

“Now,” the High Artist continued, “I regret that I must insist that you leave this mountain. Immediately.”

“High Artist,” I said, doing my best to ignore the glee on Gadriel’s face, “surely we can take a couple hours—”

“No. It must be done now. If we wish to maintain relations, they were quite insistent that we do this.” The High Artist’s face softened, and for a moment I saw the man from my childhood who would ensure I had special presents on my birthday. The one who was my father’s friend. From his place at the side of the room, Cael frowned, but he did nothing to interfere. “I will ensure that Catalina has an escort past the clouds,” the High Artist continued, “and there will be humans waiting on the other side of the ash to take her home.”

“No need for an escort,” I said. “I’m going with her.” And I wasn’t coming back.

“No. You’re not.”

My chest wrenched and I resisted clenching my fists. That primal growl stirred inside me, threatening to destroy what stood in my way. Who was he to tell me I couldn't follow my mate? He had no right. None. "I am not bound to serve here by decree or oath," I said, letting the venom slip into my voice, "nor am I a prisoner—I am free to leave."

The High Artist's face turned to stone, all while Gadriel couldn't contain his wide smile. Cael's eyes widened, but I knew better than to expect him to intervene. He couldn't. I wouldn't let him. This was between me and the High Artist.

"We are at war," the High Artist said, his wings twitching, "and I am the authority. You will not be leaving this mountain." At war? What was he talking about? "I've allowed you far too many liberties thanks to the fondness I have for your father," he said, "and I even let you keep a human mate. But that is done. It is time for her to leave."

"There is no law that permits you to keep my mate from me," I insisted. "And every law that mandates the opposite."

"We are not in our kingdom," the High Artist repeated. "She is not one of us. The humans are demanding her return, and they shall have it. Would you risk the rest of us for your own selfish reasons? Your going with would only complicate matters. The humans are furious enough as it is."

"It will be alright," Cat said, speaking up. Her voice reached me, a soothing calm in the turmoil threatening to burst in my soul. "Zariel can go with me to Princeton. It will be a surprise to everyone, but it won't be a problem. Not for long."

"And you think I'm going to take your word on such a complex issue? You have caused enough problems already." The High Artist snapped his fingers. "It is time. No point in dragging this out further. For any of us." The guards moved towards us.

“You’re not going to let us say goodbye?” I asked, somehow pulling Cat closer to me .

“You’ve had the last five minutes.” The High Artist shifted. “That is enough. Be glad that I gave you this, and an explanation.” Gadriel smirked, and a flare of anger shot through me.

They were already taking Cat away—what was wrong with a little murder?

“Zariel—” Cat said, right as a guard grabbed her arms and tried to pry her away. Out of instinct I growled and lunged toward him, only to be restrained by two other guards, whose fingers dug into my arms. She broke away from me with a cry, her face contorted in grief. It was as if my soul had suddenly split in two.

“Let me go,” I thrashed in their grip, not caring that my feathers and wings bent, twisting. If I lost her, I lost everything.

“You’re making this worse for yourself,” one of the guards suddenly said in my ear. Not a guard. Cael. “This can be fixed later,” he said, pleading. “Trust me. Please.”

His words made sense, but every instinct I had wanted to rip him apart, to watch his blood fly through the air, along with everyone else in this room. My vision turned to a sea of red, and I could detect nothing but their heartbeats, their vulnerabilities. My mate was being ripped from me—they were hurting her. I’d let myself be pried apart to a thousand pieces before I let them do so. I would make them pay.

I would—

And then my vision went black, and I lost everything.

Chapter twenty-nine

Zariel

I opened my eyes to darkness. Darkness, screams, moans of despair, and the rank scent of decay. After only a few breaths I couldn't tell which was worse—the sounds, or the pained hollowness that occurred when they stopped. My head pounded, jolting through my body with each heartbeat. My head was sore where something had hit me—bastards probably knocked me unconscious. It wasn't Cael. He could be a brute when we sparred, but he didn't have it in him to actually hurt me. Not unless he had no other choice ...

Where was I?

Where was Cat?

Cat? She wasn't in the mountain. My rune told me that much .

I sat upright, and instantly returned to the stone ground. My cry joined those of the other prisoners. Fuck, my head hurt. Breathe. I needed to breathe. Let the pain fade.

Slowly my vision adjusted, and I could make out a dim light from the small gaps in the door that opened to the hall. The solid stone walls surrounded me, and the glow from the ash that could normally be depended on above ground was barely noticeable here. Above ground had the beauty of winter—here it was just cold. I shivered from something else entirely when I finished looking around the room. The prison's signature saw was chained to the corner, a gift to a prisoner who would hack off a

wing or limb to be free.

I really was in the prison, under the mountain. Why? Why was I here ? What did I do?

I attacked when they took Cat away, yes, but any angel would have done the same. It was one reason why our laws took such pains to make sure mates could stay together, if they wished, especially during the early years when emotions governed all. Many angels would have done the same thing. Many would've done much worse.

Groaning, I rubbed my eyes. There was no point in yelling for help, or trying to get out. I had lived and labored in this mountain for years. Escape was impossible.

“Well, took you long enough to wake,” Gadriel said. I rolled over to find his sickening smug face pressed against the narrow row of bars. How long had he been standing there, waiting to see me discover him? Did he watch me wake and fall? How was he involved in Cat being taken from me?

“What do you want?” I asked, rubbing my head and sitting up. It would do no good to show him how I really felt—furious and desperate to get back to Cat. Was that why I was here, because the High Artist knew I'd go after her?

Gadriel crossed his arms and leaned against the bars. “You know, you probably would've been left alone, with your little human, if you weren't so damn nosy and oblivious at the same time. The High Artist was curious to see what would happen with the human, and if she could be of any use to us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Did you really think that no one would notice one of the rooks missing?”

Oh. That .

When I didn't answer, Gadriel continued, "Now, what we can't figure out is exactly who you sent a message to, and why. Who are you bringing into our affairs, little traitor?"

"Traitor?"

"What else should I call you? You're the one who decided to try to interfere with the High Artist's plan to take us home. And since this mountain is all that remains of our world, he is the king."

"And you want him to become a god?"

Far from being stunned, Gadriel's lips curled. "So you did figure that part of the plan out. How much does your human know, hmm? "

"She doesn't understand our magic," I said. "I tried. She's my mate, but she doesn't understand such things. She's only a human." A pang went through me at insulting Cat, but the last thing I needed to admit was that she knew the High Artist's plan nearly as well as I did. She needed to get home and tell someone what was occurring, but would she? Maybe the humans would help us stop the High Artist. Maybe there was a way they could—

"You're an awful liar, Zariel," Gadriel said. "Lucky for your mate, the High Artist decided that she'd cause more problems for us with the humans if she never went back than if she told stories of an angel becoming a god. No one is going to believe her." He chuckled grimly. "I'm sure she saw your runes—that's going to sound crazy enough. Angels, with burning skin? If she starts talking about an angel becoming a god, then they're going to assume the ash did something to her and that will be that." At least he confirmed they didn't know about Cat's magic. One small mercy.

There was something else going on. Confident people typically didn't waste their time toying with their captives, explaining their reasoning. Sure, some gloating was expected, but this was beyond that. It was like I was a splinter he couldn't leave alone. Was he trying to convince me, or himself?

"If you're so confident that this plan is going to work," I asked, "and that the High Artist will take us home, then why are you concerned with what the humans think? We'll be gone before they know what's going to happen."

"Insurance," Gadriel said. "This spell hasn't been attempted in thousands of years. Last thing we want is a missing or dead human if we need their goodwill." While I was very curious about how, exactly, it had been attempted, I wasn't about to ask Gadriel. I was more curious about the last time it succeeded.

I closed my eyes. Bittersweet relief flooded me—Cat was safe and going home. I couldn't be with her, but at least she was far from here. She wouldn't be harmed, as long as the ritual didn't do something ... unexpected.

"Do I dare ask why I'm in here?" I asked. "I'm assuming it's to keep me from following her."

"Oh, yes. That's part of it. Do you like your accommodations?"

"The finest prison I've ever been in."

"Luckily for you, it will be the only one. See, that spell needs certain sacrifices, if you remember. And it turns out that an angel would fit that role perfectly."

My stomach twisted. Ah. Well, that was somehow both expected—and not.

"The other Artists will never accept you murdering me without being properly judged

and sentenced,” I said. “I’ve done nothing.” There were other angels in the prison, yes, but I wasn’t about to remind him of that .

“Incorrect.” Gadriel was practically giggling. “After we informed your mate that she had to leave, you tried to kill the High Artist. Our guards barely stopped you in time. A shame, really, that you were unable to control your temper. It seems to be inherent in your family.”

The blood drained from my face. Aniela. They were going to do to me what they did to Aniela—but worse. What actually happened to her? Why did the High Artist remove her, send her here? Why did she admit she was guilty? Just how deep did his treachery go, and for how long? He was my father’s friend— why was he doing this to us?

“I think I’ll leave you for now,” Gadriel said. He clapped, not bothering to restrain his glee. “I’m not sure how much time you have left, but it’s best that the time be spent in silence, don’t you agree? Time while you can think exactly about how you ended up here.”

Chapter thirty

Cat

How could that—brutally ripping me from his arms—be the end of my time in the Ashen Mountain? How could that be the last time I would be allowed to see Zariel? What were they doing to him? Was he safe? Was he in his wintery paradise, pouring over manuscripts, or was he hurt?

This was a nightmare, it had to be. I'd wake up at any moment.

... Right?

I cried and screamed as I was hauled out of the mountain, not caring that angels stopped and stared as I passed. I kept crying as the guard flew me through the ashen clouds, clutching me roughly against him. My gauzy robes caught on his armor, the edges cutting my skin. My ears popped from plummeting from such heights, the wind tossing my hair into snarls and knots.

My protests and howls ended up being a good thing—they hid the fact that the ash clouds didn't burn me, not like they used to. Zariel's magic, his gift to me, had worked. Mostly. The clouds were uncomfortable, but they no longer felt as if they were tearing my skin and setting it aflame. Without the magic of the interior of the Ashen Mountain to negate the effects of the ash, I was instead left with stings, as if I had merely received a hard slap. Zariel was right—I had his magic, but a weaker version of it.

There was no way I'd reveal our secret to them . I had a feeling that if I did, I'd never be allowed to leave.

“Here,” the angel said when we landed at the mountain's base with a thud, just outside the ashen clouds. I squirmed out of the angel's arms right as he practically tossed me on the rough ground. I caught my fall and squinted, staring at the bright morning sky for the first time in weeks. By now, the season had passed fall and turned to the drab of winter, which was mild compared to the weather of the Ashen Mountain. After a world that was nothing but snow and light, what surrounded me was overwhelmingly brown and gray. Yet the sun almost blinded me, my eyes blinking hard while they tried to adjust—I hadn't been in direct sunlight for weeks. I was really back, wasn't I? We were on a side of the mountain that didn't connect to a road. I was near a brook, and thanks to the mountain dismantling a lot of the roads, I'd have a bit of a walk before I came across anyone. A lonely walk.

Something was wrong. What happened to the people who were supposed to be waiting for me?

“Here?” I asked, turning around.

The angel was already gone, flying back to the mountain and soon hidden by the clouds. For the first time since I left, I was truly alone. No Zariel, no angels, and no humans. There wasn't even a pigeon to greet me. I crossed my arms, thankful that the angels' clothing was warmer than it looked.

The High Artist lied. No one asked for me to come back, did they? That was just an excuse to make me leave. I turned to look at the mountain, which was nearly hidden by the ashen clouds. Zariel was in there, somewhere. He'd find his way to me, someday. I couldn't worry, not now, not when I had to get home first. Even if the humans didn't ask for me back, people would be looking for me by now. Silv would be worried.

I gripped my skirts, lifting the gauzy material out of the mud, and stepped forward, wincing as the wet soil soaked through my fabric flats. God, I hated wet feet. I hated it so much. And it was windy, far too windy. And I was dressed like I belonged in a nativity scene. I had my own problems—I couldn't think of Zariel.

Zariel would be fine. Now that I was gone, the angels had no reason to be mad at him. He'd be left alone.

Right ?

Gadriel had seemed so smug when the High Artist announced that I was leaving. Gadriel likely knew about the High Artist's plans, considering he was so far up the High Artist's ass he was basically a feathery hemorrhoid. The ritual required seven deaths—could one of those be an angel? Surely, they'd use the other creatures in the prison, and not an angel—not that that was better, all things considered. But Zariel had been a pain to the High Artist. And there was still the fact that the High Artist had this plan in place at all—Zariel wasn't just going to relax and let him do it. And they just happened to find a reason to send me away right as we figured so much out.

Maybe I was reacting over nothing. Maybe Zariel was fine. Lonely, but fine. Maybe the High Artist wouldn't be able to do the spell at all and their plan was just talk. Zariel would go back to his manuscripts and scrolls and then he'd find me when he had the chance.

Right?

I stopped and closed my eyes, smelling the sweet decaying earth that came right before the heart of winter. There was nothing but the scent, the wind, and my self-imposed darkness. Gently, I touched the lower part of my stomach, tracing what I could not see. What would the rune tell me? Could it tell me anything? Behind me, from inside the mountain, I felt two different tugs against my heart. Two that were

oddly close together, considering the height of the mountain and where Zariel normally stayed. Two that were surely below ground.

Fuck.

Without thinking, I turned around and rushed back to the silvery chaos, towards the Ashen Mountain. Desperately, I used the flimsy fabric to cover my face as I plunged into the ashen clouds. The clouds would burn and batter me, but I'd live. The fabric was thin enough that I could see, to a point—well enough to make it to a mountain at any rate. Mountains were hard to miss.

I had lost it. I had actually lost it. What if I was wrong? The rune may not work as well as we thought. The angels might find me and imprison me. Yet I kept walking, even as I hissed from the stinging ash, like thousands of mosquitos having their way with me. I had to keep going, because there were only two options that laid before me that I would accept—

Best case was that I'd leave the mountain again, knowing that Zariel was fine.

But, if I went in there and found anything else, there was no way I was going to leave Zariel to face this alone.

Chapter thirty-one

Zariel

“Who is my new neighbor?” a scraggly female voice hissed from the cell next to mine. “Must be someone important, considering your visitor. Another angel, perhaps? Oh, that would be delightful. I haven’t had an angel next to me in years, not since he—”

“Silence,” I snapped. I stared at the ceiling, not that there was much of anything else to stare at in the perpetual darkness. How much time had passed? Not long. Maybe a couple hours. I didn’t even have dripping water to help me count the time—the only cue I had was my hunger, which wasn’t as intense as it should’ve been. Prison tended to stifle the appetite.

How much time did I have before the High Artist attempted the ritual? Probably not long. My imprisonment would raise questions, unimportant as I was, and the High Artist wasn’t being so secretive for nothing. If Gadriel’s ranting was any indication, he couldn’t afford to have everyone know his true plan until it was too late. Too many variables, too many angels who may protest. Too many who could stop him while he was still vulnerable. Would Cael try? He was probably trying already, but the High Artist didn’t fully trust him where I was concerned, and he was likely too watched to do anything.

Who was I trying to fool? No one who had access to the High Artist cared what happened to me, other than Cael. I was a traitor’s brother. I was nobody. And I had brought a human into our home, right when our situation was at its most precarious.

Maybe some would think my fate harsh, but we weren't known for indulging the whims of those who upset things. And I had upset things. Today it was a human—what new horrors would I bestow tomorrow?

But the High Artist and my father were friends. Old friends. Right? He wouldn't do something to me, not when he had already punished Aniela.

... Unless his ambition made him want to get rid of all challengers. Or maybe Gadriel lied to him about something.

Or he maybe just didn't like me. That was always a possibility too.

Or ... there was something about the situation that I didn't know. Despite how long I knew the High Artist, we were never friends. And as Aniela showed me, there were layers I was just discovering.

I wasn't going to calmly go to my death. That wasn't going to happen—I wouldn't just lay there as a dagger sliced across my neck, my blood the payment for the High Artist's power.

But what could I do?

"Little angel ... lovely creature ... we're going to be such good friends," the unknown creature said with a hiss. "You have no one else but me who can hear you. Won't you tell me your name?"

"If you tell me what you are," I said, flicking gravel off my fingers. Ignoring the creature was doing no good. She had been prodding me periodically since Gadriel left, and after hours of settling and seething, I was ready to talk. It was that or continue to sulk.

“What am I ...” the creature said absentmindedly, “what if I told you that I deserve to be here? That I plucked the flesh off children’s bones, that I made beds from angel wings? That I regret none of it, even as they talk to me in my dreams, singing their sweet little songs in my ear. Each one with me. Forever.”

“A nezhit?” I ventured.

“No. I do not bring sickness. I bring death .” There was a rustling of feathers, and an odd clang with them.

“Ah—a harpy.”

“Correct.” More rustling, more clanging. That was what happened when one had metal wings. “I think you’re going to die, angel,” she said. “I hear the guards—several of us are going to die. Maybe they’ll feed me your corpse afterward.”

“You don’t have to sound quite so pleased about it.”

“I’m pleased about anything that brings change here, especially if it means I get dinner after.”

The harpy would eat me, gladly, even after speaking to me and getting to know me. The half-woman half-bird creatures thrived on carnage, and bathed in the viscera of rotten corpses before they consumed them. But they were also like us angels, and despised anything that kept them from the skies. It was only the prison’s foul smell and thick walls that kept me from smelling the harpy’s rot now, a remnant from meals long gone. My memory jolted with a little anecdote regarding the craven creatures.

That was right—they had metal feathers. Not ashen-tipped like mine—solid metal. By all rights they shouldn’t have been able to fly, but they did.

“What if I told you that I can give you an Artist to eat?” I said, sitting upright. This was reckless. Even if my plan worked, I’d have to send an angel’s— Artist’s—corpse to be feasted on, and the harpy would probably make me swear an unbreakable vow that I would do so. But ... it might be worth it. With this harpy, I had a chance to escape being sacrificed, or, at the very least, I would take Gadriel with me. I eyed the door, the small gaps near the floor where if one was very careful—or willing to use their unnaturally long limbs, a small item could be passed between us.

A pause from the other side of the wall. “I’m intrigued. Artists are not something I have tasted. Do their egos affect their flavor?”

I grinned. “Only one way to find out.”

Chapter thirty-two

Cat

My eyes burned. My skin stung, screaming from the thousands of little pricks. I could barely see. Barely breathe. But I made it. I trudged through the field, through ash that was up to my knees, each step one that should've killed me, until I reached the base of the mountain. Then it got worse, my steps now taking me upwards through a mixture of ash and snow that reached my thighs.

I leaned my head back—there was no way I could see the peak from here. The mountain was as ominous as ever. And now I had to figure out how to get inside, where the mountain's magic would neutralize the ash. Where I could feel alive again instead of this muted—but very real—misery.

I was close enough now that I could tell that Zariel was definitely beneath me, in the prison. Why? What were they planning on doing to him? Unease prickled through me. I couldn't think of the High Artist, what else he had planned. He wouldn't sacrifice Zariel, right? Regardless, I was not going to wait and see what happened.

At least I knew where Zariel was. But which of the tugs from my rune was him and which was Aniela?

I couldn't focus—I could barely see. I had to breathe.

Breathe.

I had to find a way inside the mountain, out of this ashen hellscape.

Knocking on the front door and asking to be let in was out of the question. If Zariel was in prison, the best I could expect would be a locked door. At the worst ... alright, I had to come up with another plan. That meant I had to find my own way in. Somehow. There was more than one entrance into this mountain near the ground, there had to be.

Aimlessly, I wandered near the base of the mountain, the relatively small layer of foothills that surrounded it were speckled by pine trees. My legs trudged through the layer of ash and snow, burning and freezing at the same time. The melted snow from my body heat mixed into the ash, coating me in a dark, glittery paste. This wasn't a wintry wonderland—it was brutal, a grim reminder of why the angels picked this place as their library and prison. Even if a prisoner escaped, they'd never find their way out of this.

It was nearly impossible to see. The death glitter burned my face, while whipping against it like sand. I covered my face with a thin layer from my robe, which blocked the worst of it.

Zariel ...

So what if I was in pain? I had to get to Zariel. Clumsily, I scampered up to a grove of pine trees, using their branches to take shelter, to give me a break from the onslaught. With the help of the pines and their thick needles, I was able to take my first clear breath and steady my rushing heart. The magic kept me alive and conscious, but damn it stung.

I had just caught my breath and started to look around when there it was—the pearl trees, those unique things I had noticed when I was outside with Zariel.

My heart skipped. Could it be?

Now that I was up close, it was easy to tell that these were unnatural, for what tree was decorated with actual pearls? It rested in the middle of a pine grove, like a goddess surrounded by her pine-tree worshippers. How could anyone think that this was a natural tree? Then again, in Zariel's world, there were stranger things than this, including fish with wings that flew in the rain.

Alright, if the tree was here, that meant there was one of those "secret" entrances around here, or something else that the angels thought was worth marking. Now, where was it?

I kicked around the base of the pearl tree, digging through the ash—nothing. It was unlikely that the entrance was literally under the tree, but I had to try. I expanded the circle, kicking and digging—nothing. A bit further, making another painful round—still nothing. I was just about to collapse into the pile of ash when a strange carving on a trunk caught my attention, the tree's yellowish flesh standing stark against the dark brown bark. I couldn't read the angels' runes, but seeing one marked on a tree was not normal. That had to mean something.

Frantically, I dug around the base of that tree and found a trap door covered with rocks.

Yes! I found it. I sighed with relief and got to the task at hand.

Moving the rocks aside, I worked my fingers under the small ledge, digging out the layers of ash and dirt that had accumulated over the years—centuries?—since this had been opened last.

Fuck—this thing was heavy. But I managed to open the trap door with a grunt, sending the slab back to crash into a pile of ash, puffing a little cloud into the sky.

I peered inside, my face hovering over the hole in the ground. Black. Pitch black. There was no way to tell how far it went, and I was not about to drop a rock and risk awakening some goblins or a fiery monster. Against one side there were metal bars fused to the stone—a ladder. I tested the top rungs. It felt safe enough. Sturdy.

Anything to get out of this burning winter.

Lingering next to the entrance, I treasured the last bit of sunlight I'd possibly ever have. If the angels weren't going to let me through the front door, there was no way they'd be happy if they found me inside the mountain. And that was if I didn't fall to my death first. Or get eaten by something at the base of the ladder.

Here goes.

Using the ribbon laces, I tied my fabric shoes into one of my long sleeves—bare feet would be safer. The cold metal froze my feet as I stood on the first rung—and then I climbed. And climbed. And climbed, descending into darkness.

How many steps were on that damn ladder? Twenty? Fifty? After several minutes, the light became a distant memory, a faint pinprick at the top of the tunnel. I was slowly moving in the dark, breathing stale air and trying not to panic that the shaft was becoming smaller, my robes catching on the stones. If I fell, who would find me? Would anyone ever find me?

Oh...my corpse would stay here, undiscovered. Forever. Hopefully my ghost could haunt the library.

My damp hands gripped the bars, doing the job that my ash-covered slippers weren't prepared for. Thank fuck I removed them.

Slow. Slow and steady.

I wasn't going to trip on my dress. I needed to be patient. It didn't matter how long it took—I wouldn't be any faster if I fell. Well, technically I would be, but I wasn't going to think about that. At least the ash was drying and flaking off. At least I could take deep breaths. I had a long way to go, and one way or another I was going to reach the bottom of this ladder.

One step.

A second step.

Then another.

Then another.

Until there was nothing but the metal bars, my breath, and my racing heart alone in the dark.

I was alive. Looking up, I searched for the light from the sky above. Nothing. There was nothing. I had lost count at three hundred and fourteen steps, when I started to wonder if this pit would go on forever, if there was even a bottom. My feet were sore, my hands raw from where they saved me more than once, clinging to the bars when my foot slipped. But I was alive and at the bottom. I had made it—I was back inside the mountain.

Now I could sense the two pulls on my rune separately again. One was directly above me, while another seemed ... more horizontal. But which was Zariel?

Did it matter? Worst case was that the pull closest to me was Aniela, unless Zariel had even more family members in prison that he failed to mention. I definitely had such relatives—wayward cousins and all. If I found his sister, maybe she'd know how to help me. At the very least, maybe she knew some way to get out. I'd free her

if I could, but I had no way to open any of the cells, and I knew better than to even dream about stealing the keys from a guard. I was a PhD candidate, not some assassin thief. There was also the fact that my knowledge was painfully academic—I couldn't talk my way out of things. Once I got pulled over for speeding and found myself trying to convince the cop to give me a second ticket. Luckily, he didn't.

Now safe on the ground—safe ish—I tugged the shoes back on my poor cold feet, and clumsily felt my way through the narrow hall of stone. It was little more than a tunnel, a pitch black one. If the space started shrinking on me, closing in with each step ... I was going to have a problem. I kept my ears open, as much as I could over the roaring sound of my breath. If anything saw me, it was probably going to be too late. There was no running or hiding here.

Where was I? In the prison? Or did I manage to go under it? Was that possible? How many stories below ground was I? Sure, I started my descent from a bit higher than the mountain's base, but hundreds of ladder rungs is ... a lot. Annoyingly, I pushed back my new questions of just how deep into the earth the shifting of the worlds went. This wasn't the time or place. First, I had to live long enough to see a computer again, much less write up a new paper. But ... was it so bad to think about anything other than the consuming darkness?

Yes, anything but the darkness .

For what felt like a lifetime there was nothing but my soft steps on the stones and the constant rough stone of the walls until—blissfully— I felt the sides give way. The space had grown bigger, and there was a soft light coming from around the corner.

Oh, thank God. Light. Space.

But what caused the light?

Holding my breath, I slowed my steps, listening for any sounds. There was no shuffling, talking—nothing. Carefully, I rounded the corner, and found—food?

I blinked hard. There was a small lamp next to the wooden door, and the cavernous room was filled with what was probably the widest variety of food I had ever seen. The room, which was around the size of an elementary school gym, was filled with rough wooden crates, barrels stamped with angelic symbols, and hanging nets containing onions. And next to this medieval grocery selection were boxes from big brands and massive industrial cans of vegetables. Boxes and boxes of military rations. And gallons of fruit punch. Supplies from the summit, unless the angels had a warehouse store membership. Zariel had mentioned that there were multiple storerooms in the mountain—there had to be to keep the entire population supplied for years. This must've been one that was becoming empty of the original supplies and was now filled with all the carbs I could eat.

My stomach growled. I hadn't eaten since last night. Should I take the time? But then again, would I be in better shape if I didn't have the sugar shakes? What the hell. I opened the industrial pack of cheesy crackers and one of the gallons of fruit punch and hid behind some crates. While I enjoyed my ill-gotten gains, and tried not to throw everything back up, I planned.

Was it just me, or had the tug that was above me changed location? Getting weaker? Was it because they moved, or was it because I did? I wiped crumbs from the corner of my mouth. The other tug, the one that was more horizontal with me, was still there—a small blessing. Then again ... was it?

If the angels moved one of them, odds were that they'd be moving Zariel, their most recent prisoner, which meant that I was going to find his sister.

And after enduring mere minutes in this darkness, much less years, I had a feeling that if I found Aniela, she would have her own scores with the Artists to settle.

Chapter thirty-three

Zariel

What tends to get left out of accounts of ritualistic sacrifice is just how time consuming the preparation is. Now, whether the Artists discovered that I had to watch the process for the ritual to work, or whether this was the equivalent of making a hog watch a roasting fire, I couldn't say. I suspected it was the latter, especially since I was the only sacrifice here.

What exactly had I done to make the High Artist not only want to kill me, but also make it as tortuous as possible, short of actual torture?

Did that mean I pretended that this wasn't happening? ... Yes. I had a plan. A small one. One that would be better if I watched this part with an air of detachment, even though my nerves were affecting my runes. One of them was telling me that Cat was beneath me, which was impossible. I would have noticed her in the mountain above me first, if that were the case.

Apparently, this also meant I had lots of time to sit in a chalk-marked circle, hands bound in the front, while Artists scribbled on the floor around me. We were in the same black stone room where Cat and I had done much more enjoyable things. Carefully, I shifted so that the harpy's feather was tucked against my skin without piercing it—we had made that exchange just in time, though I would never forget the grating sound of her removing her metal feather from her flesh.

At least Cat was gone and far from here. She wasn't going to see me die.

And at least Cael wasn't here, either. The High Artist likely didn't trust that he would just sit back and let me be killed.

"You're rather calm, considering," Maniela, a fellow scribe, said as she etched out her runes, ones I recognized from the book. Another older angel raised his head at her from the opposite side, and then went back to drawing.

"You're rather unbothered by my dying," I retorted.

"Fair enough." Maniela winced.

"You lived with me for over a decade—we attended classes together. I'm the reason you received a first mark on that assignment. I can't help but be a bit offended."

She scowled, the skin on her forehead bunching. "The High Artist told us what you did."

"What? "

Maniela finally raised her gaze and paused her drawing. "You attacked him."

"I did no such thing."

She nodded. "He said that it was misguided vengeance for your sister, and for taking your mate away."

"I never—"

"Stop telling him this," the other angel snapped. I didn't know him, other than to know that he was desperate to be an Artist. "It's not going to matter."

It wouldn't. Maniela just confirmed what I had long suspected—the High Artist lied about everything. Aniela never tried to kill him. Something else had happened between them, something that Aniela kept silent about, even as she was imprisoned. I clenched my fists and gently moved them over my robes. I could reach that feather, if needed. But now wasn't the time. I couldn't hope to fight my way out or flee. No, my only plan was to take someone with me, and ideally ruin this ritual.

“Though you are oddly calm,” the angel said, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. “You are aware you're going to die, right?”

“I read the ritual,” I said. “I know that this needs to be done to six other creatures, and there's a lot of drawing to do yet. I'm going to be here for a while.” I wasn't going to let myself panic until the sixth creature was being drawn in. I had a feeling they'd save my death for last. The High Artist probably wanted me to panic and beg—I wasn't going to give in. Would I panic once I saw the knife? Probably.

Was I also in denial?

... Also, probably.

The door opened, and around a dozen guards and a couple Artists walked in—guarding prisoners with bound hands.

The angel turned to me and smirked. “You were saying?”

I swallowed hard and instinctively reached for the feather. Now was the time to start panicking. Yet I couldn't help but stare at those brought in to die with me.

A basilisk—that would be to satisfy the earth element. The creature, which was essentially a horse-sized snake with reptilian legs, lumbered through the hall, baring its teeth through a leather muzzle. Its eyes, that could kill with a mere glance, were

hidden under a thick leather hood. Basilisks couldn't speak any language we could understand, but they were intelligent, and there was a rumor that they wore their scales like a skin and could change their form. And then there was the fact that they were prone to murder.

A water nymph—that would be for water. The young woman cowered in her leather bonds, her seaweed hair dry and brittle and plastered against her waxy skin. There were lots of reasons a nymph could have been here. Many of them lived in bodies of water in our realm, and did so undisturbed. This one was apparently very unlucky. Or very cruel.

A fire elemental—obviously that was for fire. A dark-haired man with singed smoking skin walked through the room, bound in metal chains. “Man” was a generous term to describe him—at a single thought he could turn into a creature of solid flame capable of igniting anything. Well, almost everything. There was a reason the prison was inside a mountain. And a reason he was wrapped in chains.

A fae creation—that would be for metal. A metal mechanical dog strolled through the room, his turning gears making a constant whirring noise. The Dawn Fae were notorious tinkerers, using their magic to contort their bodies with their crafts, and sometimes make entirely new creatures. Like this dog, which, as a fae creation, was much smarter than its earthly counterpart. Though, there was also a good chance that the dog was not nearly as ... manufactured as its appearance suggested. It was speculated that the fae mastered inserting souls into their objects, possibly souls that they made—the creation needed to have some sort of soul in order to satisfy this ritual. There was a chance that this dog was an artifact from one of our archives, and not from the prison.

Leshi—that creature was for wood. The leshi stood even taller than us angels, dark bark woven seamlessly into his pale flesh like the exposed inner layers of a tree. Dark wispy moss hung from his head and stuck to his limbs, swaying with each step. The

human part of him was eerily handsome, as regal as a tree which had graced the earth for centuries. A leshi was a creature of nature, one of the oldest—and the most vicious. Humans and other more defenseless creatures learned to pacify the leshiye with sacrifices of fresh blood, lest they take what they wanted for themselves. The leshiye had no kingdom of their own, wandering and hiding in the desolate woods. But sometimes they became too ambitious for their own good.

One of the angels marching along with the creatures carried a jug made from black glass. Smoke whirled inside the jug, occasionally shifting to the shape of a face or a handprint, pushing against the limits of its prison. I raised an eyebrow. A ghost? That was probably for spirit, but ghosts ... were already dead. Then again, that seemed like something the High Artist carefully thought of. There were ways to destroy a ghost—it just took a little preparation.

And then there was me—for air. Every prisoner stared at me, and a sick look of satisfaction went across their faces once they saw I was bound and in a circle. Fools. Dying alongside an angel didn't mean they'd be less dead.

The High Artist's minions moved with rehearsed efficiency, sending everyone to designated spaces around the room, their voices a series of low murmurs. Once the creatures were put into place and the Artists surrounded them in seemingly prearranged places, I paled.

The time for the ritual to begin had suddenly come much closer.

Chapter thirty-four

Cat

O h, my god. Oh, my god. The smell.

The shows don't prepare you. The books don't prepare you. Nothing does. The odor of the medieval-style prison was suffocating. Unwashed bodies, not all of them human or human-like, wafted over me, filling my lungs so that I could taste the rancid air. Excrement, fresh and rotting, flowed through my nose as a slick bottom note, coating every spare remnant of that sense until it went numb. And was that food? That sickly, sweet smell? Please just be spoiled food.

I bit my hand to keep from coughing. Why did I have a feeling that smell was rotten flesh? I whispered a short prayer that any decomposing limb wasn't attached to anyone living. The angels could be brutal, but this was beyond—

This was—

I doubled over and breathed through my mouth, slowly .

I'd never find Zariel if I was caught, and puking was loud and left evidence behind. I had to move. Fast. Away from the smell and towards Aniela. Anything to get away from the smell. The whole prison couldn't smell like this, right?

Zariel had casually explained a bit of the prison's layout to me, though now I wished I had begged to see a map. The prison had guards, but they were much more

prominent near the entrance. This wasn't a place where there was a guard in each hall, probably because the smell would drive them insane. And because the prison was a maze in the ground with only a few exits. If someone did manage to escape, then they'd be found outside in the ash. Oddly, the angels didn't seem concerned with prisoners escaping their cells and living happily, munching in the storeroom. I didn't understand why, until I saw that the prisons didn't have key holes, or any sort of visible lock. Instead, there was a short spike poking out of shiny black orbs placed at each cell, the spike roughly as long as my thumbnail. That had something to do with getting into the cell, I just knew it. My gut twisted even more. Nothing good was going to come from this. I had seen the angels' beauty, marveled at their creations—and now I was submersed in their brutality.

Alright—I had to find exactly where the rune was leading me, and try to avoid any guards. Aniela was closer than ever, a beacon calling me to her. Could she sense me? Did she sense when Zariel gave me their magic? If so, maybe I wouldn't have as hard a time explaining things to her as I thought. The rune throbbed harder every few steps, burning like my stomach touched metal left in the sun, as if it knew I was looking for her and was trying to reassure me that it was doing its job. Maybe it was. If angels could make magic burning runes, I wouldn't put it past them to make them intelligent.

My battered nose had somehow adapted to the smell enough that I could breathe, and instead my ears were now overwhelmed by the moans. No one begged for mercy—there was no point. But many still moaned in pain or from a living nightmare. Still others were holding conversations with themselves, and not every voice that came from the cells formed words I could understand. Somehow worse than the cries was the absolute stillness from those who had given up. Or were dead. Yes, these creatures were dangerous, and Zariel had a point that his world wasn't like ours. He had seemed confident that most creatures in here deserved their fate. The angels couldn't just let them leave now, to do what they would to humanity. But would it be so bad to give them some fresh air? Zariel was imprisoned—who else

was in here unjustly sentenced by the High Artist?

I came to a crossroads at the end of a hall, and suddenly the rune tugged to my right, urging me to turn. I listened, following it to a cell nested at the end of a walkway, one side of the cell sharing a wall with the mountain itself. Carefully, I peered inside the little slat, into the near-absolute darkness .

“Aniela?” I whispered and then backed away. Last thing I needed was claws gouging out my eyes if I was wrong.

“Who is it?” A woman asked and then coughed. My shoulders sagged with relief.

“I’m Cat. I’m ... Zariel’s mate.”

There was a shuffling in the cell, and then an angelic face pressed against the slit. All I could see were her golden eyes, narrowed with suspicion.

“His mate?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not an angel.”

“I’m aware. It’s a long story.”

“That’s impossible. This is some trick.”

“You can feel my rune, right?” I paused, squirming. “You know I couldn’t have that unless Zariel gave it to me.”

“Show me.”

I did, untying and parting my robes. The light from the runes glowed, casting us in a dim orange glow.

“... Zariel, what have you done?” she whispered, closing her eyes and resting her head against the bars.

“He needs us,” I said, retying my robes. She raised her head to look at me. “I’ll explain what happened later. Or he can tell you himself.”

“He had better.” She paused. “And what is his mate doing here, of all places? ”

I swallowed. “Zariel was taken prisoner. The High Artist lied, about everything. I ... I am afraid Zariel is going to be sacrificed. Probably very soon.”

Whatever I expected from Aniela, it was not the dark chuckle that slipped from her mouth. “I thought I sensed him near me. Ah, so the bastard finally got around to his plan.”

My eyes widened. “You knew ?”

“Oh yes. I learned about it years ago, not long after the worlds changed. Found some notes on his desk and kept asking questions he didn’t want to answer. One night he brought me into his study and gave me a choice—plead guilty and be imprisoned, or Zariel and I would both be killed. There’s lots of ways for accidents to happen here.” She pushed matted dark hair out of her face. Even with her eyes hollow and her skin stained with dirt, she was striking, an angel of despair. “As you can guess, I chose the option that let him live.”

As much as I wanted to get to Zariel, I needed to make sure she was going to help me before letting her out, or at least not stop me. Which meant talking. “But why is the High Artist doing this to Zariel, of all people? I know that they haven’t gotten along,

but I thought that he and your father were friends.”

Aniela huffed. “That’s between Father and the High Artist. Trust me, I’ve had a long time to think about it, and I suspect that the answer lies from long before Zariel and I came to the mountain. It has to. But, Cat, be glad that you won’t see the angelic courts—a betrayal like the High Artist’s is entertainment. For some, blood is a delicacy. They make this prison seem pleasant in comparison.” After what I just smelled, I highly doubted that.

“I don’t know how to save him,” I admitted. “I’m afraid we’re too late.”

“No. He’s alive. We can feel it—if he died so would his connection to the rune. But we need to go. And I have an idea.”

“You’ll help me?”

“Of course. He’s my brother.”

“Are you ... able to help?”

Aniela shifted, standing tall so that she had to duck to see out of the cell. “I’m an angel,” she said. “And what strength I have left will be used to see that bastard dead. I swore it to myself the day I was placed here.”

Good. This would be easier with someone who had an idea of where to go. I looked down the dank, grimy hallway. Our plotting could wait until after she was free. If a guard found us, we had nothing. Aniela groaned, stretching her wings. Would she really be able to move? To fly? To see? She had been imprisoned here for so long. But as she said, she wasn’t human—maybe she handled being in here better than I would.

“Aren’t you going to let me out?” she asked, watching me expectantly .

“I don’t have a key.”

“Yes, you do. You have our magic—it’s blood.”

“What?”

She tilted her head to the protrusion sticking out of the door in front of her.

As I feared, the shiny black ball at the door stared back at me like a morbid eye, the spike extended, rusted and crusty with what was likely the blood of guards from years past.

“I need to ... ?”

“Yes.”

“... There isn’t a way out of this, is there?” Thankfully I was up to date on my tetanus.

“Slam your hand on it fast. It’s the easiest way.” Aniela shifted.

“So all of the guards, each time—”

“Once we’re put in, we’re not expected to come out. And because of the cost of opening the door, we usually don’t leave until it’s time for a new occupant.” She kicked a panel near the base. “This opens a little wider, for when the guards decide it’s time to give us a fresh bucket.”

I stifled a gag. That rotting meat smell probably was a limb.

Gritting my teeth, I eyed that spike. This was going to hurt. Bad. Slowly, I held out my trembling hand.

For Zariel. He needed me. He needed us. I could do this. I could—

I slammed my hand on the ball before I could think, pulling away and leaving my blood coating the rusted metal .

“Mother fucker ,” I cried, putting my hand in my mouth and hopping. Tetanus shot? I’d need every antibiotic in the world after this.

But it worked. The door creaked open and Aniela emerged, wings spreading hesitatingly in the hall, and then fully extended. Now I could see that she was Zariel’s sister—they had the same coloring, and nose. And then the same look of determination as she took in her freedom.

“Finally,” she said, mostly to herself.

“What about me?” a deep male voice suddenly asked from the cell next to her on the left. “We had a deal, Aniela.” No one else in the hall protested. Was there anyone else here? Considering that the High Artist wanted his secret kept, I was surprised she had any company at all.

Aniela coughed. “After all these years? As if I’d forget,” she said. Before I could ask any questions, she slammed her hand on the spike on the neighboring door and yanked it away with a stream of muttered curses, opening the creaking door to let out ... something.

The man that emerged was tall, possibly taller than Zariel, with long dark green hair that clung against his back. His skin was pale, but tinged with echoes of some color—or was it dirt? While the prisoner wore breaches and a shirt, his neck had firm

evenly spaced lines, almost like fish bones pushing against his skin, trying to break free. Yet the man carried himself with a regal grace and held me in his firm gaze. He was handsome, surprisingly. Fish bones and all .

What was he?

“This is Drusc,” Aniela said to me before turning back to her ... friend? “It’s nice to finally see a face.”

“Indeed. These years would have been far longer without you.”

Aniela turned to me once more. My mouth was open, my bleeding hand pressed against my chest, and I was beyond confused.

“Drusc doesn’t deserve to be here,” Aniela explained. “He was trespassing, but even that was up for debate.”

“How—”

“My people’s lands are along the river, which spreads through many kingdoms,” Drusc said. “I was searching for someone—and led astray. In several respects.” Drusc clenched his fist. “But I have a chance to set things right now.”

“Drusc is a rusalka,” Aniela explained.

“But he’s a man,” I said. If Aniela wasn’t going to panic about the flesh-eating water creature, then neither was I. For now.

“I’m glad you noticed,” Drusc said, giving me a wink. I grinned, despite myself.

“There’s rumors and human myths, and there’s the truth,” Aniela said, doing her best

to adjust her filthy hair, settling for twisting it and letting it land between her wings. She had a point. The exercise in name entomology, rusalki mythology, and magical translations would have to wait. A long time .

“I want to talk longer, my friend, but we should go,” Aniela said. “My brother was more foolish than I feared.”

Drusc nodded, stretching, his fingers reaching the ceiling. “Yes, yes, murder, sacrifice, treason—all in a good day. I’ll be sad to miss it.”

“You’re leaving?” I asked. Someone that size would be useful.

“This isn’t Drusc’s fight,” Aniela said softly. “And he’s suffered enough at our hands.”

His jaw clenched. “Isn’t that the truth ... but as much as I would love to keep talking, there’s no point in making this farewell last. We might have company any moment.”

Aniela nodded. “Good luck,” she said to him, adjusting the feathers on her wings. “I hope to hear from you again one day.”

“One moment,” Drusc said, pulling up his shirt sleeve to reveal a thick corded forearm. “And don’t worry—whether you like it or not, you will. As soon as I can send word.” He clenched his fist and webbed spines jutted out from the sides of his arm, like fish fins. Grimacing, he grabbed one of the spines and plucked it out with an unnerving squishing sound, offering it to me. A moment later the remainder of the spines were absorbed back into his skin, no sign of anything amiss other than a fine, oozing line.

I took the slimy, bloody spine, because what else was I supposed to do?

“Use it wisely,” Drusc said, obviously amused at my reaction.

“I ... will?”

“It’s a rusalka barb,” Aniela explained, frowning at a few of her bent feathers. Was she sure she was going to be alright? “They use these to paralyze their ... prey.”

“Prey? You make it sound so crass,” Drusc said.

“Do you have a better explanation?”

“Yes. It’s a weapon—a potent one. It will be weaker with it no longer attached to me, but it will still work. The thought of this being stuck in an Artist makes it worth it.”

“I, well, thank you,” I said. If I lived long enough to write my dissertation, the things I’d be able to add ... “But wouldn’t Aniela be better—”

He looked me over, evaluating me. “You look like you need the help more. And I’m sorry, but I can’t keep removing body parts.” Fair. On both counts. Even if Aniela was weakened, she was still an angel, and I was still ... short. And filthy. And tired.

“Good luck, human,” Drusc said. “I’d say that I’ll see you soon, but I think we all know that’s not going to happen. But trust me, I will be wishing for your success. Send me a note if you use the barb will you?”

“Uh ... yes.” How was I going to manage either of those things?

Aniela and Drusc said farewell, and she reminded him of a few exits from the prison—which Drusc rejected. He’d find his own way out, and we weren’t to spare him another thought. Literally. How was he going to get past the ash? He didn’t seem concerned, and neither did Aniela, so hopefully he knew something I didn’t. After a

few moments he left, departing the corridor with shocking fluidity, like a wave retreating from shore. We were alone.

“How are we going to get from here to the ritual room?” I asked, tucking the barb under my robes in a pocket and away from my skin. The last thing that I needed was to paralyze myself. It was a small miracle that I hadn’t encountered guards yet, and that the creatures around us were either excellent at minding their own business, incapable of speech, or dead. Or not there. I was going to keep pretending they were never there.

“Don’t worry,” Aniela said, taking my hand and leading me out of the hall. She was obviously too thin and covered in grime, but her eyes were now lit with a fire that told me she would either die or get Zariel back. There were no other options. “I have a way for us to get to the ritual. And a plan, which at the very least will make things harder for them.” She cocked her head. “How strong is your grip?”

Chapter thirty-five

Zariel

I was going to die.

Either the High Artist was going to successfully sacrifice me, or my plan would work, he'd be the first one dead, and then I'd be killed by the guards.

Either way—I was going to die.

The room was packed now, filled with Artists and a few archivists and scribes who were apparently loyal to the High Artist. Where was Cael? Was he really going to allow this? He had to know what was going on. He wouldn't just let me be killed. Or maybe he'd be standing in the corner awkwardly and refuse to meet my gaze, just like every other angel in this room I used to be friends with. Cowards.

At least Cat wasn't here. She was safe, and out of the High Artist's reach. The rune only let me sense Aniela, though the sensation felt...odd. Stronger than normal. Maybe the rune stopped working correctly with Cat outside of the ashen clouds. That wasn't how things worked back home, but the rules could be different here. The important thing was that I didn't sense Cat die, I didn't feel the rune's connection to her abruptly end.

I closed my eyes, drowning out the sound of chanting around me in forgotten languages, the songs meant to stir the base powers of the universe. Angels trained for years to hit the right pitch and tone required to work magic. It was unnerving to be on

the receiving end of the chants, as opposed to trying to satisfy an irate choir master.

“Finally,” the High Artist said from next to me, making me jump. I wasn’t ready to act, the feather too far from my hand—I couldn’t strike. Instead, I froze and gave into the panic that I barely contained. As if savoring the moment, the High Artist bent over and whispered in my ear, “I’ve waited so long to do this.”

“ Why ?” I asked. “You gave both of us the references to come here. You had the connections in court to make it happen. We both grew up with Cael. You were Father’s friend. Why? What could I possibly have done to you?”

The High Artist smirked, the one I had long ago learned meant that he was going to enjoy my reaction—whatever it was. “I gave you the references because that was the best way to gain access, without him getting involved. And also to make your father think I had forgiven him.”

“Forgiven ... for what? ”

“Have you ever wondered why I am trapped in the mountain, while he is at court, whispering his plans into the queen’s ear? Me, whose family was destined for greater things?”

“Being here is an honor.”

“It’s a tomb,” he said. “Sure, we made it beautiful, but there is no power here. None that follows outside of this mountain, at any rate.”

“That’s not true. You cannot tell me that this library is insignificant to our people. That’s—”

“Your father is on the queen’s council. He has access to riches and influence that I

can only dream of. And your mother—don't pretend that she isn't using this to her advantage."

"So that's why you hate us." I swallowed. "You want to punish Father. But Father didn't do anything."

The High Artist grimaced. "Didn't he? And I just happened to get attacked the night before the exam that decided so much? Not enough for me to get an exemption, of course, but enough that I did worse than him, and that was what mattered."

"Father would never."

"No? And it was just a coincidence that the very day he met our now-queen that I was sent here? And that's not counting the hundreds of little barbs and slights through the years." His eyes narrowed. "You boys were lucky that our positions set yours higher from the start. You didn't have to betray your friends for the slightest chance to better yourself. You didn't have to scheme as well as study."

Alright. This was starting to seem suspicious. Would Father have done such a thing? Angels were brutal, our court a nest of intrigue, and I had long ago abandoned the notion that my parents were beyond such things. They had rank at court—of course they played its games. But they weren't like that ...right?

"So," I said, "all of this is just to punish Father?"

"Partly. And part of it is that somehow, both you and your sister have managed to be very difficult for me all on your own. Your sister never minded her own business, and then there's you and that human. You and your questions and endless opinions. I guess I should be grateful—you've made it very easy to get rid of you." He patted me on the back. "Don't worry, Zariel. You're second to be sacrificed. So you won't have the suspense of waiting to die for much longer."

Wonderful.

The High Artist went to the middle of the room and clapped his hands, bringing everyone to attention.

“Angels of the Ashen Mountain,” he said, “we are called here tonight to do our duty, to fulfill our obligation to take us home. We who have endless knowledge of the worlds around us have the answer—a ritual overlooked for generations.” The High Artist paused for dramatic effect, accepting the accolades. He was lucky that the ritual room captured sound, otherwise the entire mountain would have heard their cries. “I shall offer myself up for this ritual, and take us home, after which I shall surrender myself and everything I have become.” Another pause for dramatic effect. “For the good of all.”

Praise met the High Artist’s proclamation. Angels cried out, tears streaming down some of their faces. They wanted to go home, wanted it so much that they were willing to risk everything. The High Artist bowed as if humbly accepting a great honor, and not that he was taking advantage of everything to become a god. Idiots. Did they really think that anyone would be able to resist the temptation of power? One did not choose to become a god and then immediately abandon it. And this was an angel who was not satisfied with having one of the most prominent positions amongst our people—he wanted more. Nothing would be enough.

A row of angels focused their attention on the leshi next to me. He was going to be first.

Fuck. I was going to see a leshi die, for nothing.

Heart threatening to break out of my chest, my vision focused on the knife that emerged from one of the angel’s robes. My bonds felt tighter, the leather tearing into my skin, making me unable to let me reach what I needed. That feather. Could I save

him?

No. I couldn't do anything.

The High Artist took his place behind the leshi, head bowed as if in prayer. I knew better—he was savoring this moment, the thrill of power about to be his. The condemned creature held his head high, even as the High Artist accepted the knife from the angel and stepped behind the leshi, the slick blade pressed against his exposed throat. There were no murmurs from behind the gag, nothing other than glaring hatred for the High Artist. For us.

We deserved every bit of it.

The angels chanted and the atmosphere in the room changed with each word. As if they were lit on fire, the runes drawn on the floor illuminated around the leshi, bathing him in an unearthly glow. The air became electrified, my hairs standing on end.

I was next. I was going to be next.

Moments later, the High Artist slid the knife across the leshi's throat with a grunt, sending a spray of blood across the onlookers while the light left the leshi's eyes. No one flinched, though a few angels' lips curled. We had seen enough sacrifice—this was nothing new to us. It was merely the focus of the ritual that was different. The fact that the condemned did nothing to deserve this.

Was that it? Were they done with the leshi? Was it my turn to die?

No.

As if embracing a lover, the High Artist bowed his head to the leshi's fatal wound,

taking gaping mouthfuls of the hot, curdled sap-like liquid into his mouth. It dripped down his garments, sticking to the flowing fabric like honey. He drank as if it was a sweet nectar, to be savored and enjoyed .

This was my only chance.

While all attention was on the leshi and the High Artist, I moved my hand under my tunic, working at the bonds, sawing them against the metal feather. Did I have enough time?

“Stop fidgeting,” Gadriel muttered from near me. “Face your death with some dignity.” He paused. “Not that I should’ve expected anything else.”

When had Gadriel arrived, making a point to be next to me? No matter. I should’ve known that there was no chance he’d miss this. We were creatures of pride, and stabbing him was something he’d never forget. No matter how much he deserved it.

“I’ll spend my moments as I wish,” I snapped, though I stopped the taunt rising on my tongue. Last thing I needed was him getting suspicious.

Finally, the bond snapped and I paused. Did he hear? Did anyone? I didn’t dare turn to look at him. Silently, I let out a long breath—I had cut enough that I was able to slip a hand free. That would do.

Doing my best to avoid attracting attention, I adjusted my hand and gripped the base of the feather, wincing as the sides lightly sliced my hand. When I used this and shoved this metal into someone’s flesh, there was no doubt it was going to hurt. A lot .

But it would hurt them more. I was not going to just sit back and let the High Artist win. Someone would die with me.

And then I noticed a movement high above the crowds, on the narrow walkway that surrounded the room. An angel and a human. Cat.

Cat?

Oh. Fuck.

Chapter thirty-six

Cat

This wasn't going to work. We were interrupting an angelic ritual, saving someone marked for death. Even I could feel the magic thrumming through the air, like lightning about to strike. It was two of us against a horde. A weakened angel and me. This was insane. This was—

“Calm,” Aniela said in my ear as we walked across the upper rampart of the room. We were alone, a relief. But that didn't change that the one angel we needed was below, in the center of the magical chaos.

“How can you say that?” I hissed, confident that I wouldn't be heard over the chanting. No one was staring up at us since there was too much going on in front of them.

“Easy,” Aniela said grimly, “either we will prevail, or we will not. And if we managed everything thus far, I like our odds.” She cocked her head. “Don't you?”

No. I didn't like our odds at all. Because this plan depended entirely on angelic pride, ego, and ignorance. I would've preferred a plan relying on strategy, strength, and muscular armed men, but I wasn't going to get what I wanted. I nodded, giving her the agreement she expected.

Yep, we were going to die. All of us. There was no possibility that the angels would let me leave after crashing this .

Zariel was bound and sitting on the ground in a marked circle, next to a leshi who was bleeding out amidst the chanting crowd. His face was unreadable, watching with a casual indifference that I knew better than to believe. Surrounded by all these angels, and not a single one offered to help him. They were all willing to see him die, to cheer for it. I pursed my lips. How dare they do this to him?

How much time did we have? Not long. He'd be next—the way the High Artist kept glancing at him told me that he wouldn't be saving Zariel much longer. More pragmatically, Zariel was right next to the leshi in the circle of doomed creatures. I didn't have it in me to stop and wonder at who was set to be murdered right after Zariel. There was him, and only him. He was the only one that mattered.

And Gadriel—that cretin—smugly stood behind him, running his bony fingers through Zariel's long hair like he was a pet.

Stop. He needed to stop.

That was Zariel. My mate. My ...

What exactly was he to me? I didn't know, but I wanted a chance to find out.

No, I needed it.

Together, Aniela and I had already escaped the prison using one of the mountainous doors, glided to another set of doors on her weakened wings, were embraced by a horde of spider webs in a dark corridor, and had to crawl behind a wall of potted plants on a ledge in the atrium to avoid notice. But we did it. We made it this far. She was right—we had to go the rest of the way.

And for Zariel, there was nothing I wouldn't do.

Fire gleamed in Aniela's eyes, and her fists were clenched at her side. "It's jealousy," she said.

"What?"

"Why they're doing this. Why no one cares." She sighed. "Zariel was the best of us, or he could be, if the High Artist didn't stop him."

"He did seem good at his job," I said, recalling the angel who had asked him for help with her task.

"Good?" She looked at me incredulously. "They were wasting him. On purpose. All because they hated that he was someone with both the birthright and intelligence necessary to be here. They want to be him, and they never will be. But he never said such things to you, did he?"

I shook my head.

She huffed. "That's Zariel. Too modest for his own good. And to his detriment."

Then Zariel's head turned, no longer staring at the leshi. Was he looking at us? Oh, shit, he was.

"He saw us," I whispered.

"He saw us a couple minutes ago," she said. "He's going to kill me for bringing you here."

"We'll worry about that later," I said and she hummed in agreement.

Yep, the time to worry was definitely later. Apparently done with the dead leshi, the

angels moved and were now circling around Zariel like crows hovering over a corpse. The High Artist, his mouth and chest covered with blood, took his position behind Zariel. An angel who had feasted on a creature's spent life force, his wings splayed behind him. A beautiful nightmare.

The High Artist moved Zariel's hair to expose his neck. An angel stood next to the High Artist as he prepared, holding the still-bloody knife, offering it to his master when it was needed.

Zariel didn't fight—what would be the point? I knew him better than to expect him to beg and plead. But ... his hands were moving rather oddly under his robes, for someone about to have their throat slit.

There was no time to wonder. Voices rose in a steady chorus, and the energy in the room changed once more. The angels were chanting, all sound and focus tugged into their words. The High Artist took the offered knife and faced Zariel .

"Now," Aniela hissed.

I turned and clung to her, wrapping my arms frantically around her neck and praising whatever made the angels have abnormal strength. Silently, we glided over the hall, falling. Falling—

And crashing into the angels, right as they noticed us.

Screaming broke out, from both the angels and their victims. Aniela all but dropped me and I landed with a thud, the wind knocked out of me. Aniela was gone—I was alone.

What was I going to do?

Zariel. I had to find Zariel.

Suddenly the High Artist had a knife in his thigh, blood pooling through his garments in a red circle.

A knife? How did ... ? It was an odd-shaped knife, with a long narrow point where the handle was supposed to be—and covered with blood. What was that? It didn't matter. Where was Zariel?

Zariel? I frantically searched until my eyes landed on him.

Blood dripped from Zariel's hands, and there was leather still tied around his left hand as he struggled against the other angels. Fighting. Expertly, he met each encounter with a deftness I didn't expect for a scholar. He ducked and twisted the other angels' blows, using their weight and wings against them, slamming them to the ground, one after another. Even without a weapon, he was dangerous. So he had learned how to fight at some point. He was a noble's son, and one that had been trained, whether it was at home or here in the library.

I smiled. If this kept up, he was going to win. Angels were fleeing, not wanting to be part of this chaos. The ritual had quickly become more than they had bargained for. We could do it—we could escape.

"I should've known better." Gadriel said with a growl. He strode up to Zariel, uninjured—and pissed. He wasn't running. We weren't going to be that lucky.

"Yes, you should've."

For a moment they stared at each other, taking their measure, and then Zariel lunged. The two of them became a dance of limbs and wings, no less deadly for lack of weapons. Gadriel landed a blow on Zariel's face, which was instantly returned when

Zariel twisted, whacking Gadriel with his wings, sending him careening to the ground. Blood streaked down Gadriel's face, cut from the metal on Zariel's feathers, hate flaming in his eyes. Neither of them was going to give up—this fight would go all the way through, to whatever end.

Sudden screams pulled me from my fixation on their fight. Angels panicked—there was no order. No one cared about me. Some angels ran out of the room, others stood back and watched. Others still tried to keep the ritual markings from being disturbed by those fleeing, and focused on keeping their prisoners in one place. Too late for that. Some lines were already smudged. I knew little about magic, but they'd have to start everything over.

I grinned. With all this chaos, the rest of the mountain would know what was happening—the High Artist wouldn't be able to act in secret any longer. We may have actually stopped him. Even if we died, we might have stopped this.

Aniela shook off an angel who tried to grab her, twisting with the same practiced movements as her brother, and rushed towards Zariel. She'd help him fight—my goal was the High Artist.

The High Artist surveyed the wreckage of his ritual with an iron expression, the bloody knife still in his hand. His hair was a mess, strands scattered. The implement in his thigh was gone, and though injured, he stood straight, arms raised. "Stop them," he cried out. "Summon the guards!"

I lunged towards him, reached for his wings—and was caught in his grip. The High Artist clenched his hand around my neck, squeezing precious air from my throat with all the unnatural strength of an angel. The knife dropped next to us in a clang. I heard my name being called in the distance. Screams and thuds.

"You meddlesome little bitch," the High Artist sneered. "You should've left when

you had the chance.”

And he shouldn’t have taken so long to try to kill me.

Using my free hand, ignoring the stars forming in my vision and the pulsating in my head, I pulled the rusalki’s barb from my tunic and thrashed at the High Artist’s arm. Shit, I missed. Again—

Thank fuck—I broke his skin’s surface. That was enough.

Right?

His eyes barely had time to widen in surprise before he dropped me and fell over. Paralyzed. I landed on the stone ground, slamming my knee. Damn, that barb worked faster than expected.

Wasting no time, I stumbled towards the High Artist, reached for his wings, tugged—and plucked. Fistfuls of bloody feathers came out of his wings with each grunt, showering me in a nightmare snowstorm of red feathery down. I didn’t care that the silver on his wings cut my hand, adding my blood to his own. I didn’t care that each pull took all my strength. Again. And again. And again. His wings became exposed skin and bone, pocketed, and marked with red. Wings were the source of an angel’s pride—and shame. And me, a human, stripped him in front of his acolytes.

The High Artist didn’t cry out. He couldn’t. He was frozen by the poison as I plucked, yanking every feather I could get my hands on until Gadriel called out, “You’ve proven your point, human. Stop!”

I raised my head, the feathers still floating around me. Some were stuck to my fingers, mixed in with sticky blood. Angels stared at me and at the High Artist’s patchy, bloody wings—horrified. Good. Did they still want him to be a god, plucked

like a chicken ready for the pot ?

And then my heart dropped into my stomach. Gadriel had Aniela pressed against him, his hands perfectly placed to crack her neck with one sick twist. “Surrender,” Gadriel said, gasping for breath, “or I will not hesitate to end her.” He looked down at Aniela. “You care for this one, no? Family and all.”

Where was Zariel? I looked to the ground, and there he was, where he had likely been knocked unconscious, his black hair strewn around him.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:16 am

Chapter thirty-seven

Zariel

S lowly, with my vision still clouded, I pushed myself up. Everything hurt, especially my head. What had hit me?

That was right—Gadriel.

Where was Cat?

Cat.

Time stopped. She was next to the High Artist, her eyes aflame. Her hands were filled with tufts of bloody feathers. She ... plucked the High Artist?

Cat ...

There was no coming back from this. There was no future where the High Artist would let her leave. Or live . And Gadriel, he would use any influence he had left to ruin her.

Gadriel had Aniela. He had my sister in his twisted grip, ready to kill her, and there was nothing I could do to stop him .

Whatever happened in the next few moments would change everything.

Cat...

In less time it took to take a breath, everything we shared together, everything we dreamt of, what could be, passed between us. And I wanted that future, wanted it so bad that I would do anything to make it happen. No matter what it took.

The other angels stood back, watching. Why weren't they interfering? Then again, this wasn't their fight. Most of them just wanted to go home.

"Whatever you want," Cat said to Gadriel, pulling out one last lump of feathers before she bowed to Gadriel in mock submission. The High Artist deserved it. She did it—she ruined him.

Gadriel smiled, slick and satisfied. "I want you to—"

"What? What do you want?" I asked, drawing his attention to me. I wasn't trying to negotiate—I needed to get closer. Stumbling, I took a few steps. Let him think I'm injured. Aniela didn't fight him. She couldn't.

"Well," Gadriel said, "for starters, bow to me as your new High Artist."

Stunned, I blinked hard, and then took advantage of Gadriel's turning to speak to the angels surrounding him to move closer. Just a bit closer. I didn't look at Cat—I couldn't waste the time. There was no possibility I was going to let her come to harm while I had life.

"Yes, me," Gadriel said. "I am the second in command. And you can see, she has shown that our former High Artist is ... unworthy."

Second in command? Since when? And what about the ritual? The High Artist should have known better than to trust Gadriel—Gadriel probably guessed that the ritual

would never be completed now, and this was his chance to seize power.

Gadriel as the High Artist?

Never.

I lunged, grabbed Gadriel, and managed to land a blow before he twisted and planted his own against my side. Aniela freed herself, and then stumbled, exhausted, the effect of her imprisonment evident. Grunting, I twisted, shoving Gadriel off course—he corrected far too quickly. Dammit. Growling, he flew just high enough to crash into me, and I spread my own wings to keep him from slamming me into the stone wall. We gripped each other's biceps, tearing into each other's skin, both of us refusing to let go. He was stronger than I was, better rested—I couldn't fail.

Cat ...

Chapter thirty-eight

Cat

“Z ariel!” I screamed. I had to do something. What could I do? They were angels, massive angels, locked in a fight to the death. Could Aniela help him? No. She could barely stand.

“Help him!” I called out to the watching angels. Were they just going to stand there and let this happen? Did they want Gadriel as the High Artist?

Suddenly there was a squelch, and Gadriel’s eyes widened. A dagger stuck out of the side of his head. How? Where?

Cael pushed aside the gathered angels and strode in front of us, taking in the scene, right as Gadriel’s body fell to the ground.

“I’ve wanted to do that for a long time,” Cael said, pulling the dagger out of Gadriel’s head and wiping the blood off on the dead angel’s hair. Did that really happen? No one even tried to stop him. No one protested. I froze. I had just plucked Cael’s father, what was he going to do to me? Was he the High Artist now?

Aniela stumbled to Zariel, who swept her into his arms, the two of them bowed together, talking in hushed tones. Finally, after everything, Zariel had his sister again. No matter what happened, at least he had that. Gently, he held her face in his hands, tears streaming down his cheeks. After a few moments they stood, facing the new complication. Together.

A complication that seemed ... unfazed. Cael finished cleaning the dagger on his robe, staining it with what was left of Gadriel's brain matter, and approached me. Zariel moved towards us. "Cael. Don't. Blame me—"

I stepped back. The angel, who had just murdered another angel, towered over me, knife still very much in hand. I knew we weren't the best of friends, but fuck .

No one would help me, other than Zariel. Could he? I clenched my fists—I didn't know how to fight, but I'd try.

"Don't worry," Cael said suddenly, giving me first a grin, and then a wide bow, his robes billowing in a flourish. "I just wanted to be the first to say congratulations to the new Lady of the Ashen Mountain."

"What?" I had to have misheard. What was this? Aniela told me that plucking the High Artist's feathers would mean that he'd be dethroned from the shame of being laid bare by a human. There was absolutely nothing said about me taking his place. Nothing. I wasn't an angel. I didn't belong here .

"Um" —I looked around awkwardly—"don't you want it? Or someone more ... qualified?"

Cael laughed. "I'm his chosen successor—his son and heir. And I renounce it. It's all yours." He winked at me.

It wasn't going to be this simple. It couldn't be. Others wouldn't allow it. Others—

"There's better options than me." What I knew of angelic politics swarmed in my mind. They were complicated, to say the least. And this mountain was a situation all its own. But still— me ? The Lady of the Ashen Mountain was the High Artist's ... mate.

“Once word spreads of how Father was trying to make himself a god and was disgraced,” Cael said this last part loudly so that everyone could hear, “I think others may change their minds about allegiances. Look at your leader— look at what he let a human do to him. A god? He couldn’t even handle his own library.” The High Artist laid still, twitching from the poison that was slowly wearing off. Yes, I poisoned him to take his feathers, but he put himself in a position where it was allowed to happen—and no one stopped me.

Cael turned back to me, expression serious. “We need to get home, Cat. And you are our best chance to have a place here while we work to do so. You have connections to this world—to the humans—that can help us. Father didn’t see it—didn’t want to. You and Zariel together can help us in a way no one else can. If you’re willing. And this is temporary— once we get home this matter will be returned to the queen, and someone permanent chosen as required under our laws.” This speech was for others as much as me. Cael was laying the groundwork for angels to understand our ... leadership? Temporary leadership.

“You won’t be alone,” Cael said softly. “The High Artist has advisors. I don’t want the job, but I’m not going to abandon you.”

“You had better not,” Zariel said, smirking and moving next to me.

Zariel. I wanted to cry at the sight of him, alive and whole. His face was bruised, his lip and hands bloodied, but he was alive. Alive.

Ignoring Cael, Zariel placed a hand on my arm and he took me into his embrace, placing his forehead against mine. I closed my eyes and inhaled his scent, letting it wash over my senses. Him. I was holding him.

“You came back for me,” he whispered.

“Always.”

“You should’ve stayed safe.”

“Without you, there is no point.”

We kissed slowly, savoring the fact that this was an embrace that fate could have too easily denied us. I was at his side, and I was never leaving it again.

“Am I really the Ashen Lady?” I whispered.

He smiled. “Yes, well, Lady of the Ashen Mountain. As your mate and an angel, I’m the High Artist. Temporarily. ”

“But—”

“It isn’t what I wanted, but Cael is right, someone needs to take the High Artist’s place—and if someone doesn’t take it now, someone worse will.”

“I see.”

“We’ll manage,” Zariel continued, “and we won’t be alone. Cael has supporters, and there are many who will listen to him. Many did not like the High Artist, and Cael’s right—while I may not be the best-qualified candidate, the factions will be in chaos. We need someone who will work to take us home above anything else—and I will do that. And this will be temporary— acting High Artist, so to speak.” He had repeated that point so many times. Was he just as in shock as me?

“And then? Once the worlds are returned?”

He looked into my eyes, heavy with emotion. “You are my star and my light. You are

my solace and treasure. I love you. More than I can express.”

He didn’t ask if I was going to leave the mountain. He didn’t need to. There was no possibility I’d allow myself to stay behind while he possibly shifted back to his old world.

My heart filled with joy, I couldn’t contain it or the happy tears that formed on my cheeks. I’d have him, and I’d keep him, and that was what mattered. “I love you.” I stared at the carnage my scholar had wrought—two angels were unconscious on the ground near us. “But maybe you didn’t need me. You seem to have handled everything fine on your own.”

“I always need you. You saved me—in more ways than one.”

Though it pained me, I broke out of his arms and took in the room and the wreckage. Angels stared at me, and some bowed hesitatingly. More streamed in and out, and there was loud chatter that grew with each passing moment. Zariel was right—as the news of what the High Artist tried to do—and how he epically failed—broke out, there would be chaos. It was best for everyone if leadership was solidified now, before angels had time to plot. And Zariel was sincere in his desire to only be the temporary High Artist—he never gave me the slightest indication that he wanted the job. What was the saying, that those who desired power were the worst ones to have it? Exhibit A of that was laying on the floor, twitching harder as the minutes passed. Did the poison hurt? I hoped so.

“What’s going to happen to him?” I asked, inclining my head towards the High Artist.

“Can I decide, brother?” Aniela asked from where she was conversing with another angel a few feet from us, thick bruises forming on her neck and face.

Zariel smiled. “Of course. As long as it conforms with our laws.”

She grinned back. “Oh, it will. Don’t worry.”

Chapter thirty-nine

Zariel

High Artist. What a joke.

I was too young. Too inexperienced. There were far better qualified in this mountain. This was the last position I wanted, and a week in the role had not changed my mind. In fact, if I ever made it home, I'd be sorely tempted to leave the Ashen Mountain for good, no matter how hard I worked to earn my place here. It was difficult to accept the idea of living where I had almost been sacrificed. And the place that had been so cruel to Aniela.

But Cael was right—who would take the High Artist's place, if not me? Cael didn't have the mind for any sort of rule, and it was not merely a reluctance. He hated politics. If I didn't step in, would the role be filled by someone who had the High Artist's aims, who willingly drank the poison he poured into their minds? Or would it be taken by some Artist who would see this as their chance for power, and not care about bringing our people home?

I'd sit on the High Artist's seat. I'd do the endless tasks, both political and administrative. But I wouldn't take the oath that bound me to this role, which had to be witnessed by a quorum of Artists. That alone should help convince more than a few that I was sincere in this being a temporary arrangement.

The High Artist had convinced a chosen few that becoming a god was the best option to go home, and I was the one who had the best chance of truly accomplishing that

task. But it all depended on a message from the elves of the Darkening Woods, and there was no way of knowing if they'd answer. We may not have been allies before the worlds shifted, but in this we were united—surely, we both wanted to go home. And we would work together to do so. I hoped.

“How much more do we have to do?” Cat asked me from her desk. Taking the position of the High Artist meant going over the mundane correspondence of the mountain. From inventory, promotions, internal squabbles—both of the library and the prison. There was so much to do, and thanks to the High Artist's obsession with what benefitted him, many of the tasks went unattended to. Again, to assure angels that I intended my position to be temporary I had to leave much unchanged, but there was still so much other work.. .

“A lot.” I sighed. “All of it.”

Prisoner inventories and conditions. Cleaning schedules. Rations. Inventories. Personal disputes. It never ended.

“I expected more fighting,” she said. “We've been doing this for a week and there hasn't been anyone pounding at the doors to kick us out.”

“Give them time,” I said. “Angels normally fight with their wits, and battles are conducted in secret. I'm sure I will have a challenger soon. But we'll manage.” I smiled at her. “After the next summit they're going to realize that you're the best one to help us, and the resistance will disappear. That is, until we are back in our kingdom.”

“I can only hope.”

“ You are my hope.”

I took a moment to take her in, the brave creature who saved my life. If she hadn't returned to the mountain, broke into the prison, and freed Aniela, I would be creature food and the High Artist would be divine. Speaking of creature food, I kept my word—the harpy ate Gadriel. But his corpse was no longer my concern. Cat sat at the desk, knees bent and feet resting on the seat, her pale blue robes flowing around her. Her nearly white hair was in its normal braid, but there were dark circles under her eyes that hadn't been there before. She was more beautiful to me than the sun reflected on crystalline snow, and more precious than my own heart.

“Come,” I said, standing and reaching for her.

She didn't look up from the papers. “We have work to do. The university asked for a list for the next food shipment and no one bothered to put a decent one together. And I actually know what things are called, and I know better than to ask for ‘tuns of oil’ or ‘barrels of butter.’”

I frowned. “That isn't correct?”

“It's ... there's a better way to ask for things. Those have not been used in centuries. We'll get a scale and figure out more efficient measurements. But the spice list—gillyflower? Cinnamon makes sense. Hippocras? I understand that the languages shifted, but apparently it decided to be very peculiar about food. I need to fix it. And tell them no more of that fruit punch.”

“It can wait,” I said. “There's something that I insist we do now.”

She raised her head. And smiled.

Chapter forty

Cat

The second summit was approaching sooner than we expected, and there was so much work we needed to do despite toiling nonstop for a week since the High Artist's ... demotion. To prison. There was the work from the angels that the university wanted. Our list of supplies that we needed—with improvements. As well as negotiations about potential future visits from angels in the mountain. And I needed to brace myself for going back to the human world. I had sent a letter explaining the situation, and we received a reply. The university was not thrilled, to say the least, but I couldn't help but notice that under their thin veil of annoyance was academic desire.

Silv. Silv was going to kill me. What was he going to say, once he learned just what I did? What I had become? Zariel's magic was now mine, my memory improved, my sense of direction impeccable. But with it, I would never be a normal human again. I missed Silv so much—I hoped I could talk him into joining us at the Ashen Mountain. If we managed to make it back to Zariel's home, he deserved the chance to go too.

I had all that work to do and here Zariel had insisted we take a break for ... something.

“Where are we going?” I asked. The High Artist's apartments—our new ones—were decadent and large enough that there were several options in these chambers. While the same snow-like ash glistened over the stone walls as in the rest of the mountain, here there were white gemstones—ones that seemed like crystal, moonstone, and

another that glowed a pale blue light—were placed along the walls in patterns like snowflakes. The floor was another careful mosaic of white and silver stone, and I suspected the molding was made of real silver. Besides this, we had a sitting room that contained the High Artist’s private library, a different room with a harp and harpsichord, and yet another with a private atrium, filled with teeming green and sometimes edible life.

“Oh, you’ll see.” Zariel smirked. “But before I show you anything, you need to promise you’ll return to working on your dissertation.”

“My ... what?”

“Your studies.” He searched my face. “They are important to you, no?”

“Well, yes, but I thought I’d have to give that up to stay here, and when it’s time I want to go with you—”

He stopped and gently cupped my face. “What I want you to do, before the next summit, is figure out what you need to do to finish your studies. We can arrange for you to leave the mountain, if needed. And you should, to see your family and friends and experience your world while you can. You’re my mate—not my prisoner.”

“Leave here ... not for long, right?”

“Never.” He kissed my forehead.

“Good. Because you’re not allowed to leave this world without me.” I grinned. If I tried, completing my PhD was possible. With the access to the Ashen Mountain’s library, and guidance from my academic advisor, it would be possible to finish my dissertation, and I could leave to defend it when it was time. And it was also possible that my unique access to the angels would make the doctoral committee be

understanding of physical commitments. Because while I adored that Zariel wanted me to continue my dream, I wasn't going to risk that the worlds would return and I wouldn't be here. Whatever had put the worlds in this place could decide to change their minds at any time. I wasn't going to be separated from him. No matter what it took.

Zariel guided me to the bedroom, an opulent space filled with free-standing crystals that went up to my waist arranged along the wall like a little fence. A window to the outside went from floor to ceiling, giving us a perfect view of the wintry ashen world. A living pine tree grew near the window, its roots hidden from view under the stone floor.

In the center of it all was our light blue velvet-covered bed, resting under its white canopy.

“This is what you wanted to show me?”

He rubbed his fingers through his hair, giving me a sheepish grin. “Yes.”

Without a word, we both went and laid on the bed and I moved so that my back was against his chest, his wings protectively over us. My favorite position, and his. I traced a finger along the bones of his wing, delighting in the little gasps and shivers that came from him at my movements.

“Don't get any ideas,” he teased. “I've seen what you can do to a wing.”

“Never.”

His hands inched along my chest, grasping one breast after another, all while a prominent hardness pressed against my ass. “How would you like me to take you?” he murmured in my ear. “In the air? On the ground? I'm sure I can find another study

room.”

I giggled. “For us, in a bed is a novelty.”

“In bed it is.”

He nuzzled my neck as he pressed gentle kisses and nipped the skin. Heat worked through me, responding in places that his hands were nowhere near. While he kissed me, his hands delved into the folds of my dress, expertly working around the panels and ties .

“I want you to lay on the bed,” he said, tugging the fabric away from me. “I want to look at you.”

The heat was now an urgent throbbing, but I obeyed, laying on my back while he moved so that he was positioned over me, moving the last layers of my dress away like he was unwrapping a present.

He uttered my name with a soft groan.

My breasts were now bare, my body exposed, from my neck, to my burning runes that matched his, to my core, which was already desperate for his touch.

“Have they bothered you, my dearest?” He pressed a line of kisses over each rune, a mirror of his own. We were bound by more than a mate bond, or by love—we were bound by blood and magic, tied together no matter what.

“Never,” I said. “A little uncomfortable, but never bad.”

“Good.”

His hands worked down my thighs while he hovered over my core, breathing his hot breath over me.

“So slick,” he said, touching the wetness that waited for him. “Do you want ... this?” He plunged a finger into me, deftly working it in a way that made me writhe.

“How about ... this?” He slid in a second finger, stretching me. His mouth followed, suckling and nibbling on my clit, an elaborate dance that only he knew, and I could do nothing but watch. And feel. He was positioned over me, his wings spread, while he undressed with his free hand, unveiling a sculpted chest and burning runes that were a twin to my own. Underneath the soft layer of feathers, his cock was hard and protruding towards me. I wanted that. Now.

“Ah, so this is what you really want,” he said, positioning himself at my entrance. I could only gasp in reply as he rubbed himself over me and pushed into me. I twisted, adjusting to the perfect stretch and fit. And then, once he was seated inside me to the hilt, he moved.

I couldn't form words. I could only take what he was giving me, over and over. Unlike when we were in the air, or when we were on the altar, Zariel slammed into me. Hard. I was his mate, his partner, and he was taking me as he wanted. And I would take it all, gladly.

“My love,” he said in my ear, pinching my clit gently while he worked me into a frenzy. “I was made for you. To satisfy you. And I want you to show me that I'm right. I want you to come on me, all over my cock and hand.” He kissed me, devouring me, not needing to listen for an answer. He worked harder, thrusting in a fluid rhythm, matched by my own maneuvers.

And then he sat up, adjusting his wings so that the very tips brushed and teased my breasts.

He was a statue come to life, perfect as chiseled ice. A brilliant mind and gentle heart. And he was mine.

I came with a cry and he followed almost immediately after, filling me. Without pulling out of me, he moved back so that he was holding me against him once more. With his arms around me he thrust slowly, letting us both bask in bliss.

“I love you,” Zariel said. “I have no idea how it is that the worlds shifted to let me find you, but I am grateful.”

I kissed him in answer, with no words necessary. We may have been fated, but we chose each other. And we would choose each other again and again.

No matter what came.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:16 am

Months passed, and spring in the outside world was now a realistic hope. I was still the Lady of the Ashen Mountain, and I was adjusting to my role. Zariel was right—angels griped and groaned about Zariel being the High Artist, but no one could agree on any other single candidate. And they had to admit that having a human to assist them in dealing with the humans was a huge help—the fact that the second set of human-gifted supplies included a lot of chocolate worked in my favor. Besides, Zariel was hardly a dictator—he made it clear that the goal was to get home. After what the High Artist tried to do, the consensus was that other means should be tried first. Turned out that the High Artist’s plan was definitely not as popular as we feared—most angels had sense. But as always, those with sense tended to keep their opinions to themselves .

In between helping Zariel at the mountain, I was also pursuing my degree. Slowly. I was right—the university was more than accommodating of my unique issues considering the unparalleled knowledge I had access to. But they were clear that I would still have to show the academic rigor necessary for a PhD.

I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“There’s someone here to see you, Lady,” Cael said with a small smile, walking into our study. “He came with the morning patrol.” One change we made was that once a day, an angel would see if there was someone or something that needed our attention outside of the mountain. So far, it was merely supplies or correspondence, since few visitors were brave enough to go through the ash. Occasionally we received gifts from fans, including 3D printed angel bobbleheads. I hoped that the giver would be pleased that they took their place in the library next to a fossilized unicorn skull.

Again, I wouldn't have it any other way.

My mother was planning on visiting, and she said that she was going to arrive sometime between now and next Christmas, bring her book club, and stay for an extended holiday.

That ... I would have any other way.

But that was tomorrow's problem.

Silv entered the room behind Cael, dressed in his normal jeans and a hoodie, his horns barely visible through his hair. His eyes were beet red from the ash, but other than that he seemed to have survived the clouds alright.

"Silv!" I said, running to give him a hug. "You made it! I didn't think you'd come back so soon." Aniela walked in behind him wearing the library's gauzy robes, by now recovered from her ordeal. Physically, at least. She gave me a little wave in greeting and stayed back, letting me say hello to my friend.

"Cat," Silv said, wrapping me in his padded arms. "I'm glad to see you're still alright." He gave a not-so-subtle glare at Zariel, who remained impassive at his desk. Silv may have blamed him for why I was now in the notorious mountain.

"My mate is fond of you," Zariel said, leaning back in his chair. "Don't test it."

"Stop. Both of you." I chuckled, having seen this exchange a couple times already. Silv would tease, Zariel would threaten, and that was how it was going to be.

"What brought you here?" I asked. "Are you finally staying with us?"

"Not quite," Silv said, handing over the canvas bag. "Though Dimmy has another message for you."

“No.” I groaned. “Please, no.”

“Don’t worry. I ignored him. As always.” He looked at the bag as I took it, unprepared for its weight. “But I did bring it in case you want to read another plea to have him stay in the mountain. ”

“I’d sooner let my mother’s book club live here,” I muttered and Silv chuckled.

“Depending on what’s in here,” Silv said, “I may be staying with you.” He glanced at Zariel, who watched, curious. “If the High Artist is alright with it.”

“He is,” I answered for him. Silv was non-negotiable. Zariel nodded in agreement. He wouldn’t make me lose a friend.

I opened the bag and pulled out a giant book written in elvish script. With the book were two notes—one addressed to me and another to Zariel.

“Is that ...?” Aniel asked.

“The elves,” I said, collapsing into my chair across from Zariel’s. The book weighed heavy on my lap—this was the secret that could bring the worlds back to normal. All of that. Here. Waiting to be read. “They replied.”

“It worked,” Cael said. “It really worked.”

Silv nodded. “Apparently they sent it to a human, who drove it to Princeton, and I happened to find her roaming around the department before the university goons did.”

“And she trusted you?” I asked.

“Once I showed that I knew everything that was in that letter and the ultimate goal,

yes.” Silv frowned. “Though she did have a purse that I thought was made of a real cat at first. She may not have the best judgment.”

“I disagree,” I said. “I like her already. ”

I tossed Zariel his letter and opened mine. There was no point in my looking at the book—I couldn’t read a word of elvish.

Dear Catalina,

We have sent the book you requested, and I’m writing separately to assure you that we will do everything that we can to help. Should you have any further need, please do not hesitate to ask. I was told that you don’t have an angelic name, and it sounds a bit, well, Californian to me. I might be wrong, but I thought you may be human from this world, like myself. In which case, I want to state again—we will do everything that we can to help.

Amber, Queen of the Darkening Woods

“The elves have a human queen?” I asked.

“Apparently so,” Zariel said, his eyes on his letter. “And we happened to write to them right as the Darkening Woods was undergoing a bit of a coup. Eldrin, the king’s older brother, has claimed the throne.”

I blinked. “I have a feeling there’s a story there.”

I handed the book to Zariel, the one on which we pinned all our hopes. He had spent countless nights re-mastering old elvish script and language, preparing for this moment. In doing so, I saw firsthand just how brilliant he was—his ability to master languages was beyond what a memory rune could do, especially since he had no direct translation. He had to use one source to translate another, and then another,

until finally the elven dialect at issue, mastering four languages to get the one we needed. But he did it. Once the book was on his lap, he paused, running a finger over the delicate gold script. And then, taking a deep breath, he opened it, cracking the ancient spine.

And read.

And read.

While Zariel was reading, buried in the book, I turned to Silv. “This may take a while. Since you’re here, do you want to—”

“We were right,” Zariel said, looking up from the book, excitement lit on his face. “Cat, we were right. It was a god.”

Silv cursed. Something about how he never should’ve left his hut that fateful morning. Cael and Aniela glanced at each other, worried.

“What does it say?” I asked.

“In short—there are at least two recorded instances of the worlds shifting involving gods, I have to read more, but it seems like those were smaller shifts. With one, a god was looking for their child and chased them into another realm. With the other, a god was mourning their broken heart and wanted to leave all reminders behind.”

“You’re all here because a god is ... looking for something?”

“Or fleeing. Or causing mischief. Who can say?” Silv crossed his arms. “Gods aren’t known for their subtlety. Or caring about others. ”

“It explains so much,” I said, “remember how we discussed that the worlds shifting brought us together, and there is a similarity in name between the mountain and

Princeton? If a god did this, it makes sense that the like would go to like. Because the god is looking for something.”

“Again, you’re assuming there is a rational explanation for this,” Silv said. “How are we even going to know where the god is, much less what it wants?”

“Easy,” Zariel said. “We have a way to reach the other pieces of our world and organize communication. We start by telling everyone what we have learned—and asking everyone to watch.”