



Bonded Ever After (The Royal Gold Keepers #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I have more questions than answers...

In one world, I've been told to trust no one but Callum. The leaders I've always believed in are supposed to be my enemies, and the people I've served all my life seem to only see me as a tool to get what they want.

But what do I believe?

Things aren't any easier in the magical world of Neverwoo. Callum and I are still searching for answers to our fathers' disappearances, and we're trying to navigate the irresistible connection between us, when we know we can never be together.

Can two enemies walk between worlds and help each other survive? Or will they simply be the cause of each other's destruction?

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ONE

Elora

I'm breathing hard as I jog through the empty streets of Neverwood, which is so unlike me, but I've been exhausted lately. Overhead, thunder echoes through the valley and lightning splits the sky, but no rain falls. I shiver. One week. One week until I have to return to Neverwood. Except, storms will be a hell of a lot worse there.

A lot may be worse there.

The past three weeks have been brutal. Callum has become something beyond cold to me. There's venom in his gaze when he looks at me that he's not a good enough actor to fake. I don't know what happened to make him so angry, but I know in my gut that it'll carry over to Neverwood, and the thought makes me sick.

I need him in Neverwood to survive. Don't I? But more than that, I want to be with him.

Everything was so... good with Callum in Neverwood. I felt things with him that I've never felt with another person. Stupidly, I believed I was falling in love with him, even though I knew, logically, that we could never be together. But there, I trusted him with my life. There, he touched me tenderly. Like maybe he loved me too.

So what changed?

I've racked my mind, and I keep coming up empty. Why does he suddenly hate me?

And what does this mean for Neverwood? I don't even think he'll want to travel with me any longer, but I can't imagine going through the Forest Realm, the Mist Realm, and the Ash Realm alone. After everything we already know about these places, I don't think the two of us can survive without each other.

What am I supposed to do?

I reach the end of the houses at the edge of Paradise Falls and stop and take a break, breathing hard. I've been pushing myself, training for what's to come, but I don't think anything will be enough. How can I possibly be strong enough for everything I'm going to face in Neverwood?

Motion catches my eye, and I glance over at the woods. There, for just a moment, I see Ari Radyn. She's wearing a bright red jacket, her long dark hair left loose around her shoulders. She glances around as if looking for anyone who might catch her, then slips into the woods.

My heart hammers. I need to talk to Ari about what I found in my mother's journals. I've been trying to figure out the best way to do it without risking someone hearing us. Seeing her now, I realize that I won't have a better chance than right now.

Hopefully, she'll help me. I'm not sure though. We have the shared bond of both our mothers dying in the fire at the science building, but I don't know if that's enough to make a connection with the cold and sometimes cutting woman.

Hurrying away from the houses, I slip into the woods after her, and immediately feel a change sweep over everything around me. In town, things had been quieter—no birds, no insects, just silence—as it tended to be around people. Everything felt like the world was just holding its breath. But it's so much different in the woods. The birds sing to each other. The insects are alive and loud. This place feels like life in a way Paradise Falls just doesn't.

It's almost like being in Neverwood.

I'm not sure where to go, so I just follow my instincts. Before too long, I catch sight of her red jacket and speed up. I spot her with a large map in her hands that is covered in handwriting and different colored lines. Which is weird. What is she doing with a map like that out here?

I've almost reached her when she whirls around with a look of panic, but the panic changes to surprise when her gaze falls on me. I just stare at her, from her long dark hair and dark eyes, which are the polar opposite of my blonde hair and mismatched eyes, to her red jacket, jeans, and boots. She looks ready for a hike. But no one would hike out here, right? Hiking is hardly an activity for the people of Paradise Falls.

"Why are you following me?" she blurts out, folding her map in her hands.

I blush. "I wasn't following you. I mean, not at first. I was out for a jog, but then I saw you, and I wanted to talk to you."

"Talk to me?" She lifts her brow in a strangely cocky way. "We have class together. You couldn't have talked to me then?"

I try not to melt in embarrassment, reminding myself that Ari is good at making people feel stupid. "The thing is, I wanted to talk to you alone."

"Alone?" She crosses her arms in front of her chest. "Why?"

Fuck. I hadn't thought about how I would approach this. I can't exactly tell her about the journal.

My mind starts working as she stares at me, pinning me into place with her gaze. "I've started to have some memories of life before my mother and the fire." The

words come out rushed and tangled. “Memories that involve you and your mom.”

Ari doesn't look surprised, just suspicious. “Okay... and?”

“Were we friends as kids?”

She huffs. “Everyone in Paradise Falls is friends with kids their same age.”

Why do I feel like she's dodging the question? “You know what I mean. Were we friends? Did we have playdates? Did we hang out together?”

She takes a long minute to answer. “Yes. Why?”

Okay, that's something. “Were our moms friends?”

“Yes.”

Now, we're getting somewhere. “Best friends?”

She hesitates. “Yes.”

I frown. “How is it that I don't remember any of this?”

“Shock?” she offers with a shrug. “You changed a lot after your mom passed.”

“But your mom passed away in that fire too, and you remember,” I point out.

It's silent between us for a long minute, and her expression is guarded. “Why are you asking about all of this? Aren't some things better left in the past?”

How can anyone think that?

“No, I think it’s more dangerous to be operating without all the facts,” I say, then press on. “Did your mom leave anything behind for you? Anything that talked about why our moms would’ve been in that science building late at night in the first place?”

She looks uncomfortable. “No. Nothing.” Then, she gives me a funny look. “Are you sure you want to be looking into this? Anything involving the Council is usually better left alone.”

It’s weird. I get the feeling she knows more than she’s letting on. But how can she? She was just a child too when our moms died. There’s no reason to think she would have information that I don’t.

“Well, if you think of anything, you’re welcome to reach out.”

She nibbles her bottom lip, not making eye contact. “Where is this coming from anyway? The fire was a long time ago.”

A cold wind blows around us. “Like I said, I just started remembering some things from that time and wanted someone to help clear up my memories. I have so few with my mom, so they’re precious to me.”

She nods, but I get the sense she doesn’t believe me. “Well, I’ll let you know if I think of anything else.” For a minute, I have the feeling she wants to say more, but then she closes her mouth and looks away.

What is this girl hiding?

“So.” I glance around. “What are you doing out here anyway?”

Her entire body stiffens. “Just exploring. I like to come out here and camp and stuff.”

“Really? I thought Veric was the only one who did stuff like that.”

She blushes, which I wouldn’t have expected from her. “No, I enjoy it too.”

“Do you ever see Veric out here?”

She instantly shakes her head in a way that tells me she does see him out here.

“Ah, okay. Well, I better get back to my jog.”

I turn to go when, from out of the woods, Veric comes crashing between us, holding a map decorated in different colors, just like Ari’s. His eyes widen when he swings his gaze from me to Ari, and he instantly folds the map and puts it away. As I stare, his broad shoulders curl, like in doing so I won’t be able to see all six-foot-something of him.

Unable to help myself, I study him. He’s got dark, wavy hair, left too long, so that his green eyes peek out from beneath his heavy head of hair. He’s wearing jeans, a gray jacket, and a backpack similar to the one I own. Which is weird. No one needs that heavy of a backpack out here. But then again, he’s been known to disappear for long periods of time. Maybe he’s disappearing out here?

But why?

“Hello,” I greet him.

He doesn’t respond other than a nod. But then again, it shouldn’t be a surprise to me. He hasn’t spoken since the day his father was killed in the fire. It seems that while Ari was able to bounce back from what happened, Veric and I haven’t been as lucky.

“What are you doing out in these woods?”

I didn't expect a response, but I wanted to read his expression. His surprise at finding us fades away to a hard look that's as guarded as the man himself. Whatever he's doing out here, I'm not going to figure it out, he's making that clear.

"You both have maps," I say, turning to Ari. "Why?"

Ari shrugs. "Just exploring. Is that a crime?"

"No—"

"So get back to your jog and leave us alone."

I bristle at the attitude in her voice, but realize I'm done with these two anyway. For now. "Okay, well, have a good hike, or whatever."

Turning, I head back to the city, but when I glance back, they're heading in different directions, which is strange. I'd have guessed they were working together. It looks like I was wrong. But then, what had drawn the two of them out here to begin with? And does it have anything to do with the fire or our dead parents?

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TWO

Elora

I'm oddly tired from the jog this morning, like, completely exhausted, and I have no idea why. Maybe it's that I know I'm leaving to Neverwood in a week, and my body is just screaming no , but it's never been like this before.

"What about this one?" Beva asks, stepping out of her closet as she holds up a floral skirt and a pink shirt. "I feel like it says fun and sexy !"

I attempt a smile that says watching her show me a hundred different outfits for college is super fun. "It's really fun and sexy."

She frowns. "Well, you won't be able to tell until I try it on. I'll try it on." Then she disappears into her closet. "I can't believe I'm leaving Paradise Falls and that I get to see the real world! I know I'm going to have to constantly be on alert for all the crime and violence, but I think it'll be neat to see something new. To meet new people."

"Yeah," I say, followed by a yawn.

"I mean, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared for a war to break out. As we know, wars break out on the outside all the time. I keep having this picture in my head of a war breaking out in the city my college is in, but then I remind myself that I've never heard of one of us leaving for college and dying. Disappearing, yes. Dying, no. But then, maybe the Council keeps it quiet so as not to scare us."

“Uh huh.”

Deva’s bed beneath my cheek feels soft. My body melds into the mattress, and my eyes flutter shut. I’m just so tired. My muscles feel like jelly. Even my mind feels like nothing but mush. It’s like I’ve spent a whole day fighting and running in Neverwoods. Maybe I’ll just—

I jerk awake and realize someone is shaking me. Looking up with sleepy eyes, I see Beva staring down at me with concern in her eyes. She’s wearing the new shirt and skirt, along with some heels.

How long had I been asleep?

“Are you okay?”

I nod, then sit up, rubbing my face. “Yeah. Sorry.”

She frowns. “I have never seen you take a nap. Not even when we were toddlers.”

“Yeah,” I agree, trying to shake off the heavy exhaustion that tugs at me. Then I decide to share something that’s been bothering me. “I’ve actually fallen asleep a couple times in the last few weeks.”

She sits down slowly on the bed next to me, her brows furrowed. “Is that a normal thing for Gold Keepers? Because, I mean, it wouldn’t be something alarming for the rest of us. Naps are something we enjoy.”

I hesitate, then decide to be honest. “Gold Keepers typically need less sleep than everyone else. It’s just something about the way we’re wired. So, yeah, this is weird.”

Her expression seems troubled. “Don’t you have a physical soon?”

“Three days.” Fuck the Council. We don’t even need physicals. Gold Keepers have never needed physicals.

“Would they be able to figure it out if something was wrong?”

I cast her a look. “The last people in the world I’d want to know if something was wrong is the Council.”

I don’t trust them. I don’t say that though, because I don’t need to. We both feel the same way about them.

Rubbing my face, I sigh. “I’m fine though. My body’s just probably tired after my long trip in Neverwood, or maybe it’s trying to prepare me for the one I’ll be taking in a week.”

Beva doesn’t look convinced.

I smile. “It’s okay. I’m fine, alright? Let’s just focus on you and your big trip.”

She hesitates for a half a second, but then returns my smile and glances at her half-packed bags on the ground. “I just can’t believe it. The Council could give me my flight details any day, and then I’d be off to University of Horizon. Even now, my parents are there exploring the institute, waiting to help me get settled when I get there.”

Allowing her parents to go was a favor to me from the Council. Other than Teth’s parents and Beva’s parents, it was extremely rare for families to get to see the outside just because their students were leaving. The nice thing is that neither Callum nor I call in favors often, so the Council tends to listen when we do.

She stands up in her outfit. “So, what do you think?”

I grin. “It’s a winner!”

She squeals, which tells me she’s really excited about leaving, even if I didn’t already know it. She’s just not a squealer. “I just can’t believe I’m getting to go. That I’m going to be safe.” Her words get quieter at the end, and she looks thoughtful.

I dig my nails into my leg gently, trying to hide my sadness. “You’re never going to have to worry about the Council or Security again. It’s a brave new world out there!”

Nodding, she heads back to the closet. “Let me show you another outfit.”

I hold myself stiffly, not wanting to fall asleep, even though sleep tugs at me. Maybe I’ll just go home and take a nap after this. I’ll feel less weird about it when I don’t have an audience staring at me wondering if I’m about to grow another leg or something.

“There’s also this new perfume I bought,” she says. “It’s something different than my usual. It’s mostly rose, jasmine, and lily. It was a little expensive, but I decided to treat myself.”

A minute later, she comes out of the closet in a new outfit, one with tight pants and a loose, floral t-shirt. I’m about to say something nice about it when the scent hits me. It’s like being shoved face down in a field of flowers while someone buries you in more flowers. My stomach rumbles, turns, and then I’m running for her bathroom.

I barely manage to raise the lid before I’m hurling my breakfast into the bowl. Within seconds, Beva is behind me, lifting my hair and saying comforting things I can’t quite make out as I continue to unload my breakfast, maybe my dinner from last night, possibly even my meals from the past month. It seems to go on without end for an impossibly long time before I’m left dry heaving.

She secures my hair with a hair tie, then goes to the sink to scrub the perfume off her skin. I appreciate it, even though the smell doesn't seem to be triggering me anymore. Wiping my mouth, I flush the toilet. Then she offers me an extra toothbrush and gives me a minute to clean up.

Embarrassed, I eventually head back into the bedroom. She's waiting on her bed looking lost in thought as I slowly approach her. The floorboard creaks as I move, and she glances up, seeming relieved.

"You're okay!"

I nod. "I'll survive."

Sinking down on the bed, she pats her lap and I lay down with my head on her legs. Her fingers run through my hair, slowly massaging my scalp, and I relax just a little bit. I need a moment of calm to fully settle my stomach.

"Have you ever thrown up before?"

I search my memories for a minute, even though I don't need to. "No, we don't puke."

"You don't get sick?"

"No," I say.

"Could it be food poisoning?"

I hesitate. "I don't think so. I haven't had anything new."

She says nothing.

“It’s got to be something. The exhaustion, the puking, it’s got to be all tied together.”

She releases a slow breath. “Don’t kill me, okay? But I have to ask...”

“What?” I frown. What could she have to ask?

“Could you be pregnant?”

Pregnant.

Pregnant.

Pregnant? The word echoes through my mind. I hadn’t even thought of it. Didn’t even consider it. Gold Keepers have great difficulty getting pregnant. It usually takes years to accomplish, with the help of tracking ovulation, adjusting sperm temperatures, etc. There’s no way I could have just accidentally gotten pregnant. Right?

I sit up. “Gold Keepers need a lot of help to get pregnant.”

“Okay,” she says.

“It took my parents at least five years. Callum’s parents were the same.”

“Uh huh.”

“I-I just can’t be,” I stutter.

Her eyes lock onto mine. “So, you haven’t been having sex?”

My stomach drops, and I think I might be sick again. “I, well, I have been.”

“Ferone,” she says softly.

I look away. “It can’t be though, right?”

Beva smacks her hands on her thighs. “Probably not, but let’s get a pregnancy test, just in case.”

She gets up to go, but I grab her hand. “No one can know about this.”

If anyone finds out, my world will fall apart. A Gold Keeper being pregnant wouldn’t just be hot news, it’d be the only news.

Her gaze gentles. “The store clerk will think it’s mine. I’ll be sure to hide it on the way home. I won’t let anyone even suspect it. I know how huge it would be if you were pregnant, to everyone. No one needs to know until you’re ready.”

“Thank you,” slips past my lips.

She hurries out of her room, and I fall back onto the mattress, every muscle in my body tight. I can’t be pregnant, especially not with Callum’s baby. The Council would never allow such a thing to happen. I would have to...

I stop myself, clenching my hands. I’m not going to think about any of that. In all likelihood, I’m not pregnant. Maybe I did just eat something bad. Freaking out about nothing would be a complete waste of time.

I get up and start cleaning and organizing Beva’s room. It’s a total disaster from the packing, so I stay busy with it until Beva returns with the pregnancy test. Actually, three pregnancy tests. She hands them to me, and I wordlessly go to the bathroom, read the directions over and over again until I feel like I’ve memorized them, then pee on all three tests. When I’m done, I cap the tests and head out to Beva’s room.

Where... we wait.

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THREE

Elora

We sit on the floor, the tests between us, sitting in silence. Time ticks by and neither of us looks at the tests. She just stares at her watch, waiting for the five minutes to pass.

“It’s time,” she finally says.

I pick up one test. There are two lines. My stomach flips. “Two lines. That means...”

“Yes,” she says softly, “but check the others.”

I grab the next one, and dread fills me as I read the results. “Two lines.”

“Okay.” Her voice shakes.

Then I lift the third test. “Two. Fucking. Lines.”

Dropping all three, I lean back against her bed, feeling myself spiraling. This can’t be happening. I can’t be pregnant with a Runefall man’s child. With a man who hasn’t spoken to me in three weeks. I mean, he hates me. Hates me with every fiber of his being.

Should I even tell him about this?

And the two families seem to only be able to have one child now. Will this be the only child for both our families? Will Callum try to claim it as his family's child?

All that is if the Council finds out and allows this to happen. I put my hands on my stomach. Would they try to take my child away if they found out? Would they think doing so would allow us to have more children?

I feel sick. My hands skim my stomach and already I know that I wouldn't allow that to happen. Children are a rare and beautiful thing. I could never let someone hurt my child, no matter what it costs me.

"Are you okay?" Beva asks. "You've been quiet for a while."

I don't know what to say. "I'm just scared."

"I understand, but let's look at this practically. You're a Gold Keeper. Children from Gold Keepers are rare and prized above all else. The Council might not like you going to Neverwood pregnant so soon, but they'll be ecstatic that there's a Gold Keeper baby on the way."

She only thinks that because she doesn't know the full truth. But, I realize, she's right. If this were just a baby, the Council and all our people would be happy. I could try to pass it off as Ferone's... but that would require having sex with Ferone soon. Even if the dates didn't entirely line up, he probably wouldn't question it, because he'd just be so happy at being linked to a Gold Keeper. We would marry. He would spend his life in complete luxury, enjoying all that life would bring, and I know he'd be good to me and the baby.

But could I do that?

Ferone might not mind, but I wonder how Callum would feel. Probably relieved. Not

only would no one know what he did, but he wouldn't have to play dad to a kid he doesn't want, with a woman he doesn't want.

So is that what I should do? Sleep with Ferone? Pass the baby off as his? Get married? And give Callum the freedom from me that he so desperately wants?

I don't know. I don't know what to do. I just know that I have to keep this baby safe at all costs, even if it's a cost to Callum.

"It's okay. Just breathe." Beva rubs circles into my back.

I look at her. "You don't understand. There's so much the Council can't know. That no one can know."

Her lips tighten into a thin line. "Do you want this baby?"

"Yes." The word comes easily.

"Then it looks like you're going to have to get really comfortable with lying and lying a lot. If you and this baby are going to be safe, you need to be able to look a person in the eye and lie, even if it means lying for the rest of your life."

I'm surprised. "Do you really think—?"

"You can do it. The gods know that I've had to lie about a lot of things to stay safe too. It's hard, but it gets easier with time."

"Beva..."

She sighs. "Elora, do you know what I would do if I could do anything?"

I shake my head, surprised by the turn in the conversation.

“Nothing. I would read all day, maybe explore the woods, and do absolutely nothing else. But the only reason I’ve been allowed to survive is because of you, and because I ‘want to be a great scientist.’ It’s never mattered what I really want. I need to be a scientist to survive.”

I swallow. Hard. “I understand.”

She gives a nod. “I know you. I know the second you stopped spiraling you started thinking about this baby, and I know you’re going to love and protect that baby the same way you’ve loved and protected everyone close to you. If that means lying, if that means betraying everyone around you, do it, and don’t feel the least bit guilty about it.”

I realize that she’s right. I also realize that if I already love this baby this much, Callum deserves to know the truth. If he then chooses to have nothing to do with me or the baby, that’s his choice, but he needs to be the one to make the decision.

And, secretly, I hope that at a minimum he can guide me about what to do. My gut says the only way out for us in this situation is to have Ferone believe it’s his baby and marry him, but Callum may have ideas that I don’t. Unless he’s a total ass, talking to him should make this easier because he’s the only person in the world I can be fully honest with.

Yet my heart says talking to him is just a formality. With the way he’s been acting, I fully believe I’m on my own with this, and that I need to accept a life with Ferone, no matter how wrong it feels.

Because in just three days I have a Council-mandated physical, and everyone will know I’m pregnant after that. Time is ticking to put my plan in place with Ferone,

and if I'm not quick enough, it could cost me more than I can even imagine.

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FOUR

Elora

I drive straight from Beva's house to Callum's house, my stomach twisting with nerves. It feels strange. He lives so damn close to me, but I've never been to his house before. I've never even thought of going in.

Not that that would be a surprise to anyone.

We're enemies, from the two families. No one would see a reason for us to visit each other's houses. I'd already decided that if anyone caught me here, I would just say it was about a fight we were having in Neverwood. About the competition to see who would win more goldarium.

Now, I just need to go in. I just need to face him and tell him the truth, no matter how he reacts. No matter how mean he is.

Wiping the sweat from my palms onto my pants, I get out of my truck and look at the house that looks so similar to mine. It's all modern lines, a contrast between white and black, with big windows that have been designed so no one can see into them, just out of them. I walk up the path through their perfectly manicured lawn and pray that Callum's mother isn't home.

I'd considered just trying to confront Callum in public, but I'd decided against it. I'd had a feeling that no matter how I approached the topic with him, he'd be an ass, and we'd just attract more attention. Attention we couldn't afford to receive. This is the

only way. I just hope he's home.

What if the councilwoman answers? I push away the thought. Callum's mom will be out and about, just like she always is. Everything will be fine.

Walking up to the door, I take a deep breath, then knock loudly.

There's nothing for a long minute. No stirring of life, not even the slightest awareness that anyone is home, but then I sense motion on the other side of the door.

A minute later, Callum opens the door, and his gaze falls on me. He looks like hell. Like he's not sleeping. Like he's been busy partying it up for the past three weeks, which I fully believe based on the fact that he's still in his pajamas in the middle of the day, his hair a mess, bags under his eyes, and more than a little stubble on his chin.

His eyes widen, and he says, "What the hell do you want?"

I draw my shoulders back. "We need to talk. Can you meet me at the entrance to Neverwood?"

His jaw tightens. "Not a fucking chance." And he goes to slam the door.

I shove my body against it, pushing the door back open. "I'm not kidding. We really need to talk. This is important."

He leans down so that those brilliant blue eyes of his, filled with malice, are level with my own. "What part of not a fucking chance don't you understand?"

"Callum—"

“I don’t think you get it. I don’t want anything to do with you. My skin fucking crawls when you’re around. Just the sight of you makes me want to vomit. I. Don’t. Want. You. Here.”

Each word is like a blow to my heart. I can’t believe this is the same man who held me so gently, who loved me like I was the only woman on this planet. What changed with him?

I swallow around the lump in throat. “It doesn’t really matter how you feel about me. We need to have a quick conversation, and then I’ll go. Is your mom home? We can just step inside. It’ll only take a minute.”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “You’ve been trying to figure out why your dad left this whole time.” I flinch at the venom in his voice, but he continues. “He left because of you. That’s clear to me now. He didn’t want to deal with a spoiled, self-absorbed whore.”

It’s hard to do anything but stare. “Callum. Please.” I’m practically begging him, but I don’t care.

He leans forward, pushing me back out the door with a firm hand on my shoulder. “And maybe that fire wasn’t a mistake. Maybe your mom was trying to get away from you any way she could.”

My jaw drops open, and he slams the door in my face.

I stare. And stare. I couldn’t imagine my worst enemy saying crueler things to me than what Callum just did, but as awful as this is, I think it’s a good thing. Now, I know without question that he meant it when he said that here or Neverwood, I’m on my own.

I'm on my own here.

Heading back to my truck, I fight the tears that are threatening to well up. I touch my stomach, then drop my hand, just in case someone is watching. The truth is that I'm not on my own here; I have a baby to think about, a baby to protect. I can't wait any longer to put my plan into action. Everyone thinks I'm already sleeping with Ferone, so the scientists shouldn't question the timing later. But I need to sleep with Ferone and give him the plausibility that he's the father.

A plan is set in motion. I'll find a fairly public event to have sex with Ferone. Any doubt anyone might have will be erased that way. Then, when they discover I'm pregnant at the physical, it'll be easy to lie and say it's Ferone's. Things will move quickly then. We'll have some grand affair wedding. Both our lives will change forever. We'll both get something out of the match—me, safety for my baby, him, anything he could ever want.

Because if I don't do this, I know in my gut the Council will abort the baby. I won't be given a choice in the matter; it'll be inflicted upon me. And right now, as much as I love Callum, I love my baby more. If hiding who the child's father is saves my baby, then that's what I'll do.

I start driving, wiping away a tear I hadn't even known had fallen. In my mind, a picture of Callum, a baby, and me in a happy home disappears like a picture being lit on fire. That was never going to happen, so it's better to focus on my reality. There's a party tonight. I'll make sure Ferone is there, and then I can accomplish the first step of my plan.

It's my only hope.

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FIVE

Callum

I'm drunk again, at a party I don't even want to be at, but anything's better than being alone. I think I've been drunk every day since I found out Elora was sleeping with Ferone. I'm in a hell of my own making, and if I feel too much, I think I'll just die. Just cease to exist.

Elora was my everything, my whole world, and I've lost her.

Worse yet, she seems not to care how I feel. How this has killed me. She wants us to talk together, as if what happens in Paradise Falls really doesn't matter. Fuck that.

Why had I ever spoken those words that what happened here didn't matter? Why the fuck hadn't I made it clearer to her that I didn't want her near anyone? That I owned her. That she was mine and mine alone.

"Hi, Stud," some girl says as she drops into my lap.

I stare at her, not caring, not feeling, just wishing I could fade from existence. She smiles at me, drawing her face close to mine. Her big brown eyes are encircled by dark mascara that's already begun to run. She smells like cheap vodka and cheap perfume, so strangely at odds with everything about Elora.

Another girl drops into the seat next to me. "So, like, when do you go to Neverwood? Soon, right?"

One week. One week until I'm alone with Elora in Neverwood. I'd already decided I wouldn't be walking with her. Already decided that if Ferone was enough for her here, she wouldn't have access to me, even if it killed both of us out there.

Still, the idea fills me with dread. If something actually happens to her... I push the thought aside even as an image of her hurt surfaces to my mind. I'd said the worst things I could possibly say to her, thinking I'd feel better if I hurt her too, but I didn't. I felt worse.

There's no end to my misery. No end to the hell I'm in. Before I touched Elora, there was some awareness in the back of my mind that I might be able to have her. Hope. Jagged hope that I could have something pure and wonderful in this life.

All of that is gone now.

"Are you looking forward to Neverwood?" the girl next to me prompts.

I take a swing from the bottle of vodka in my hand. "No."

They giggle. They banter with each other, each one vying for my attention. I want to tell them to go away. That I have nothing to offer them. Before the night is over, I'll be wasted, my dick too soft to do anything at all, but I don't say that. I don't tell them anything.

Music blasts from the stereo. Twenty-something-year-olds grind against each other in the living room while I sit frozen on the couch, watching it all unfold. The house is crowded. Everyone from the university squeezing in to have a little fun. Do any of them have a clue how pathetic this is?

Suddenly, my gaze lands on someone. Ferone. His dark hair has been styled. He's wearing a dark green shirt and slacks, far too dressed up for a party. But I wonder if

he's actually dressed up for someone else. For Elora.

My gut tightens. Of course he is. He has her now, so he has no need for any other woman. When he can see her, touch her, slip inside her, his world is complete. He doesn't need anything or anyone else to be happy because he has the woman I love.

I start to stand. The woman in my lap falls off. I clench the bottle of liquor in my hand and sway on my feet. I'm going to fucking kill him. And the thing is, no one will stop me. There will be no punishment. Because I'm the motherfucking Gold Keeper, and the only benefit to such a miserable job is that I can act without consequence.

I start toward him, and stagger in surprise when Teth suddenly steps in front of me. "Want to go outside and get some air?"

I try to push past him.

He grabs my shirt, pulling me so that he can whisper in my ear. "Let's go outside."

I shake my head. "No. I'm going to kill him."

His grip only tightens. "I know. Let's go outside. Let's get some air."

"No, I have to keep an eye on him."

All I want is to beat the shit out of him. To know he won't ever be capable of touching her again. I want to break him like he broke me.

Teth guides me back to the couch, and we sit down together. Tension radiates from Teth, and I don't blame him. He wants to stop whatever disaster I'm planning, but he also knows he can't. If I want to do something, there's no force on earth that can stop

me.

I go to take another swig and Teth catches the bottle and lowers it back down. He doesn't say anything, and the urge to fight him wells inside of me, then vanishes. Maybe slowing on my drink right now is a good idea.

Maybe I need to calm down before I do something I'll regret.

Instantly, my spine stiffens. I turn toward the door. I can't see it from my spot, but I know she's here before she steps into the room. It's impossible to breathe. Impossible to do anything except stare. She's wearing a short black dress that dips low enough in the front that you can see the lace from her black bra. She has on black heels that make the already tall woman look even taller. Her blonde hair lies in waves down her back, and her lips are painted with a deep red lipstick.

My groin tightens. My entire body responds. Fire courses through my veins and an undeniable need to hold her makes it hard to breathe. I miss her. Fuck, how I miss her.

She's animated, seeming to talk to anyone and everyone, which is very unlike her. She seems to be pulling people into conversations she's never spoken to before, and there's laughing and excitement around her. It's like everyone in the room is aware of her, is being pulled into her gravitation, and I don't blame them. I feel the pulling too.

Then Ferone is beside her.

Everything changes. Everything inside of me is twisting into something dark and ugly. She turns to him as everyone watches and kisses him. Hard. His hands go to her waist. She tilts her head for him, and the floor drops out from under me.

I start to stand. Teth pushes me back down next to him.

My gaze swings to my best friend. I need help. I need guidance.

“Don’t do anything you’ll regret,” he tells me, his dark eyes filled with warning.

There’s whooping and shouting, and I turn back to see Elora dragging Ferone up the stairs as everybody watches with excitement. Her gaze slides across the crowd, meets mine, and lingers for half a second before she looks away. Then she’s gone up the stairs, and I’m left in even smaller pieces than before.

This can’t be happening.

I get the feeling that this is punishment. Punishment for the way I spoke to her earlier. Maybe she figures she hasn’t hurt me enough, that she needs to make it publicly clear that she’s fucking this asshole right in front of me.

He’s probably already touching her. Already undressing her.

I rise to my feet, and Teth is there in an instant. “Callum...”

I drop the bottle on the floor, not caring when it spills everywhere. Then I meet his gaze. “You’re not going to be able to stop me, so please get the hell out of my way.”

He seems to search my expression for a minute before he steps out of the way. I push my way through the crowd, hating how the music feels too loud, hating that there are people everywhere. It’s like I’m crawling out of my skin and no one can see it except me.

I reach the stairs and climb them like a man climbing to his doom. If I see Ferone up there touching her, if I see him anywhere near her, I’m going to kill him. Not figuratively. I’m going to literally break every bone in his body, and no one is going to be able to stop me.

I get to the first door, try the handle, and find it locked. Stepping back, I kick the fucking thing in and see two terrified people in the middle of fucking. Turning away from them, I go to the next door and do the same thing, but the naked people in the room aren't them. Lucky for Ferone. Two more broken doors lead to nothing, and then I'm at the final door. Heart in my throat, I kick it open.

Ferone is shirtless on the bed. Elora is in nothing but her bra, underwear, and heels. She's standing in front of him as his hands rest on her waist. Her eyes widen as they fall on me and time seems to stand still. If I hadn't walked in here right now, they'd be fucking.

Springing forward, I grab Elora's dress from off the floor and throw it at her, then yank her out of his grip. I swing back my fist to punch Ferone in the face, but then Elora is there between us, her face twisted with anger.

"Get out! Get the fuck out!"

"Back away," I tell her.

"No," she tells me stubbornly.

I'm breathing hard. "I'm going to kill him, and you're not going to stop me."

She shoves me back, and in my drunken state I stagger. "Go back to your women and your liquor. We're having our own party, and you're not invited."

I eye the man behind her. "Going to let your slut do all the talking for you?"

Ferone stands. "Look, asshole, if you were any other kind of man, I would've kicked your ass a long time ago, but my hands are pretty well tied with you being you. I get your families have beef, I get that you would be awful to anyone she dates, but we're

together now, and you're just going to have to accept that."

I laugh. I can't help myself. Does he really think he can give her what she needs? His gentle thrusting probably doesn't do a damn thing for her. She needs a man like me. A man who can be her equal.

Elora pulls on her dress between us, then grabs Ferone's hand. "We'll just continue this at my place."

As they go to pass me, I shove Ferone back. He glares. I shove him again. Elora tries to get between us, but I move around her, a fighter even in my drunken state. He finally punches me, but it's nothing. Barely a blow. I wind back, and at the last minute, I gentle my punch. I hit him square in the face, knocking him to the floor.

He doesn't get up, but his chest continues to rise and fall.

Turning to Elora, I don't think, I just act. I pick her up and toss her over my shoulder, then head down the stairs. She punches my back. She kicks. And she must actually be trying to hurt me, because it does hurt. I carry her out of the party and down the street, deciding on a whim to head to my house, since it's only a couple streets away.

"Put me down, you oaf!" she screams.

I pat her butt, then caress it. I've missed that butt.

"I'm going to kick your ass when you put me down, you idiotic neanderthal!"

It's weird. I don't even mind that she's yelling, or that she's mad at me. I just like being near her, like hearing her voice, even though that's fucked up.

We reach my dark house, and I step inside. I flick on a lone light switch and then set

her down in front of me. She regards me with a mixture of anger and wariness. I just hope she can't see my desperation as I look back at her.

“You can spend one night without Ferone's dick.”

She glares. “You don't get it.”

I angle her until her back hits the wall in my foyer, and then I lean close and say, “I get it. You've been fucking that asshole every night since you got back from Neverwood, and you can't bring yourself to spend one night without his wimpy, tiny little dick.”

To my surprise, she looks confused. “I haven't been sleeping with Ferone.”

I laugh, but the laugh is filled with anger. “Everybody knows. You haven't exactly been subtle about who you're letting into that pussy of yours.”

She gives me an irritated look. “People talk, Callum, that's what they do. If the rumors are true, you've banged your way through the whole cheerleading squad, all the science geeks, and you're making your round through the art club. All in a week. I imagine your dick is pretty tired after all that.”

I study her face, trying to see any signs that she's lying, but there are none. “You're telling me that after what I just walked in on, you're not sleeping with Ferone.”

Her cheeks heat. “That was actually going to be our first time. Not that it's any of your business.”

I take her by the back of the neck and force her to look at me. “Don't lie to me.”

Her eyes glare into mine. “Why would I lie to you? I'm a free woman. I can do

whatever the hell I want, and it's none of your business."

"People said they saw him leaving your house."

"He's never been to my house," she says, emphasizing each word.

I release her, feeling strange. She hasn't slept with Ferone? It's like all the strength leaves my body, and I just want to sit down. Over the past few weeks I've been fueled by jealousy and rage, and just about nothing else. But I was wrong? How is this possible?

"Time to go," she says, taking a step toward the door.

"Go?" I say, the word coming out broken. "Go where?"

She gives me a strange look. "Back to the party with Ferone. I have plans."

I stare. "Plans to fuck him?"

She crosses her arms over her chest. "Yes."

It's like I've gathered the broken pieces of myself in my arms, and now I don't know what to do with them. "You don't have to go back to him. You don't have to sleep with him."

Looking away, she says, "Yes. Yes, I do."

When she tries to head to the door, I catch her arm. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asks quietly.

“For everything awful I’ve said to you. For the awful way I’ve been treating you. I thought you and Ferone... I thought you were together, and I couldn’t handle it.”

She doesn’t look at me. “You were cruel, Callum. I don’t know if I’m ever going to be able to forgive you for that.”

I move closer to her, looking down at her, feeling broken. What had I said to her? Something about her mom and her dad. Biting words. Awful words. I don’t deserve her forgiveness after that, but I need it.

“You’re right. I deserve that. I used the things that were most important to you to hurt you, but I’m never going to do that again. I’m going to be a better man for you. I know that you can’t believe that right now, but you’ll see. With time.”

She finally looks up at me with uncertainty. “I have a lot going on. I need someone I can trust, and I think Ferone is that person.”

I shake my head, a knife twisting in my heart. “I’m that person. I know things are complicated, but I swear, I’m that person.”

“You don’t get it,” she says brokenly. “I have to go. I have to sleep with Ferone.”

“Why?” And I’m begging her with that word.

“I just do.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s complicated.”

“I don’t care.”

“I’m pregnant!” she shouts, then covers her mouth with both hands, looking horrified.

Pregnant? Did she just say she was pregnant? She hasn’t been with anyone else... That means... That means she’s carrying my child. Elora is going to have my baby.

Happiness explodes inside of me, and I pull her into a hug, grasping her tightly. My Elora. The woman I love. Pregnant.

“I can’t believe it,” I say, a lump forming in my throat. “I’m so happy.”

“Happy?” she asks, sounding shocked. “You know this isn’t a good thing.”

“How can it not be a good thing? This is the best thing I’ve ever heard. You’re growing my baby inside of you.” We’re going to have a family. A real family.

She struggles out of my hug and looks up at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Callum, what do you think they’ll do when they find out I’m pregnant? What’s the first question they’ll ask?”

I stare, not comprehending. “They’ll be happy a Gold Keeper got pregnant so easily. They’ll be amazed.”

“Not when they find out you’re the father.” Her words drop like stones between us.

It’s weird. I hadn’t thought about that at all. Just the idea that my Elora was pregnant with our baby was all I cared about. Now, the reality of our situation settles over me. There are two families. Two separate families. Never in a million years would anyone think about the two families becoming one. What’s more, it seems likely that all future Gold Keepers will only have one child. Would this be our one child? They’d never be able to accept only one Gold Keeper going to get Goldarium. So, what would they do about it?

“It’s not like they can undo this. It’s done,” I say, picturing telling the Council, telling them to suck it, and that Elora and I would be raising this baby together, with or without their approval.

“Callum.” She says my name softly. “They could try to get rid of the baby. I’d have to be careful all the time. Watch my back. Watch the foods I eat. Even watch the shampoo I use. You know how many ways they have of getting rid of a baby.”

Fuck. My hands curl into fists. “Let them try. Let them try to hurt my woman or my child. I will burn this fucking place to the ground and leave nothing but ashes.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “That’s a nice idea, Callum, but that’s not the world we live in.” Her sharp intake of breath is audible. “The only way for this baby to be safe is for them to think it’s someone else’s. There has to be a possibility, no matter how slim, that this is Ferone’s baby. He might have doubts, but he won’t share them. I know it. The baby will be safe. It’ll be raised safely with Ferone and I, and—”

“No.” I’m shaking my head. “No, that can’t happen.”

“Callum—”

“Look at me. There’s no way that I can sit by and watch you raise our baby with another man.”

Her beautiful mismatched eyes stare into mine. “I don’t think we have a choice.”

“We do.”

“Then what’s your solution?”

“I—I don’t know,” I say, “but I’m going to come up with one.”

“In three days?” she asks, sounding desperate.

“Three days?” I repeat.

“That’s when the physical is. Then they’ll know, and it’ll be too late to pin Ferone as the father... unless he and I work something out.”

I come closer and touch her arms. She steps away from my touch, and my hands fall. “I’m going to come up with a solution, okay? I swear it.”

“Are you willing to gamble with our child’s life on this?”

My hands clench. “Please, just give me until the physical. I’ll come up with a plan.”

She doesn’t look convinced. “I’ll give you two days. If you don’t have an idea before then, I’m going forward with my plan.”

I try to hug her, but she steps away.

Fuck. “I know I hurt you, but thank you for giving me this time.”

The sadness in her eyes tears at my heartstrings. “Two days, Callum. Then, no matter how hard it is, no matter how angry you get, I’m following through with my plan. This baby is too important to risk otherwise.”

I try to think of something to say. Something that will fix the hurt between us. Something that will make her realize just how much I love her. “I would do anything for you. Anything at all.”

“Except trust me, it seems,” she says quietly.

My heart aches. “Elora—”

There’s a sound in the house. We both turn and look into the shadows. I glance back at Elora and see her wide eyes. She rushes for the door and slips out. I want to go after her, but instead I tear through the house, looking for the source of the sound, and find no one and nothing.

Maybe it was just the house settling. It probably was, but I hate that it frightened her. There was so much left to say. So much left to do. But for now, I have to focus on the problem in front of me. I need to find a way to protect my baby and the woman I love, without losing them to another man.

And I need to be sober to do it.

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SIX

Elora

Sprawled on my bed the next morning, I stare at another page in my mother's journal. I'd read all of them, but many of the pages contained cryptic notes. One, she spoke incessantly about a well-pruned bird draped in gold that was cowardly and greedy, but that had a speck of gold in its heart. She said she wouldn't trust the bird with much, but that she had one weakness. It didn't make sense to me. I knew she wasn't talking about a bird, but I couldn't figure out who the hell she was talking about.

She also wrote about my dad. To no one's surprise, she describes him as an amazing husband and father. There were plenty of entries about my daily life with the two of them, and it seemed most of our days were filled with laughter and fun. She describes me nicely, but the stories paint the picture of a passionate child with a bit of a temper.

All of it made me smile.

Then there was the blueprint of a building. I'd be comparing it to a map of Paradise Falls, but I couldn't seem to figure out which of the science buildings the blueprint was modeled after. I sigh and set the journal and blueprint on top of the advertisement for the new science center building.

Rubbing the bridge of my nose, I try to figure out what to do from here. "You have to keep looking for clues," I tell myself softly.

Turning back to the book and the blueprint, I pick them up, but glance at the

advertisement as I do. I freeze, then pick up the advertisement and set it next to the blueprint.

“Holy shit.”

They’re a match. The new science center building has the same large opening as the blueprint and the same larger-than-average first floor. As I compare the windows, a sinking feeling grows inside of me. There’s no doubt that they’re a match, but why was my mom studying a blueprint of the new building? How is all of this connected? And why the hell would the Council remake the same exact building?

I need answers.

Gritting my teeth, I think of the two people I suspect actually know something and hide the journal and map back into the bottom of my Neverwood bag. I know it’s a longshot, but I hurry out of the house and head back to the woods, to the place I’d seen Ari and Veric. People wave to me as I pass, grinning. They try to rope me into conversations, but I politely tell them, “Another time.”

Fewer people are on the streets as I get to the edge of town. Then I slow my walking and sneak around, looking for any sign of Security. When I see no one, I slip into the trees and trace my way back to where I saw Ari and Veric.

There’s no sign of them, but I keep searching, aware of where I’m going, in case I get lost. I’m about to give up and accept that this whole thing is a big mistake when I see a flash of red between the trees. Rushing over to it, I stumble across both Veric and Ari. They have identical looks of shock on their faces as we stare back at one another.

“What are you doing here?” Ari asks, her voice filled with surprise.

“What do you know about the fire that killed our parents?”

Ari stiffens. “Nothing.”

“You know something ,” I accuse.

“You’re wrong.”

I glare. “Do you really think the fire was an accident?”

She curses, grabs my arm, and starts hauling me into the woods.

I allow it, mostly because these two couldn’t possibly be dangerous to me. Any chance that they have information that would be helpful to me far outweighs the risk of going with them. Still, I don’t like how far we trek through the woods before she finally stops. Veric stops silently behind her.

“Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to say things like that?” she hisses at me.

“Why?” I challenge.

“It could get us killed,” she snaps.

“Why?” I ask again.

She glares.

“Do you think the fire was an accident?”

Her gaze slips to Veric’s, but his face is a mask of nothingness. “No. No, we don’t think the fire was an accident, okay? Is that everything?”

“Why were our parents killed? I mean, out of everyone, why them?”

She looks uneasy, glancing around the silent woods again. “Our parents were killed to keep a secret.”

A secret? “What secret?”

She doesn’t answer.

“What aren’t you telling me?” I ask.

She snaps, “You do realize that you’re the only one in this little group who can’t be killed for asking dangerous questions, right?”

I hadn’t thought of that. “I just need to know.”

“Questions are dangerous.” Veric’s low voice comes out low and husky from lack of use.

Ari’s gaze flies to him in shock.

He continues, “My father was a scientist working on genetic research at one of the labs. Just before the grand opening of the new science center, he was switched over to that new building. From that day on, he changed as a person. I remember him being stressed and upset. My mom would try to talk to him, but he seemed afraid to tell her whatever it was. I remember her telling him that they’d never had secrets between them, and he told her that these were the kinds of secrets people died over. She begged him to leave the project, but he said this was not a project he could walk away from.” His gaze is distant. “I remember it all. Everything from those days before he died and she disappeared.”

The way he says “disappeared” sounds angry, like she hadn’t disappeared at all, and I wonder if that means she’s dead. Probably. My heart aches for him. To lose both your

parents in such a short time... I can't even imagine.

Ari twists her hands together nervously. "My mom and your mom met for days leading up to the opening of the building. Days where they would have us play together, while they talked in another room. But I would sneak over to their door to listen in on their conversation. They were talking about how to destroy that building. It seemed very important to them."

I frown. Destroy a science building? "Why?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know."

I look at Veric, and he shakes his head too.

Everything seems to center around this buildings—what they were hiding, what they were fighting for, where they died, and even that the building was important enough for the Council to rebuild.

"Do you have any idea why I don't remember anything?" I ask.

She takes a deep breath. "The Council has the ability to play with our memories when it's convenient to them."

That's sick. Someone played with my memories?

I need to figure this out. I need answers.

"I'm breaking into the science building tonight," I tell them, knowing in my gut that that's what I have to do.

Ari takes a step back. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. That seems like a dangerous idea."

“How else will we figure out the truth?”

She lifts a brow. “Why do we need to figure out the truth? Our parents have been dead for years, why not just move on?”

“Have you moved on?” I ask.

Silence.

“After today, there will be people working in the labs every day. It’ll be impossible to get in without being noticed. This is our only chance, our only shot to see what was important enough to lead to our parents’ deaths.”

“I’m in,” Veric says simply.

I nod, then look at Ari.

There’s a flash of anger in her gaze. “If you get caught, you’ll get a slap on the wrist and Veric will be in major trouble. So would I. That’s not a risk I’m willing to take.”

“Suit yourself.” I hesitate. “But I think you’ll regret not taking a chance to get to the bottom of this.”

“I won’t,” she snaps. “Sometimes self-preservation is the most important thing.”

“So be it.”

She turns to Veric with a pleading look in her eyes. “Don’t do this.”

His eyes gentle as they fall on her, but he shakes his head.

Her hands ball into fists, and she huffs before spinning around and storming off.

Veric gives me a look, waiting.

“The blueprints show a side door on the east side of the building. I’ll try to get an access card and meet you there after nightfall, when the celebration is at its busiest.”

He nods, then follows after Ari.

I wait for them to go, then release a slow breath. Being pregnant, I need to be smarter. I need to hide that I’m carrying Callum’s child and focus on a plan for that. This seems like the last thing I should be doing, but I was right. It’s now or never. A final chance to uncover the secrets surrounding my mother’s death.

I just hope I’m making the right choice.

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SEVEN

Elora

All around me it's loud and chaotic. School bands make their way through the streets playing music as people crowd the sidewalks, screaming and yelling. Vendors walk around handing out free ice cream, hot dogs, churros, big pretzels, cotton candy, and more. Banners are strung on all the buildings and balloons decorate all the light poles. Big spotlights are pointed up at the new science building, which stands empty.

It's a formidable-looking structure, with a big entrance into a gleaming foyer that screams perfection. But other than the foyer, nothing else can be seen within the buildings. The windows reflect back the world all around us rather than what's within, adding to the sense of secrecy around the building.

But maybe I'm the only one who feels that way about the place.

Sitting on a big plaque in front of the building is the name Walker in big letters, as they had dedicated the building to my mother. It was henceforth to be known as the Walker Building. Underneath her name is a smaller plaque with the names of Veric Perthran, Zave Radyn, and Ermes Railan. The three people who died in the fire along with her.

People had cried when they announced who the building was dedicated to. They'd held their loved ones. But I'd just stared at the building and felt... empty. Something about this place resulted in my mother's death, and I'm going to find out what it is. Until then, I need to try not to feel too disgusted about them naming the new building

after her when she wanted to destroy the other one so badly.

The council members are up on a big stage in front of the steps leading up to the building, and a crowd had formed around them. They'd already given their speeches, talking about how exciting it is to have their first building made entirely out of goldarium, and that it would allow them to make great strides in medicine.

"Isn't this amazing?" a woman asks, stepping into my field of vision. "Your mom would be so proud."

I attempt a smile. "Thank you."

Fireworks explode in the sky overhead, drawing all gazes upward. Callum is suddenly in front of me, looking like an entirely different man. He's wearing a black button-up shirt and white slacks. His hair has been cut and styled, and his beard is gone.

"We need to talk," he says.

I want to. I want to see if he's come up with a solution for our baby, but I can't right now. Things need to be timed just right if I'm going to get into the building.

"Later," I say.

He frowns, looking confused, which is when his mom is suddenly at his side. Her short hair is sleek, as always, and she wears her trademark white color, although, for once, she's wearing a dress that covers her arms and reaches down to her ankles instead of a pantsuit. It's got lots of harsh lines in a modern style that I don't like at all.

"How are you enjoying the celebration?" she asks, and her gaze searches mine.

Time to lie. “It’s wonderful.”

“We thought you might like the building being named after your mom.”

“It was a very thoughtful gesture,” I tell her, trying not to grind out the words.

She clasps her hands together, looking between us for a brief moment before she says, “I wanted to let you know that you won’t be having your physical in two days. I decided it might be best to wait until after you return to Neverwood, since that should be your focus.”

I try not to look surprised. “Okay.” I want to say thank you, but I hold it back. A physical wouldn’t be something for us to put much thought into.

Callum, however, looks triumphant. “Great, Mom, thanks.”

She gives a tight-lipped smile. “Of course.”

It’s uncomfortable for a minute while she lingers between us, but then Councilman Vyn calls her name, and she tells us a hurried goodbye before rushing off through the crowd. I take a step away from Callum, wanting to get to that alley, but he takes a step closer to me.

“Elora...”

“I seriously can’t talk now,” I say.

His eyes narrow. “Why?”

I bite my lip.

He lifts a brow and gestures to the alley on the other side of the building, away from the one I need to go to. I don't want to go there. I don't want to talk to him right now, but I suspect he's not going to leave this thing alone until we talk, so I nod.

We go there separately, trying not to look like we're going to the same place. People stop both of us as we make our way there, and we're both the picture of the perfect Gold Keepers. When he slips into the shadows, I wait a few minutes before following after him.

When we get there, he pulls me behind a dumpster. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," I say, avoiding his gaze.

He doesn't touch me, but with the intensity of his gaze he might as well have. "Tell me."

I sigh. "You're not going to like it."

"Ferone?" he asks angrily.

I shake my head.

"Then what?"

Letting out a slow breath, I say, "I'm breaking into the science center today. There's something about this place that's connected to my mother's death. This will be my only chance to go in before people start working in it, so I'm going to steal a key card from one of the scientists, meet Veric in the alley on the other side, and explore the building."

His brows have lifted so high that they've disappeared into his hair. "Why Veric?"

“His dad died in this building too, and he suspects the fire wasn’t an accident either. He’s going to help me.”

He’s quiet for so long that I think he might not say anything when he says, “Okay, let’s go. If we’re going to do this, we should do it when it’s crowded and busy, so Security won’t notice us sneaking around. The later it gets, the more the crowd will disperse.”

I stare at him in confusion. “Wait, you want to go with me?”

He smiles at me. “There’s a new rule. We’re a team. Here or Neverwood, it doesn’t matter.”

“Seriously?”

He glances at my stomach like he really wants to touch me, but he doesn’t. “We’re a family.” That’s all he says, but the words sound important. Powerful.

I step away from him, feeling uncertain. He’d treated me like crap. He’d said awful things. I couldn’t just pretend none of that happened, no matter how much I wanted to, but I also needed to pick my battles.

“It’s okay,” he says softly. “I know it’ll take time to fix things between us. Let’s just focus on your goal for tonight.”

We separately slip back into the crowd. I make my way to where the scientists are standing near the stage. These ten men and two women will be in charge of whatever they’ll be doing in this building. I scan all of them, then see one man with his key card clipped to the pocket of his lab coat. The man who’s currently running this science center, so his key should open everything.

Bingo!

Making my way to him, I plaster on my best smile. “Dr. Masters!”

The man is maybe ten years older than me, but he already has a bit of a combover. His glasses are far too large for his face. He’s wearing a checkered shirt and yellow pants beneath his lab coat, and he swings his body toward me as I stride up to him.

Instantly, his cheeks heat. “Elora Walker, to what do I owe the honor?”

I keep that smile pasted on. “I just wanted to say how excited I am for the new science building to open.”

“Oh?” he asks, but there’s something strange in his voice. He looks away from me and at the ground.

Trying not to be thrown off by his strange reaction, I say, “Yes, I just think what you scientists do is so important to the community. I’m not sure what your specialty is exactly, but I’m sure you’ll be in there saving lives and making Paradise Falls all the better.”

His gaze remains locked on the ground. “Yes, of course.” He swallows so hard that it’s visible.

Now or never. I cross the distance between us and pull him into a hug. His whole body stiffens, and I slip my hand into his lab coat pocket, unclip the key card, and shove it into my own pocket. “I just can never thank you enough for what you’re doing for my people.”

I pull away from him, smiling broadly.

He finally looks at me with dark eyes full of confusion. “You’re completely different than I thought you were.”

What a weird thing to say. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

He looks embarrassed, almost guilty too. “It’s a good thing. I guess. Or maybe not. I don’t know.”

I tell him goodbye, trying not to think about the weird interaction. Then, I slowly, subtly make my way through the crowd and toward the alley on the opposite side of the building. It takes time to find that middle ground between responding to people and doing my best to slip unnoticed by as many people as possible. But I finally reach the shadows of the alley.

I creep to the other end, barely able to see through the shadows, and flinch when someone comes up running behind me. I whirl around, and my heartbeat instantly starts to return to normal when I see Callum. I press my finger to my lips, and he nods. We continue forward until we see movement, then both creep a little forward, wondering if it’s Veric.

Instead, we find Serrill and Teth... kissing . Serrill is pressed up against the door that leads into the science building, and Teth has him trapped against it. Suddenly, Serrill’s eyes flash open. He spots us, and then he shoves Teth away. Teth spins around, fists balled, a look of terror on his face, before he sees us.

“It’s okay,” I say, because I don’t know what else to say.

In response, Teth takes off running. Serrill gives me an uncertain look, then runs after Teth. I glance back at Callum, and his mouth is hanging open. It’s so comical I almost want to laugh, but I don’t. Maybe because some part of me suspected that something about their relationship was different than a friendship.

This is a serious thing though. If anyone found out, Teth and Serrill would disappear. Callum knows that. He won't say a word, even if he is shocked right now. So, I can be grateful at least that we were the two people who caught them.

We creep over to the door leading into the science building and wait in the shadows. Minutes tick by. I start to wonder if we should go in instead of waiting for Veric, but then he seems to meld out of the shadows, appearing in front of me.

I don't have to tell him to be quiet, because he's always quiet.

Looking at the keypad with the little red light, I take a breath and press the key card to it. It instantly turns green, and the door pops open. The three of us enter as quietly as humanly possible, then shut the door silently behind us. I gesture with my hands to check all the doors on this floor, and we get started.

The first thing that stands out is the fact that everything is made of goldarium. It's not that everything looks different, I can actually feel it. I can feel the substance in every surface, the strength behind each thing. It's bizarre when I think about it, wasting goldarium like this. What could possibly be the benefit of this?

It's absolutely wasteful. I wonder how many trips our fathers had to take to make this building. How many times they had to risk their lives. It's disgraceful.

Using the key, we get in one door after another, finding one identical office after another. We search drawers and cabinets, but everything is empty, the occupants not yet moved in. I try starting a computer, but it needs a username and password, so I just shut it down again. Then we head up the stairs to the second floor.

As we come out into it, I can't help but gasp.

"What the fuck is this?" Callum murmurs.

Veric's entire body goes rigid beside us.

I take another step in, just staring around. It looks like... a torture chamber. I don't know how else to describe it. It's a huge lab with tables with straps on them, and machines next to the tables. All along the back wall are cages made out of pure goldarium that look to be made for huge animals. Needles, scalpels, and horrifying instruments I can't even name are on the trays.

As I continue to walk through the tables, I see the other side of the lab. There are... huge test tubes on tables, large enough to fit medium-sized pigs in them, filled with blue liquid. Beneath them are controls that seem to change whatever liquid is in the tubes.

"What is this?" I ask both of them.

Veric shakes his head, looking horrified.

Callum's mouth draws into a hard line. "Is it possible it's for creatures from Neverwood?"

My stomach drops, and I have to take several deep breaths to keep from hurling. Damn my sensitive stomach! This baby won't be happy unless I'm constantly puking.

"There's an armored room over there," Callum says, pointing to it.

We head over and swipe the badge. To our shock, it opens. There, in front of us, is the largest ball of goldarium I've ever seen. It's enclosed in a crystal chamber. Lights are pointed at it, and as the goldarium springs and moves within the crystal chamber, we all stand in silence.

"Why are the lights going out and the council acting desperate for us to go to

Neverwood if they have this goldarium?" I ask, shaking my head.

Callum doesn't hesitate. "They must be saving it for whatever they're doing here."

What are they doing here?

"We should see the third floor," I say.

We go back in the stairwell and creep up to the third floor. I open the doors, and we all step inside to see... a large nursery. I mean, a huge freaking nursery. There are dozens of bassinets lined up and areas for the babies to play. As we continue through the rooms, we find another large room meant for a whole classroom full of toddlers, and then a room for even older kids.

"I don't get it," I say. "One floor for torturing animals. Another for raising kids. What is this place?"

Both men look as confused as I feel.

"We should go," Callum says.

The thing is, I have more questions than answers. I thought seeing this place would put all the puzzle pieces into place, but instead I just seem to have been thrown a whole box of center pieces. Still, he's right. We won't learn anymore just by staring around.

I glance at Veric. "We'll talk another time?"

He nods his head.

We all head back down the stairs and slip out the side door into the alley. One at a

time, we weave back into the crowds of people and go our separate ways. But as I head home, I feel like I'm being haunted by something dark and twisted. Whatever ghost that killed my mother.

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EIGHT

Elora

I clutch the phone in my hand, brushing away tears as Beva continues to talk excitedly. My gaze goes outside my bedroom window to the early morning sky, and I try not to wallow in my sadness. This is it. There's no more time left. My best friend is leaving, and I'm never going to see her again.

"It's amazing!" she exclaims. "Can you believe it? Tomorrow morning I'll be leaving to my new college."

Yes, I can believe it, because I love Beva. Selfishly, I feel like everything I love gets taken away, even though deep down I know this is what's best for her. She has to go, and I have to support her in leaving.

"That's wonderful," I say, heart hammering.

"I just wish my parents were allowed to call and tell me what it's like. I bet it's amazing. I mean, if the drugs, violence, and war were that bad, they wouldn't let us leave to study at the universities on the outside, right?"

"Right." I try to sound chipper, even going so far as to force a smile, even though she can't see me.

"And I reached out to Teth since he's leaving too. His university is several hours away from mine, but we're going to make plans to talk and meet up, if we can, so I

won't be completely alone after my family leaves."

I think of the silent guy who only seemed connected to Callum and Serrill. "Yeah, having a friend on the outside will be great."

My thoughts go to Serrill and Teth. Callum and I had seen them kiss. I'd never heard of two guys kissing before. Rules are in place to say that such things are illegal, even though no one seems to care about that law. Now, I wonder if it's more common than I know.

As long as Serrill's happy, that's all I care about. Happy, and safe. But if they are going to continue kissing until Teth leaves, they'll have to be more careful about it. If anyone other than Callum and I see them... well, they'll disappear.

"Do you have any idea when Teth is leaving?"

She laughs. "He's actually going to be on the same flight as me. We'll be having a layover in his city, then we'll head to mine."

My heart sinks. Callum must be so sad. We're both losing our best friends tomorrow, at a time when we need them the most. But maybe it's best that they're going. The Council won't be able to use them to hurt us if things go south.

"I'm really happy for you," I say.

There's a rush of breath over the line. "I wish I could be here for you. I know how much you need someone..."

"You'll be here for me in spirit," I tell her.

"I will be," she says fiercely. "I'll think about you every day and send good thoughts

your way.”

“Anytime I need you, I’ll just remember that.”

She’s quiet for a long minute. “You’re going to do great, you know that right? You’re going to accomplish wonderful things and be great at everything you do.” At being a mom, but she doesn’t say that.

“I hope so.”

“I know so.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat. “So, should we have a celebration meal tonight with Teth to wish you good luck on your journey?”

“Yeah, an early dinner would be great, so I’m not too tired for my flight. I’ll set it up with Teth and text you the details.”

“Perfect.”

Our last meal together. I will not spend the whole time crying.

“Alright, I’ll get going. See you tonight!”

“See you tonight!”

I get off the phone and shove my cell phone back into my pocket. Then I get off the bed, standing and feeling lost. I don’t know what to do, but I know I don’t want to keep standing in my room staring at nothing.

I open my door and head to my parents’ room. I open the door all the way. My

stepmom is lying sprawled on the bed. A bottle of wine has spilled out of her hand and onto the floor.

I take the bottle out of her hand and place it on her side table, then grab a towel and clean up the mess. Ignoring the other bottles of wine, since the cleaning lady will take care of them, I just cover her up. For a second, I linger, staring down at her face. She looks like a doll that someone has played with too hard. I wonder what it's like for her to finally have the life her parents always wanted for her, being married to a Gold Keeper, having no responsibility in the world. Is it everything she thought it would be? Is she happy?

It's strange that I don't know. That I have no connection to a woman who has been around me since I was a young child. I want to feel close to her, but I just don't.

I wonder if she feels the same way about me.

There's a loud knocking on the front door. I jump a little, cast one last look back at my stepmom, then leave her bedroom, closing the door behind me. When I open the front door, I'm shocked to see a team of four scientists and a bunch of the council members at my door. Councilwoman Prisma, Councilman Runo, Councilman Vyn, Councilwoman Oliva, and Councilman Abraxas. Everyone except Callum's mom.

"What's going on?" I ask in complete shock.

One of the scientists lifts a silver case. "Time for your physical."

My mouth drops open for a half a second before I slam it shut. "But it was canceled."

Councilman Vyn steps forward, and I step back, not wanting the bastard near me. "Council Member Kela cancelled the physical without the agreement from the rest of the Council. We took a new vote and decided it would take place today instead."

They voted without Callum's mom? This is strange. His mom has never been the leader of the Council officially, but she always sort of has been by default, since she was willing to do the most work. Why would they do this behind her back?

And what the hell am I supposed to do? Reality hits me with a cold flash that rolls through my blood. If I do this physical, they're going to know I'm pregnant, and I haven't slept with Ferone yet. If I can't get out of this, I'm in trouble. My baby is in trouble.

"I'm actually completely exhausted from being up all night partying, can we do it another day?" I ask, then start to close the door.

A shoe stops the door from closing. Councilman Vyn shoves it back open with a sickening sweet smile on his old face... because he is old, even if he uses goldarium to look younger. "Actually, today would be best."

My heart races. "Wouldn't it be better to meet at a science building to do all the tests in one shot?"

One of the scientists, the older man with a silver case, lifts it and says, "Actually, we have everything we need right here." Behind him, three of the other scientists lift their identical silver cases too.

"Well—" I start, but Councilman Vyn pushes his way inside, and the others follow.

The scientist opens his silver case and pulls out a cup. "First, we'll need some urine. Here you go! Just fill her up!" He walks over and pushes the cup into my hand.

Everyone stares at me. I rack my brain for a way out of this and come up empty.

"Have you already done Callum's? He might be pissed if I go first."

“We’ll do his tomorrow,” Councilman Vyn says with a smile.

“Maybe we could switch days, since I’m not feeling well.”

Councilman Vyn comes closer, his gaze running over me in an unsettling way. “You’re a Gold Keeper. I’m sure a little partying is nothing compared to what you do in Neverwood, so why don’t you be a good girl and go pee in that damn cup.”

A shudder rolls through me, and I turn and head for my bedroom, then I go into the bathroom and close and lock the door. Pulling open my phone, I do the only thing I can think of: I call Callum.

He answers after one ring. “Hello.”

“The Council is at my house giving me a physical. I told them you might get mad if I go first.”

He doesn’t miss a beat. “I’ll be there as fast as I can. Stall them.”

The call ends, and I sit down on the lid of the toilet, feeling sick. My sensitive stomach rolls painfully, and I have to fight the urge to vomit. What do I do? Will Callum make it in time?

Time ticks away. I jump when someone knocks at the door.

Councilman Vyn’s slimy voice comes through the door. “Are you finished?”

“I can’t pee,” I lie. Just speaking to him makes me feel even sicker.

His voice comes low and slow. “We have a stimulant gel out here. I could put it on you, if it would help.”

A picture of him putting a stimulant gel on me comes to my mind, and my stomach heaves for a second before I manage to keep it down. “No, I’m fine.”

“You’ve got five minutes, then we try the gel.”

It’s strange. I’m a Gold Keeper. The only heir of one of the two most powerful families. I should be treated with respect, but I’m not. This is the problem. The thing I never saw before my dad disappeared. The Council, our people, no one actually cares about us, other than our ability to give them goldarium. I don’t have any real power.

I pee in the cup, then seal it and set it on the counter, deciding to wait out the clock. Callum will be here. He’ll arrive soon, and then he’ll come up with some way to get me out of this. Some way to protect our child.

There’s a sharp knock at the door. “It’s time.”

I leap to my feet, grab my urine sample, and open the door. “I’m done.”

Councilman Vyn is standing with the gel in his hand with a grin that quickly vanishes. Everyone else has set up in my room, and they’re all looking uncomfortable. Clearly, they don’t like the idea of some old man touching me, but not enough to actually stop him.

Assholes.

Council Member Prisma yawns near my bed. “Do we really need to stay here? We made our point to Council Member Kela. We’re still on schedule. Do we need to do anything else?”

To my surprise, Council Member Vyn waves them away. “You may go.”

A scientist with a big bald head and big green eyes gestures to me. “Come sit on the bed. I’m going to take your blood sample.”

I don’t move as the council members file out. Everyone but Vyn. “I actually don’t see the point in taking my blood. I’m a Gold Keeper. You have my blood sample results from when I was a girl. You know there’s nothing genetically wrong with me, and we don’t get sick, so nothing would have changed.”

The bald guy looks at Council Member Vyn.

He draws himself up taller near me. “This is now standard protocol. All of you will be getting physicals on a regular basis, starting with you and Callum, then continuing this new procedure with your kids.”

“I just think it’s pointless,” I say, stalling for time.

“Why? You afraid of a little poke?” he asks, invading my space.

I take a step back. “I’m a Gold Keeper. I’m not afraid of anything. I just think this is dumb.”

“Dumb or not, your Council is ordering you to do this,” he says, his voice angry, like my refusal is a personal slight to him.

The scientist gives me a sympathetic look while another opens their silver case and places my urine sample into it. I see a spot beside it for my blood sample, and my mind starts working.

“Okay,” I finally manage, then I sit down gingerly on the edge of my bed.

They take my blood sample, then close it up and put it in the silver case before

closing the thing. Next, they run through all the standard tests, testing my reflexes, checking my throat and my nose, having me touch my toes while they look at my spine.

I do everything slowly, taking my time. I chat with them, try to distract them, and all along try to keep an eye on the silver case. It looks exactly like the other three, so I have no interest in mixing it up. Still, they're always opening one case or another as they run through the tests, and I find myself trying to subtly ensure that my case doesn't get switched.

Suddenly, Callum comes crashing into my room, looking pissed. "What the hell?"

Everyone tenses.

"Why the fuck does the Walker get her physical first?" he shouts.

The scientists draw into the corner of my room, looking nervous. Councilman Vyn, however, just looks irritated. Not that I blame him. The Runefalls are not fun to deal with when they're angry.

"We were going to do your physical tomorrow," Councilman Vyn says coldly.

"Like hell!" Callum yells.

They square off, getting into each other's face as they yell back and forth. The scientists grab the cases and move them out of the way of the potential fight, and I'm again left watching them, making certain I have the right case. When Callum pushes the councilman, the scientists suddenly start trying to break them up. I slip toward the cases, grab the right one, and hurry out. I shove the case in a closet, then come back.

I grab one of the scientist's arms. "You should warn the Council about what's going

on.”

He gives a frantic nod and runs out of the room.

I wait long enough to give him time to be gone while Callum and Councilman Vyn scream in each other’s face about how they both have egos, etc. Callum’s gaze catches mine, and I give a little nod.

He steps back. “You know what, give the bitch her physical. Because we all know that Runefalls are better than Walkers, and my physical will prove that.”

Relief washes over everyone. The three scientists remaining grab their cases and head out. Councilman Vyn gives Callum a warning glance, but doesn’t say a word, probably because deep down he’s relieved to be getting out of here alive.

Callum leaves with the others, but I know he won’t be gone long. I wait, counting the seconds, needing to be sure that the scientists and councilman are long gone before I dig out the case. Before Callum comes back. Eventually, Callum slips in from my backdoor, and I lead him to the hall closet, where I pull out the case.

“That’s it?” he asks quietly.

I nod.

We go to my room. I put the case on the bed, open it, and feel the color drain from my face. “This isn’t possible.”

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

I collapse in front of it, breathing hard. “This is the wrong case. They got the one with my blood and urine.”

“Fuck. Do you know what science building they were going to with it?”

I shake my head.

“We could get in the truck. We’ll be faster than them... We can find them.”

“Callum,” I say softly. We could try, but there are a million different ways to get to the science center, a dozen different buildings they could go to. We’d have to be the luckiest people in the world to catch them, and then what? Steal it from them in broad daylight? “It’s over.”

“But—”

“All this was ever going to do is buy us time. As soon as they realized my samples were missing, they’d be back for more. We have to come up with a real plan.”

He kneels down beside me and takes my face in his hands. “It’s okay. You and our baby will be safe.”

“Because I’m going to sleep with Ferone,” I say.

His expression flashes with anger. “No.”

“Then give me another plan. Give me a way to save our baby.”

He’s breathing hard. “Do you think Ferone would agree to a deal? To pretend like it’s his baby? He likely won’t even ask questions if it gets him what he finally wants.”

I think. “He might.”

Actually, I know he’ll agree to it. Anyone with half a brain would accept the deal.

Hell, if he was crazy enough to say no, someone else wouldn't be. This is a solution that could work, even though passing the baby off as his would be simpler.

“Then ask him. It'll take them a couple days to run your labs. We'll have everything arranged by then.”

He leans in to kiss me, but I pull back, looking toward my door in a panic as I sense movement on the other side.

Callum rises to his feet, creeps toward the door, and throws it open— except, no one is there. It's just the empty hallway. Yet, it's a reminder. We'd have no way to explain why he and I were here alone. He has to go.

His gaze holds mine, and I can feel a thousand things he wants to say, but then he turns and leaves. I sit back against my bed, head in my hands.

Everything is going to change. Nothing will ever be the same again.

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NINE

Elora

I'd actually suggested a clearing near the forest where I'd seen Ari and Veric as the place to share my last meal with Beva and Serrill. We'd set up a blanket, ordered all our favorite foods from all of Beva's favorite restaurants, and now we had a feast worthy of kings spread out around us. Leaves were falling from the trees. A cool evening breeze was blowing through the branches. It was the perfect place to say our goodbye.

"So, how did you find this place? It's pretty," Serrill asks, combing back his long, black hair with his fingers.

"Ari and Veric actually showed it to me," I say.

They both look at me intrigued, so I start telling the story about how I found them both over here, exploring the woods, with maps in their hands. The more I talk, the more intrigued they look, until I'm finally finished.

"I wonder what they were looking for," Serrill says, sounding curious.

Shrugging, I say, "There's never been anything interesting in these woods."

Beva sits back, a puzzled expression on her face. "Except the ancient path out of Paradise Falls. That's the only thing someone might need to use maps to search for. And they may be using different colors to highlight the different paths they've tried."

“The ancient path?” I’m shocked. I’d never thought about that, but now it makes perfect sense. “But why would anyone take that much time and effort to find it?”

“Maybe they want to leave,” Beva says, and I can tell her analytical brain is working.

“But even if they find the one way out of Paradise Falls, the trip would be really dangerous, and then they’d have to find a way to survive on the outside,” I say.

Serrill shrugs. “Maybe searching for it is just... like a hobby for them?”

“Maybe,” I say, but I decide right then and there that I’m going to ask them more about it.

“Those two certainly are interesting,” Beva says, laughing and shaking her head.

“You couldn’t catch me dead in the woods unless something was chasing me.”

Serrill laughs too. “Same. If you see me in the woods, you better start looking for the bear that’s trying to eat me.”

We all laugh, and continue digging into our various foods. This is a celebration, after all. Our last meal with Beva.

“I actually have some news,” Serrill says, and he seems uncharacteristically shy.

“What kind of news?”

We’d avoided any topic of what Callum and I had seen that night in the alley, knowing that he’d talk to me about it when he was ready. Besides, I have a lot on my plate. I want to be able to focus when Serrill and I have that conversation.

“I applied to a university outside of Paradise Hills. Eureka University.”

My brows lift. “The one Teth is going to?”

He blushes. “Yeah, it has some good programs. I mean, I don’t know if I’ll get in. I’ve already switched my major to the sciences, but I don’t know if it’ll be enough.”

“I’ll put in a good word for you,” I say.

We both know it’s his only chance of getting in. Even though both Beva and Teth were approved to leave, very few people get approved. I’m talking four or five from every graduating class at most, and those kids were usually the best of the best... which Serrilll is not.

“Thanks,” he says, then clears his throat. “I thought we should talk about what happened.”

I stiffen. Is he talking about what I think he’s talking about?

“What happened?” Beva asks, looking between us.

Teth draws his shoulders back. “Elora walked in on me kissing someone.”

“We don’t have to talk about it,” I rush out, not wanting him to feel pressured.

But he looks determined. “The thing is, I’m in love with that person. I think that I’ve always been in love with that person. At first, I just thought I had an interest in them, that they fascinated me, but the more we secretly hung out, the more I couldn’t deny my feelings.”

I stare at him. I’ve never known two men to be together. I’ve never even considered the idea, but when I search my feelings to decide how I feel about this, I’m just happy that he’s found someone he feels this way about, even if I’m also sad they can never

be together.

Like Callum and I.

Reaching between us, I take his hand. “I’m happy for you, and I’m sorry.”

He nods.

Beva lets out a rush of air. “I don’t really get this, but I just hope she makes you happy.”

Teth flinches at the “she,” but smiles. “Thanks.”

We continue eating. Teth and I both reach for the last mozzarella stick, fight over it, then end up ripping it in half. I put a generous helping of orange chicken on my plate, right next to a pile of lasagna.

“So, tomorrow morning?” I say to Beva.

“Tomorrow morning,” she repeats excitedly.

A plane passes us overhead, and we all look, probably thinking the same thing. Beva will be on a flight tomorrow, and then she’s never coming back. She’ll finish her degree and then run as far and as fast as she can in the outside, going to a place where Paradise Falls can never find her.

“You be careful out there,” I say. “Watch your back, but have fun.”

“And,” Teth grins, “remember that you’re a badass bitch and that no one is better than you.”

She laughs, but tears start to roll down her face. Without a word, she pulls us closer to her, wrapping an arm around our necks and pulling us into a tight hug. “You have no idea how much I’m going to miss you. Like, seriously, no idea.”

I’m about to say more when I see movement. Pulling back from Teth and Beva, I see Ari walking towards us. She has her red hood up, and her hands stuffed into pockets. She’s looking left and right, as if checking for someone following her.

When she reaches us, she says, “I have to talk to you,” and her gaze is fixed on me.

I nod and tell the others to keep eating, then follow Ari into the forest. We walk for a while, definitely long enough to be sure we’re alone, but she keeps going. I start to think about telling her we should head back, but I’m too curious about what she’s going to say.

Finally, she spins around. “We need to talk.”

“Okay.” I wait, then say, “Did you want to know what we found in the science building?”

“I already know.” She dismisses me easily.

I stare and wait again, wondering what this is about, if not the science building.

“You’re leaving to Neverwood in five days.”

“Yes?” Where is she going with this?

With a straight face, she says, “When you go, I think you should stay gone.”

My mouth drops open. “Stay gone ? Is this a joke?”

Her expression grows fierce. “No, this isn’t a joke. You need to leave Paradise Falls for good.”

I laugh, baffled by what she’s saying. “Ari, you have no idea what you’re saying. Neverwood is not like here. It’s a terrible place without anything close to people. No one could just stay there and never come back. It’s a death sentence.”

“Well, maybe Paradise Falls is a death sentence for you two. And if you have to choose a way to die, Neverwood would be better.” She’s completely serious, angry and agitated all at the same time.

“No,” I say, “there’s just no way.”

Her nostrils flare. “I’m taking a huge risk talking to you right now. A risk I’m an absolute fool to be taking. Listen to my advice, or you’ll regret it.”

Her idea is crazy. Just crazy. It’s like choosing to be lost at sea, or choosing to remain on an abandoned island full of killer animals. No one can have a real life if they remain in Neverwood, and certainly not with a baby.

“So, a girl who doesn’t seem to like me, or even care about me, is telling me to never come home. Yeah, okay, of course I’ll listen to you.”

“Don’t care about you?” she snaps, her face getting red. “Do you know how much I risked getting you that journal?”

My mouth falls open. Her eyes widen, like she can’t believe what she just said.

“You’re the one who hid my mom’s journal for me to find?”

She looks more nervous than angry now. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because... I knew you needed to be saved, but I didn’t want to end up like my mother. I wanted to give you a chance to save yourself without me getting involved, but you just couldn’t fucking do it.”

I don’t know what to say. “You know a lot more than you’re saying.”

Fear flashes across her face. “I do. And, Elora, you and Callum should not come back to Paradise Falls. This trip to Neverwood will be your last chance to escape before things go terribly wrong in your life. I’ve never been to Neverwood, but I know what waits for you here, and it’s worse.”

I’m so confused. “But I’m a Gold Keeper. One of the only two. They’d never kill me.”

“Some things are worse than death,” she whispers, then she spins on her heel but speaks over her shoulder. “Paradise Falls is not safe any longer, but if you’re too dumb to listen, that’s on you. I tried. My conscience is clear.”

I watch her stomp off into the woods, and touch my stomach. Staying in Neverwood sounds like a nightmare. Never being safe. Never having other people around us again. But what if Ari is right? What if staying here is worse?

Yet, I can’t think of what kind of evil could possibly make Paradise Falls that dangerous.

I need to talk to Callum.

TEN

Callum

Teth and I had snuck through the side entrance to the Council room and up the service stairs. We'd crawled into the little alcove overlooking the Council's meeting room, then sat together in the near darkness, every light off other than the emergency one. This was our place. The one we'd been going to since we were kids. It was like a hideout from the world, and right now, that was exactly what we needed.

"What does it feel like to know your family is on the outside right now?" I ask.

He gives a small smile. "They're away from the pollution. Away from the stuff giving them a cough and ruining their bodies. It's all I ever wanted. I'm going to build them a whole life out there."

"Yeah, you will," I tell him, smiling. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," he repeats.

We're quiet for a minute. There's not even the hum of the air conditioner to disturb our conversation, or even an awareness of others in the building. Security doesn't keep a careful eye on things here, cockily believing that no one would be dumb enough to break into this building.

Teth clears his throat. "About Serrilll..." But then he says nothing more.

I shift, uncomfortable. “Yeah, so you two are...?”

“Yeah.”

“And he’s... good to you?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re happy?”

“Yeah.”

I settle back. “Then that’s all that matters.”

“Really?” He sounds shocked.

“Yeah,” I tell him, then knock him with my shoulder.

He smiles.

I hold out my fist and we bump fists. Any tension that might have been between us fades away. It’s true that I’ve never heard of two men being together, don’t even know why it’s in the rules to begin with, but I love Teth. That love isn’t conditional based on whether he loves a man or woman.

“You know I’ll—” Miss you.

“I know,” he says. “And you know I’ll—” Miss me.

“I know.”

We give an awkward hug, and the dust in the air stings my eyes. I've known Teth all my life, and here, in this quiet building, we're saying goodbye forever. The good thing is that saying goodbye doesn't erase all the wonderful memories we've made in life. If anything, it makes them more precious because we'll never make another memory again.

Suddenly, the lights flicker on in the Council meeting room, and we stiffen, releasing each other. My mom storms in, and the other council members file in behind her, looking like they're full of dread. I don't blame them. If my mom is mad, things are going to get bad.

When everyone is seated, she turns to them. "On whose authority did you reschedule the physicals for the Gold Keepers?"

"Mine," Councilman Vyn says smugly, sweeping his hand through his steel-gray hair weaved with black.

"For what reason?" There's a tick in her eye.

He glances at the others. They look away, and his arrogant voice comes out, "It hasn't escaped our notice that you've dragged your feet in building the new science building every step of the way, even though this plan was agreed upon when Callum and Elora were just children. Even though Paradise Falls would be in a much better position right now if the original science building hadn't burned to the ground. It's our belief that you don't agree with our decision."

My mother stutters, and she never stutters. "T-that's a blatant lie. I have been there every step of the way, making certain the building was perfect."

Vyn lifts a brow. "Yes, there every step of the way slowing down everything and demanding perfection. Come on, Council Member Kela, are we to believe that all of

that is just a coincidence?”

Her back is straight. “You should see that as a sign of me doing a great job, just as I always have.”

The thing is, my mom is lying, and I don’t understand why. Is it because those labs in the new science building are set up for the creatures of Neverwood, and she’s rightfully decided that such a plan is idiotic? Or is this something else? Because I’ve never seen my mom so transparently trying to lie. All over a science building. It’s bizarre.

There’s a loud knocking at the council chamber door. My mom uses the distraction to motion for the person to be let in. A second later, Elora’s stepmom is there. She looks half-drunk, walking a little unevenly, her hair a mess.

“Fiodee,” my mom greets, “to what do I owe the honor?”

Elora’s stepmom lets her gaze run over all the council members, and there’s uncertainty in her expression. It hangs over her so much that I find myself rooting for her to turn around and walk away, because anything a person is that worried about saying probably shouldn’t be said.

“Fiodee?” my mom prods.

The blonde takes a shaky breath. “I have something important to tell you.” No one interrupts, and she pushes forward, her words slurred. “Elora is pregnant.”

Fuck. My stomach sinks. Every muscle in my body tightens. I don’t think Elora has had time to talk to Ferone already. What the hell are we going to do?

My mom looks horrified, but not surprised. The others look surprised though, staring

at each other like their world has been turned upside down. It's weird. They don't even know that the baby is mine. Shouldn't they be happy? Shouldn't this be cause for celebration?

"There's more," Fiodee says, taking a shuddering breath. "Callum is the father."

Oh. No. Oh. Fuck no.

Teth turns to me, and when our eyes meet, I know he sees the truth. The color drains from his face, and we both know. Elora and I are in trouble.

"This cannot be true!" Council Member Runo says, standing up and slamming his fist onto the table, which is shocking to see from the mild-mannered scientist.

"All our plans are ruined," Council Member Prisma says, angrily turning a gaudy ring on her finger.

"We cannot allow our plans to be pushed off for nine months." Council Member Abraxas runs his hands over his face.

Fiodee seems to completely miss their distress. "I'm still going to be taken care of by Paradise Falls, right? This doesn't affect my position?"

My mom looks pissed for a moment before her calm mask slips back into place. "Of course. Now, I think the Council needs to discuss what to do. You may leave."

Fiodee hesitates. "She'll be okay, right?"

Councilman Vyn flashes a smile. "You may leave." And the way he says it chills my blood.

My hands are clenched so hard my knuckles are white. I watch her stepmom leave, and then the council members sit back down, silent. A sense of horror settles over all of them.

“What do we do?” Councilman Runo says. “This will destroy our plans, setting us back months. Hell, all our research suggests that each of the families can only carry one healthy child to term. This may be it. The only child of the two families.”

Council Member Oliva combs her long blonde hair back from her face. “We have worked so hard to save up enough goldarium for when Elora and Callum weren’t able to go to Neverwood. Was it all for nothing?”

What? Why wouldn’t Elora and I be able to go to Neverwood? And why the hell would they let our city go into darkness if they had enough goldarium to keep the power on?

Councilman Vyn lifts a hand to suggest everyone be quiet. “Our initial plan was to tranquilize them, get them restrained in their cages at the science building, and start harvesting their sperm and eggs. We estimated that we’d need a full year of them being restrained to run our trials and see if we could successfully grow their offspring in test tubes, as well as to mix their genetics with other members of our society to see what would produce the most superior offspring. This plan clearly can’t take place with Elora pregnant, so the solution is simple. After we have them properly restrained, we abort the baby, and continue on with the plan.”

What. The. Actual. Fuck? My stomach turns and the world drops out from under me. That torture room, that was intended for... us? And the nursery is for all our babies? They’re planning on using us like animals they want to breed for the best genetics, against our will?

This can’t be actually happening. No one could actually be okay with this.

And they're willing to kill our baby? Just throw it out like trash because it interferes with their plans?

I look at my mom. Something shifts inside me. She looks pale. Worried. Not at all like the unshakable force I'm accustomed to. Is it possible she really was trying to stop this whole thing?

Councilman Vyn claps his hands together. "Relax, everyone. This little bump in the road changes nothing. Soon, we will produce dozens of Gold Keepers, who will bring us so much goldarium that we'll have no idea what to spend our money on."

"I don't know," Councilman Runo says quietly. "Last time everything seemed on track, and then those fools burned down the science building."

Councilman Vyn gives a cruel smile. "This time, Elora's mom and her traitors aren't here to burn down the building, and we won't have to spend our evening rounding them up, killing them, and covering up their murders. This time, no one is here to help Elora and Callum, not even their cowardly fathers. The building is made out of pure goldarium. Once we get them imprisoned, they won't have the strength to break free. They'll be completely at our mercy, and we'll get exactly what we deserve."

"We should act quickly," Councilman Runo says, "just in case they try to escape to Neverwood like their fathers."

Councilman Vyn's smile only widens. "If they try it, this time we have enough goldarium to force our way in after them."

Force their way in after us? Is that even possible?

"That's just a theory," Councilman Runo warns.

“A theory I won’t hesitate to test should they try it.” Vyn stands. “Our time of having to bow down to the Gold Keepers is over. We’ll own them soon. We’ll run their lives soon. And we’ll produce a whole army of them to do our bidding, raised to be the perfect Gold Keepers.”

Everyone except my mom seems happy. They start chatting, talking about everything they’re going to do once they have us imprisoned. Like we’re nothing. Not even people. And it’s all for their own greed, when they already have so much.

It’s sickening.

“Let’s get security,” Councilman Vyn says. “We’ll get them tonight.”

Teth and I exchange a quick glance and then we carefully crawl our way out of our hiding place, hit the service stairs, and just keep running.

Elora. I have to get Elora.

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ELEVEN

Elora

I'm sitting on my bed feeling completely alone. My stepmom had gone out for wine, not that it makes much of a difference. She was just going to end up in the hot tub drunk anyway. I want to call Beva or Serrill, but Beva is probably sleeping in preparation for her big day tomorrow, and Serrill is cracking the whip to do better at school, so he has a chance of escaping Paradise Falls. I don't want to bother any of them.

So I do the only thing I can think of: I head into the attic.

Knowing that Ari was aware of my hiding place has made me feel even more so like my stuff isn't safe in Paradise Falls. I go to the chest, dig through the pictures, and select my favorite ones of me and my parents, including the one of them on their wedding day, then I put everything back the way it was.

Slipping back downstairs, I take my mom's journal out of my backpack and slip the pictures into it before repacking my bag. Now, when I go to Neverwood in just a few days, I'll be able to hide my most important things from any eyes in Paradise Falls.

I hear a crashing sound from in my house and feet running. Tensing, I leap to my feet, not sure what to expect, but trying to be ready for anything. My bedroom door comes flying open... and I spot Teth and Callum.

"We need to go," Callum says, his face pale, his voice full of panic.

Before he says more, Teth says, “I’m going to run to your house and get your bag.” Then he takes off running like there are ogres chasing after him.

“Go?” I ask, shaking my head in confusion, staring between Callum and where Teth had disappeared. “What’s going on?”

Callum looks like he’s about to break some really terrible news, his expression a mixture of sorrow and fear. “Your stepmom must have heard about us being pregnant...”

My gut tightens. “What? No.”

“She went to the Council and told them, and I found out what they have planned for us...” And there’s something dark in his words.

“What are you talking about?” I say, head swimming.

He grabs my arms. “Elora, the new science building, that scary floor, it’s meant for us. They’re planning on imprisoning us and killing our baby so they can harvest our eggs and sperm and create an army of Gold Keepers that they can raise to be their perfect servants.”

I feel the color drain from my face. “That’s impossible.”

“Elora.” Those brilliant blue eyes of his lock onto mine. “I heard it all. They’re sending Security for us tonight. Right now.”

My heart hammers. “Where are we going to go? What are we going to do?”

Was this what Ari was trying to warn me about? It must be. Fuck. Why didn’t I listen to her?

“We need to go to Neverwood, just like our dads did. We need to run away from the Council and this whole damn place. It’s our only chance.”

“Live in Neverwood?” I ask, just imagining never returning to Paradise Falls.

He takes my hands, holding my gaze. “We don’t have a choice.”

I nod unsteadily and grab my bag from off the floor, except the scientist’s badge falls out from the pocket I hid it in. I ignore it, but Callum grabs it.

“There’s something we have to do first.”

I frown, confused.

“We need to steal their goldarium. There might be a way for them to use it to come after us.”

I feel sick. They could possibly follow us in?

He grabs my hand, and we start running. We leap into the truck and pull out of the driveway when Teth comes running up. I open my door, and he tosses in Callum’s backpack.

“Good luck,” Teth says, his dark gaze saying a hell of a lot more.

Be careful. I care about you. I’ll miss you.

“Just make sure you’re on that plane in the morning,” Callum tells him. “And go home and pretend this never happened.”

They clasp hands, then step away from each other. Teth slams my door shut, and

Callum steps on the gas. We go speeding down the quiet streets of Paradise Falls for the last time, not stopping until he pulls into the alley beside the science building. At the door, I say a quick prayer that the badge still works, and he swipes it.

Green. We're in.

We're more careful this time, aware that security and the scientists might be walking around, even this late. We take the stairs up to the second floor and head straight for the big ball of goldarium. Callum swipes the door, and it opens.

It's encased in a crystal container, but we open it and grab the soccer ball sized piece of goldarium and force it into a crystal chest, then close it tightly. We can't take the risk of leaving it open, because it'll draw everyone in Paradise Falls to it. We close everything up the way we found it, and Callum carries the chest down the stairs, while I hurry along beside him.

We make it to the first floor and head down the hallway to the side door before we hear, "Freeze!"

We turn and spot Security, a man in dark clothes, reaching for the taser at his side.

"This is official Gold Keeper business," Callum tells him. "So, stay out of our way."

Instead of reaching for the taser that would do nothing against us, he reaches for his radio.

We bolt, exploding out the side door and climbing into the truck. I put the chest in my lap and Callum's bag at my feet, while he steps on the gas and gets us out of there. We're speeding through town, faster than I've ever driven in my life, but there's a countdown in my mind. An awareness that if we do anything wrong right now, our lives will be forfeit.

I picture us strapped down in those cages. I picture them killing my baby and then harvesting my eggs. The thought makes me sick. These people are twisted. Wrong. Anyone who could do that to another person is a monster.

We're bouncing along the path that leads to Neverwood and park in the parking lot. We get on our bags, then Callum takes the chest and we hurry down the path. We're almost there when I put out a hand and stop Callum.

People are here. I can sense it.

Our eyes lock. A silent understanding moves between us. Our only way out is through that doorway, so whatever stands in our way will need to be destroyed.

He hands me the chest. I take it wordlessly. We leave the path and circle around the back, spotting the council members and Security before they see us.

There are about a dozen security officers. But instead of regular guns, they have tranquilizer guns. A cold awareness flows through me. I'd rather be shot by a bullet than one of those fucking guns.

We get to the edge of the treeline. Callum hands me the chest of goldarium and gestures for me to stay where I am. I shake my head, shocked. He can't handle all of them alone! But he points to my stomach, and I know that he's right. I don't want to risk hurting the baby. Not unless they leave us with no choice.

Callum slowly moves forward until he steps out into the light.

All the tranq guns focus on him.

Councilman Vyn smiles, a deadly smile. "It seems that somehow you've discovered information that wasn't meant for your ears."

Callum's mouth curls. "You fucking bastards. We already willingly gave up our lives to bring you goldarium, but that wasn't enough for you. You needed more. You needed to be greedy, conniving, heartless, pieces of shit—" And his mom flinches at each word.

The councilman shakes his head. "See, you and Jaen, and her traitors, are the problem. You can't seem to realize that our decision isn't based on feelings, or what's best for you. It's based on what's best for Paradise Falls."

Callum's voice is filled with venom. "Killing our baby and taking us prisoner is what's best for Paradise Falls? Like hell!"

Vyn spreads his hands. "I'm afraid we don't have a choice, Callum. This is the decision."

"You always have a choice," Callum says. "Just like we've had a choice every time we've gone into Neverwood. Just like our fathers and past generations have had a choice. And every time, they chose what was best for their people. And in thanks for all of that, you make this sickening decision?" He spits on the ground.

The councilman gives Callum a cold look. "Well, unfortunately for you, you don't have a choice. Do you see all these tranq guns pointed at you? Just the squeeze of one trigger, and this is all over. Except, where's Elora, Callum? I know she can't be far from you."

My mind starts working. I can't let them shoot him. I can't just stand here and do nothing.

I squeeze the handles of the chest tighter, and an idea forms in my mind. It's not a perfect idea, but it may be the only way we'll get out of this. Even though it's a risk.

Taking a deep breath, I stride forward into the light.

The council members look in my direction, and they all seem relieved. Like they feel the chess pieces they needed have all fallen into place. Unfortunately for them, I'm not controlled by anyone.

"Well, well, well, pretty little Elora. I'm going to enjoy visiting you in the lab each day," Vyn says, a sickening pleasure in his voice.

Callum looks back at me with horror. I know what he's thinking, but he'll understand soon.

I smile at Vyn. "That's if you survive long enough."

Flipping the top open on the chest, I set it down on the ground and watch as the effect of the goldarium ripples over all of them. Callum yanks me back as everyone comes running. As they get in each other's ways, they scratch, claw, bite, and fight. A Security guard manages to touch the goldarium, and his fingers burn off, turning to ash as he screams, and yet he continues to try to get to it still.

They're all trying their best. Councilman Vyn falls on the goldarium, and it eats away part of his face before he's pulled back. The Security officers start shooting wildly, and Callum yanks me behind a tree along with him. He presses his body around me as screams fill the air.

We stay that way for a long time, until it grows quiet. Then we step out from behind the tree. Callum's mom has tied herself to a tree, and blood is running down her face. She's fighting the rope, but she's unable to escape. Councilman Vyn is crawling toward the chest, and as we watch, Callum's mom pulls a gun out of her waist and shoots him dead.

Callum closes the lid, and the silence around us is deafening. Unfortunately, it looks like the majority of them were simply tranqed rather than having died, but it's the same to us now. As long as we escape.

"Mom?" Callum says.

Tears run down her face. "I need you to know... I helped Elora's mom in secret to burn down that building the first time. I tried everything in my power to stop it the second time, but it wasn't enough. I'm sorry, son. You deserve so much better than me."

Callum looks at her, his expression cold. "I do, but I'm not going to go into Neverwood hating you. The last thing I'm going to do is bring hatred and anger into my new family. So, I forgive you."

She starts weeping in earnest now, the deep scratches on her face bleeding enough that blood drips from her jaw. I want to feel sorry for her, but I just can't. Not after what she helped plan for us, even if she wasn't fully on board.

Callum picks up the box of goldarium and takes my hand.

"You know that with you gone, there is no Paradise Falls, right? There's no perfect place," his mom says softly.

"There never really was," Callum tells her, and then we step through the doorway to our new home.

TWELVE

Elora

The fire crackles near us, and we lay together in my family cabin, holding each other. We haven't spoken. We'd just crawled into bed, shaking together like leaves, trying to let the adrenaline fade from what we'd just been through.

But my mind can't seem to quiet.

Too much had happened, more than my brain could possibly process.

"We can never go home," I say, my voice breaking a little.

He holds me tighter. "Home is anywhere the two of you are."

His words make me smile as his hand strays to my stomach. "You know what I mean. Callum, what are we going to do?"

"It's simple," he says, kissing the top of my head. "We're going to choose a place to make our own."

A place to make our own? "What, in the woods where our child can be eaten by ogres? Or we can live constantly terrified of a storm? Or in the Mist Realm, where one wrong step could have our child splattered on the ground? Or maybe whatever the hell is in an Ash Realm?"

Callum chuckles. "Take deep breaths. Let's figure this out."

I take a few deep breaths, but I don't feel any calmer. I have a baby growing inside of me. A baby that will soon be walking and talking. A baby who will never have a friend or a partner. A baby who will one day be left here alone, after we pass.

"We have a lot of goldarium. We could build an epic home here. Then, we could build large walls to surround it, start a garden, and build a whole little farm."

I think, then shake my head. "This place can't be where we raise our child. There's nothing here for them. What will they do if something happens to us?"

He's quieter for another long minute. "How about the mist realm? That tree guy was pretty friendly, and it sounds like he has more people, even if there's not a lot of them. Didn't he offer to build us a home in a tree? As far as we know, these are the only people in Neverwood. We can stick close to them."

"I don't know..." I say.

The Mist Realm doesn't feel like home either. If it was just Callum and I, maybe that would be where we'd go, but our baby deserves better than that. A safer place. Besides, there's this nagging feeling in me... a feeling that's telling me we have to keep going. That there's something better out there for us.

"I-I think I want to try to find the end of the Phoenix Trail." The source of all goldarium. The thing of legend that our fathers likely went in search of.

"You're hoping to find them," he says simply.

Our fathers. My father. So what if I am? Would it be the worst thing for our child to have a loving grandfather in their life?

Tears sting my eyes. “They’re all we have left now.”

He takes a ragged breath. “And you know there’s a chance we won’t find them, no matter how far we go. And a chance that whatever is further down the path is worse than where we’ve already been.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat. “I know, but I feel like we have to take the chance. We have to provide our baby with the best life we can, even if it’s in Neverwood.”

He’s quiet for a long moment.

I look back at him, and his expression is thoughtful before his gaze slides to me, and he kisses me. “Okay. We keep going. As soon as we can.”

“As soon as we can?” I ask.

He nods. “Honey, you’re just going to get bigger, and traveling is just going to get harder.”

I hadn’t thought about that. “You’re right.”

It’s weird. My gut says this is the right move, but I’m full of nerves. We’ll be traveling into uncharted territory, pregnant, and with only Callum at my side. There’s no heading back to Paradise Falls to rest. There’s no cheeseburger and fries waiting for us at the end of a long day. There’s only... Neverwood.

“Do you think our friends will be okay?”

He kisses my head again. “Teth and Beva will be leaving on the first flight out of there tomorrow, so they should be fine.”

My mind keeps working. “What do you think is going to happen to Paradise Falls?”

He hesitates.

“Be honest.”

He nods. “Paradise Falls only has one resource: goldarium. That’s what they use to trade with the outside world. They don’t grow their own crops. They don’t have their own stock of animals. Without goldarium, everything will descend into chaos. There will be no food, no electricity, nothing.”

My heart’s racing. “So then they’ll fly everyone out?”

He hesitates again. “No, the wealthy will probably fly out. The rest will probably be left behind.”

I turn in the bed to face him. “They’ll just leave most of the population behind?”

“Flying people out will cost money. Money that will be precious to them,” he says, as if that justifies everything.

So, everyone will be left there to die? With no food? No resources? And no way out?

“I—”

He pulls me closer to him and tucks my head under his chin. “They’ll probably have some time before everything falls apart, but it’ll be better if we don’t think about it. At least our friends will get out.”

That’s true. Our friends will be safe. And as much as I hate thinking about all those people just being abandoned, my focus needs to be on Callum, our child, and myself.

If I don't stay focused, we might not survive.

"You're right," I say, even though my heart is aching, thinking about all the people who will likely die in that valley, or die in the mountains trying to get out.

He clears his throat. "Also, something I don't want to say but need to: we got what we found of their goldarium. We can hope it's all of it, but it might not be."

I tense. "Are you saying they might be able to come after us?"

"Yes," he says softly. "So we have to get moving, and we have to keep up a fast pace. Until we're sure they won't be able to find us."

This is all so scary. So scary and so overwhelming. Neverwood isn't safe. Paradise Falls isn't safe. And we have a baby on the way. A baby we need to protect from everything in this world.

"What should we do?"

He sighs softly. "We should get moving. Tonight. We can't have done all of this just to be caught by them. Our Little Bean has to stay safe."

"Little Bean?" I ask, lifting my head and looking at him.

"Yeah, don't they look like beans at this stage?"

They do. I wouldn't think Callum would know that.

I smile. "Yeah."

He smiles back. "So, they're our Little Bean."

I laugh. “Okay, Little Bean it is.”

He squeezes me tightly, then rolls out of the bed. “Let’s get going. We can go over baby names on the way.”

It’s clear he’s trying to distract me, to get me to think about something other than Paradise Falls crumbling, or the Council coming after us here, so I try to smile as I gather my stuff and focus on baby names. Because what else can we do?

THIRTEEN

Ari

I worked so damn hard. I did everything in my power to help Elora without risking my own life, so I wouldn't die the way my mother did, but all of that has been for nothing. It's stupid that I didn't think ahead, stupid that I didn't consider what would happen once Elora and Callum disappeared, and now I only have myself to blame.

"Shouldn't he be back by now?"

Serrill is bouncing on the edge of my bed, bothering the shit out of me. Veric and I had been talking about Elora and Callum's disappearance, and what that meant for us, when Teth, Serrill, and Beva had arrived at my house, demanding to speak to me. I'd taken them into my room, even though at my age I no longer needed a guardian to live with me in my tiny home, so we were alone here. My room just felt safer. They'd demanded to know everything I knew, but it turns out I had a lot more to learn from them.

We started putting together the pieces of what we knew, and what Veric knew from watching the Council. Together, we'd come to the conclusion that Elora and Callum had disappeared into Neverwood forever, and that the Council was freaking out. All flights had been cancelled, the power had turned off, and all medical centers had been closed. An emergency order had been given by the Council for everyone to stay in their houses.

Not that we did.

Teth had snuck back out, saying he had a way to spy on the Council meetings, to give us more information, and we'd been waiting patiently ever since. It was irritating beyond belief. I hated having people in my space, hated talking to them, even hated the way they smelled.

Man, I have some serious issues.

Veric is the only one I don't mind, the only presence that I can tolerate. From the moment we separately started looking for the ancient trail out of Paradise Falls, we'd created a bond. No... from the day our parents had died. The whole world had kept going, but not for us.

"He'll be back," I grate out. "Or he's been caught and we'll never see him again."

"Ari," Beva scolds.

She irritates me with her "too smart for you" attitude. You would think a girl missing a finger, and only alive because of her friend, would be a little quieter and a little more humble.

"I'm just being honest."

"We don't need honesty right now," she snaps.

"You want some lies," I tell her, leveling her with the kind of look that makes most people take a few steps back. "Everything is absolutely fine. None of us are going to end up dead in the street."

Beva glares and pats Serrill's shoulder like he's a child. "We're going to be okay. Teth's okay."

A second later, we hear movement in my house and all of us tense. When Teth throws open my door, some of my tension fades. At least it's not Security here to tear me to pieces because they found out my role in all of this.

Teth sits down on the bed beside Beva, looking pale.

"What happened?" Serrill asks gently.

"It's worse than we thought," he manages.

Worse? How the hell could things be worse than we imagined? I hope this boy tends to exaggerate, or we're all in trouble.

"What's going on?" Serrill asks.

Teth takes a shaky breath. "Almost all the goldarium is gone, and Callum and Elora won't be back. The Council intends to flee Paradise Falls, with their chosen few people. They're going to split what's left of the goldarium on the outside to make sure they're wealthy out there too."

"Fuck," I mutter.

He nods. "That's not even the worst of it. They'll be giving Security the instructions to go through Paradise Falls after they've escaped and kill everyone left here, because they don't want the risk of anyone getting out and telling the outside about what they did."

"Hell..." I say, unable to even form the words.

This is horrifying bullshit. Not that I'd expected less from the Council.

His face is tight. “What do we do? Because, clearly, we’re not the chosen ones who will be getting out with them.”

I answer easily. “We can’t be in the city when they start killing people.”

“But what do we do?” Beva asks. “There’s only one way out of here... and that’s on a plane. I mean, we could try hijacking one, but we’d have to get weapons and somehow take someone who can fly the plane...”

“That’s never going to happen,” I tell her. “Security will be all over those planes.”

“Well, what then?” she asks me angrily.

I look at Veric. He gives a subtle nod, and I take a deep breath. “The ancient path. We need to take it out of the city. It’s the only way through the mountains.”

“The ancient path?” Serrill asks, clearly confused.

Beva nods. “It’s the path our ancestors used to get into Paradise Falls, and it’s supposedly the only way in or out, but no one has found it since.”

“The thing is,” I explain, “Veric and I have been trying to find the path out for many years, and we think we’ve found it. It follows the nursery rhyme almost perfectly.”

“The nursery rhyme?” Serrill asks, clearly confused.

Beva stands up taller. “Toward the north, you must go forth, past the tea, you must flee, when in doubt, stick to the route, when you see the green, don’t be seen, to enter the wall, you must crawl, or continue on, to the great beyond.”

I nod. “That one.”

“But have you actually seen a path through the mountains?” she asks.

Veric and I exchange another look, his dark eyes boring into mine. We’d always planned to travel higher and higher in the mountains, but I’d been scared to get caught. He’d been pushing me to do it, and I’d been dragging my feet. I felt like I had all the time in the world... but I guess I was wrong.

“No, we’ve never gotten that far.”

“So we don’t know if we can get out that way,” Beva says, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

Her attitude is rich. Was her idea to steal a plane so freaking good? She should be thanking us on her hands and knees for having an actual plan that could work.

“Do we have another option?” I ask, pinning her with my gaze.

They’re quiet for a minute, and I can practically see their brains turning, trying to come up with a better plan. My jaw tightens so hard it pops. There is no better plan. As frightening as this idea might be, this is our life now.

Then, I watch the reality of our situation hit everyone in the room. There’s a mixture of horror and acceptance that falls over their faces, which might have been amusing at a different time. That’s right, your perfect little lives are falling apart. Unfortunately, mine and Veric’s lives had fallen apart a long time ago. We don’t have anything to cling onto here.

Beva finally nods her head. “Then we should all go home, quickly pack, and meet in the woods.”

Suddenly, it hits me. “Are you saying we’re going to travel together?”

The thought had never occurred to me. Veric and I are seasoned hikers. Taking these three with us will only slow us down. My plan had simply been to point them in the right direction and be done with them.

Beva frowns at me. “Of course. There’s safety in numbers.”

I scowl, not mincing my words. “Veric and I know what we’re doing in the woods. All of you will be nothing but a liability.”

“We can take care of ourselves,” she says, squaring her shoulders.

Looking at Veric, I’m surprised to see him giving me an expression that says he’s disappointed in me. What? What am I doing wrong? I’m being practical. Practical, but not kind.

Embarrassment rises inside of me. Surviving is all that’s ever mattered to me. And Veric. It’s not in my nature to stick my neck out for someone else, not after what happened to my mom. I swore that I’d never make her same mistakes, but it’s clear Veric thinks we should help these three.

“Fine. Everyone has an hour. If you’re not in the woods then, we leave without you.”

Everyone in the room files out, and I instantly focus on packing. Except, my hands are shaking. I curl them into fists and will myself to be calm. My mom always said that there was no point in worrying, that worrying was the most useless emotion there was. So, I won’t worry.

I pack my bag carefully, knowing that the items in this bag will determine my survival. Winter items get thrown in, and I belatedly wonder if I should’ve given the three inexperienced hikers better instructions on what to pack. By the time we reach the tops of the mountains, there will be snow on them. If they don’t have warm

clothes, none of this will matter, because they'll die.

But I can't worry about that now. I have to focus on my own supplies. My own survival. Because the hours remaining of my life are slipping through my fingers like sand. Soon Security will be here to take my life, and I can't be here when they come knocking.

FOURTEEN

Elora

I'm hurling my lunch just off the protected path, while Callum holds back my hair. This is my third time puking in the last few days. Apparently , the baby doesn't like jerky and trail mix.

Lucky me.

"We'll be at the next cabin soon. I'll make you stew, and I'll try to keep an eye out for any berries or fruit along the way," he tells me gently.

I clean myself up, and we start walking again at a slower pace. We'd been pushing ourselves, unsure of whether or not the Council was behind us. Luckily, we didn't have to drop flowers because, well, no other Gold Keepers would be following us. We'd also taken the journals from our family cabins, not wanting to give the Council any insight into what they might come across next.

Callum grabs my water and hands it to me. "You have to stay hydrated. All this puking isn't good for you or the baby."

"You're telling me," I say, then drink the water slowly, making sure it's not going to end up coming back up.

"You okay?" he asks, his blue eyes filled with concern.

I nod, and hand him my water, which he slips back into my pack. It's weird how tired and slow I feel now. Weird because I'm barely pregnant. A lot of women don't even know they're pregnant at this point. But Callum has reassured me that it might be because we're Gold Keepers. Their pregnancies might be different.

"Our Little Bean certainly knows what they like and don't like," he says, grinning at my stomach.

"How nice," I tell him dryly.

He laughs. "I can just imagine this stubborn little girl, or stubborn little boy, stamping their feet and clenching their fists."

I smile at the image. Unfortunately, we don't even know where this baby is going to live. My smile fades into a frown, and I touch my belly.

Callum reaches over and puts his hand on mine. "It's going to be okay. We're going to figure this out. You just worry about growing our baby, and I'll worry about everything else."

Lifting a brow, I smile. "I don't think it works that way."

"Well, we're the only people in Neverwood. We get to decide how it goes."

I try to hold onto his optimism, but it slips through my fingers. "So, I guess you're somehow going to have to learn how to deliver a baby."

He looks at me in confusion.

"You're the only one who can do it."

His eyes widen, and then he hides his fear behind a calm mask. “I’ll talk to the tree guy, Xarex. His whole home was full of books. I’m sure there’s one on childbirth. Hell, he might even know a thing or two. Or maybe one of his people do, and I can pick their brains over it.”

Okay, that’s actually a pretty good idea.

He takes my hand and starts walking. “So, Michael or Logan if it’s a boy, and Natalie if it’s a girl.”

I smile. Those were the names we’d narrowed our choices down to. “I love them.”

“I love them too.”

Suddenly, I feel a pulling. A sense of something. I know it isn’t the goldarium strapped to Callum’s pack, because that’s in the crystal chest. There must be more.

I glance all over and see goldarium just off the path up ahead.

“That looks easy enough to get,” I say.

Callum shakes his head. “We don’t need any. We have enough to build us whatever we need for our new life. There’s no way we’re going to risk our lives for that.”

He’s right. We’d already talked about this.

As we keep going, I see movement and spot the ogre hiding behind a tree. I stiffen and grab Callum’s arm, pointing. His brow wrinkles, and I realize I didn’t tell him about the last trap I was sure the ogres had set for me.

“It’s a trap,” I whisper.

He lifts a brow. “They’re not smart enough for traps.”

“They set one up for me last time. I think they’re doing it again.”

“No way,” he says, shaking his head.

I frown at him, but we keep going. My gaze slides over everything around us until I pick out four more ogres. Each time, I point them out to him, and Callum looks entirely shocked.

When we fully pass all of them, the roars start. The ogres chase after us, even though they can’t step on the path. They’re roaring, pounding their chests, and screaming. Every step of the way Callum is looking at them like they’ve lost their minds.

His surprise turns to annoyance as they keep following us. He covers his ears. He tries to hurry fast enough so they can’t keep up with us, but the ogres shadow us every step of the way.

It’s hours before they stop. Hours before they drop back. And then we’re left in startling silence. Not even the birds make sounds around us.

“Whoa ,” Callum finally says.

“I told you,” I respond, a little smugly.

He gives me an amused look. “Remind me to always listen to you.”

I flash him a smile. “Happy wife, happy life, right?”

Then I realize what I said and turn bright red. Speeding up, I try to outrun the bugger, but he easily keeps pace with me, a smile spreading across his face.

He snags my hand. “About that. I’m thinking we should make this thing official before our baby arrives. I like the ring ‘wife’ has to it.”

“Are you asking me to marry you?”

He shakes his head. “No, when I ask you to marry me, you’ll know it.”

“Okay then,” I say, blushing.

We’re only walking together for a short time when a stag leaps out onto the path. He can’t mean us harm if he’s able to go on the path, but still, Callum shifts to stand in front of me, and I’m left looking around him at the bright red stag. He has golden antlers, meaning he’s an elder, and he stands tall and majestic.

Leaning down, he touches the path in front of it, and it turns gold, moving slowly toward us. As it reaches our feet, I feel a tingling spread over me, and I look down at my hand to see that it’s turned to gold. Callum looks back at me, completely golden, and gasps at whatever he sees in me.

The stag leans down and seems to bow to us before leaping off the path and disappearing into the woods. We stare after him for a moment, probably both wondering what the hell just happened.

Callum turns to me. “The gold is fading.”

“Yours is too,” I say, touching his face, which is less and less golden by the second.

“What the hell was that?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No idea, but it was definitely weird.”

“Definitely,” he confirms.

We continue walking until we see a cabin in the distance, just in front of the Mist Realm, and we both speed up. After too many nights on the hard ground, a nice bed and a good stew sound almost too good to be true. I just hope our friends back home are doing just as well at their new universities.

FIFTEEN

Callum

We've been in the Mist Realm for days. How many, I'm not sure. It's hard to tell here, since it always seems to be the same brightness through the mist. I'm doing everything I can to make traveling easier on Elora. Every inch of me is hyper-aware of the fact that the person I love most in this world is carrying the baby I love most in this world. I would do anything for them, but I know in Neverwood that's not always enough. So, I'm on guard at all times. Ready for anything that might face us.

"You going to help? Or just watch?" Elora asks, and I startle, my focus having been on everything around us.

She's sawing off one of the giant coconut-sized fruits that tastes like a cross between a pineapple and a strawberry. When we'd climbed to the higher branches in search of food, she'd been ecstatic to find them. Apparently, she'd been craving them all day.

The fruit gets sliced off the vine, and she cracks it open, drinking the liquid and eating the inside with an intense look of pleasure. I smile and get to work cutting off another one. If my lady wants these ridiculous fruits, she'll get as many as she can handle.

"These are amazing," she says as I crack open the one I sawed off and hand it to her. "Seriously, amazing."

It's hard not to feel good hearing that. There are so few tasty things I can give her.

Watching her eat food that she gets sick from makes me feel like I'm not taking good enough care of her.

"Good," I say. "You deserve it. Just keep growing that Little Bean. I want one with chubby cheeks."

She laughs, then gets a thoughtful look on her face. "You know, I don't know why, but I never saw you as the dad-type."

I lift a brow as I start sawing off another fruit. "Yeah?"

She shrugs. "I honestly thought you'd be upset when you found out about the pregnancy."

Guilt uncurls within me. "That's because I was such an ass, treating you like shit just because I was jealous. Have I said sorry about that?"

"A lot of times," she tells me gently.

But sorry isn't enough. I need to spend my life making it up to her. I will never again give her a reason to believe that I'll be anything but good to her. She needs to know that I'll treat her like the princess she is, forever. No matter what.

I crack open another fruit for her, and she says, "Last one."

So I get to work eating a couple myself. They're good, but they're not 'roll back your eyes in the back of your head and moan' kind of good, which seems to be the kind of effect they have on Elora. Not that I mind watching her eat and moan, even if it is putting me in the mood.

"Ready to go?" I ask, wondering if it's too early to set up our tent on the path and

have a little fun.

She nods, and I offer her my hand to help her stand, then get her backpack on her. As we head to the ladder going down from the branch, a massive creature comes leaping onto the branch. It shakes the whole thing so much that we both end up thrown to the ground.

The black beast, which looks like some cross between a wolf and a dog, growls low in its throat and starts toward us. I'm on my feet in an instant, yanking Elora to her feet beside me. This thing is the size of a goddamn house. The only thing we can hope to do is outrun it, but not on a tiny ladder going to the ground.

"You go for the ladder, I'm going to distract it," I tell Elora.

"No, I—"

"Elora, just do it," I order gruffly.

Then I move away from her as the creature lets out another growl.

I circle away from the ladder and Elora, and it follows me, crouching low to the ground as it advances on me. A paw shoots out, and I leap to the side, slamming hard into the sharp branches of a bush. But it doesn't matter; the bush is a lot better than being hit by the creature.

Another paw tries to smash me, and I leap again to avoid it, noting that Elora is making her way down the ladder now. Suddenly, the creature lunges at me, and I jump back... only, there's nothing but air behind me. I fucking reached the end of the branch!

I fall through the air, my heart hammering. Please let something stop me before I

become a stain on the ground.

Arms encircle me as a body presses against me, and I cling onto... Xarex, the birdman.

It takes me a second to remember to breathe. “You have no idea how happy I am to see you.”

A big smile fills his face, and he hugs me tighter.

He changes direction, and then a second later, he snatches Elora off of the ladder. A little scream tears from her lips as she stares at us, wide-eyed. And then we’re on the branch below us with the Phoenix Trail, before we land lightly on the ground.

“Elora, Callum, it’s good to see you!” he greets. His long dark hair is tangled around his face, and his gray eyes are filled with excitement.

“It’s good to see you—”

A massive form leaps onto the branch beside us, and I grab Elora and yank her behind me, as if my body alone could keep her safe from the beast. Remembering my sword, I pull it out, feeling like someone trying to fight a mountain with a toothpick.

Xarex looks between us and the beast, seeming confused, then says, “No, Garmr, no.”

To my shock, the creature gives a pathetic whine, then sits.

“Be little now, Garmr. Little.”

Before our eyes, the big black beast shrinks until it’s the size of a regular dog. Then he lets out the saddest whine and lays down, his head on his paws. His big dark eyes

stare up at us, somehow making me feel like the bad guy.

“Elora, Callum,” Xarex says with a smile. “Meet Garmr. My pet.”

“Pet ?” I repeat in shock.

“You took my advice!” Elora seems excited, then looks at me. “Xarex was so lonely, I suggested a pet to keep him company.”

“Oh, okay.” But that... that thing is his pet?

“How do you like having a pet?” Elora asks.

Xarex puffs out his chest. “It is not the same as another person, but it is very nice. It has helped with my loneliness. And Garmr loves when I read to him, which makes me very happy.”

“I’m so glad,” she says, and I can tell she means it.

He glances between us. “So, you are off on another adventure?”

She shrugs, looking uncertain. Probably because she hardly sees this as an ‘adventure.’ “Something like that.”

I eye the dog and try to explain. “We were actually in the middle of eating, because we’ve gotten so sick of our pack foods.”

Xarex’s eyes light up. “Stay right here.”

He takes off into the air, leaving behind his dangerous beast, who simply whimpers after him. We shrug and shift to make sure we’re on the path. You know, just in case

“Fluffy” gets a taste for human flesh.

It takes a few minutes, but Xarex returns with a bag. He promptly sits down on our path and sets up a spread of different foods. Foods that actually look very good.

“You might like this,” he says excitedly. “For my people, food is always in surplus. There is far more to eat than there are people. Our crops are overgrown, overflowing with food. And with all the time I have, I can make many delicious things.”

I don’t argue. We just sit down.

The food is pretty damn good. Eggs, even though they’re cold, interesting fruits and veggies, two meat items that taste like foods back home. All in all, I’m pretty happy. But what’s more important, Elora is eating and keeping it all down.

Xarex is growing on me.

My thoughts go back to what we’re doing. Elora wants to go on this crazy quest, I’m pretty sure because she’s hoping to find her dad, but the Mist Realm isn’t awful. With Xarex’s help, we could make a home here, and I’m pretty sure he’d be eager to help us every step of the way.

I’ll have to bring it up again to Elora.

“So,” Elora begins, still eating. “How have things been going besides the pet?”

Xarex looks thoughtful. “Life is good. But I miss the days of my people. I even miss the days when your people came through regularly.”

“Victor and Archer?” she asks.

“Even before Victor and Archer.”

“Before?” I question. Like our other relatives?

He nods, but when he sees both of us staring at him in confusion, he continues more slowly. “Your families are not the only ones who have ever been to the Mist Realm. There were others. Others who didn’t even know about the Forest Realm. They didn’t have as much gold in their blood as you do, but they had enough to get here.”

We’re both confused. “We don’t understand,” I say.

He shrugs. “There were simply others. Occasionally. And I miss them. I miss the company. It seems that finding someone to love and care for is too much to ask the gods.”

Elora smiles and pats his knees. “You never know. Sometimes love just takes you by surprise.” Her gaze meets mine, and I smile.

“I hope you’re right,” he says.

Elora sighs. “Can I be honest with you, Xarex?”

“Always.”

“This trip of ours is different from the other ones. This time, we don’t intend to ever go back to our homes. We’re trying to get to the end of the Phoenix Trail in hopes of finding our fathers and creating a life here, as a family.”

Xarex looks sad. “Your fathers had similar plans.”

“Do you know if they ever found what they were looking for?”

His sadness only deepens. “They never came back.”

That’s not reassuring.

“Elora,” I start, trying to find the right words, “are you sure we shouldn’t stay here? This seems like as good a place as any to start a life.”

She gives me a gentle look. “We just have to have faith. Can you have faith for me?”

I take a deep breath, then slowly release it. “Okay.”

Anything for you.

His head snaps between us. “If you ever do decide to build a life here, I will gladly help with anything and everything you need.”

Elora turns back to him. “Thank you, Xarex, you’re an absolutely wonderful friend.”

He smiles.

Then she hesitates. “Do you mind if I ask you about the Ash Realm?”

Xarex relaxes a little. “I’ve never been, but many of my people have.”

“What do you know about it?” she asks.

He takes a minute to think. “It’s very dangerous. There isn’t much to eat. And just about everything will kill you.”

“So, like here?” I say.

He laughs, like that's the most outrageous thing anyone could ever say. "It's not dangerous here, silly. My people have no fear of our realm... but the Ash Realm, everyone fears it. We only go there if absolutely necessary."

"Great," I mumble. So the Ash Realm should just be a blast .

Elora gives me a look, so I try to keep my doubts about the Ash Realm to myself. She'd decided that that's where we were going, so that's where we were going. It's just my job to make sure we make it through there safely. We'd have to read our fathers' journal more carefully at the cabin before the Ash Realm. It's basically our only clue about how to survive in the next world.

As we continue eating, my mind starts working. "Oh," I say, then turn to Xarex. "Do you happen to have any books on childbirth or any knowledge about it?"

Xarex glances at Elora, his brows raised with an unspoken question.

She smiles. "Yes, I'm pregnant."

The joy on his face warms my heart after all the terrible responses to her pregnancy in Paradise Falls. "A baby is the greatest of blessings. If I had my way, these trees would be full of the sounds of children's laughter. Congratulations! This is very fine news!"

"We're pretty excited," I admit. "And a little nervous, since it looks like we'll be doing this thing alone."

Xarex's expression grows more serious. "I will get you a book that will help you with everything, and I will share all my knowledge with you before you go. Your nerves will fade away, replaced by all joy."

It's weird. I think I'm going to miss him when we go. He truly is a good guy. "Thank you."

He returns to his tree and brings me a book that seems to have been written by a healer specializing in childbirth. Just as he promised, he walks me through several different scenarios for childbirth. Elora looks a little disturbed by all of it, but I take thorough notes. Because when Elora goes into labor, her life, and the life of my baby, will rest on my shoulders alone.

We talk for several hours, until Xarex seems to run out of things to say, then we thank him, tell him goodbye, and keep walking, knowing we're close to the cabin. Knowing it's time for bed.

Elora holds my hand tightly, and even though she doesn't say it, I can tell Elora is a bit rattled by all the unknown elements in our future. But I try my best to reassure her, because of all the things I don't know about our future, I know that Elora is my everything.

When we arrive at the cabin, we shower, change, and lay in bed together, feeling content, like everything in our world is perfect, even though it's not. A fire crackles near us and the warm blanket covers us like a cloud.

I lace my fingers with hers as she lays against my chest. "I can't believe I'm actually here with you. There was a time that I thought I'd never get to touch you again."

She shifts, so she can look at me. "Callum, you know things would have been different between us before this if we weren't the two families..."

My heart aches a little, and my insecurity surfaces. "Can you honestly say you would have chosen to be with me if it wasn't forbidden?"

She gives me the strangest look. “Why not? It’s not like I chose to complicate my life because this was forbidden. I chose to complicate my life because I wanted to be with you.”

I laugh, but there’s no humor in it. “You deserve someone better than me.”

“No, I deserve you. A man who is excited for our baby. A man who has protected me at every turn. Callum, I’m lucky to have you.”

It’s hard to believe that. “I’m lucky to have you.”

She flashes a smile. “So, we’re lucky to have each other .”

Releasing my hand, she leans in and kisses me. Her lips are soft, melding to my own, and within seconds I feel myself heating up. This woman is like a goddamn magnet and my dick is full of metal. And as her hand curls around my erection, I know she knows it.

It only takes her a second to slip her hand into the slit of my boxers, and then we’re skin-to-skin, and every nerve in my body is alive. Our kisses become more and more desperate, and I reach into her shirt and start to play with her breasts, flicking the hard peaks and making them harder, which only makes my blood run hotter.

She releases my cock and starts to undress, and I don’t need her to tell me that I should do the same to yank off my boxers. Then, we’re naked together, and she’s grinning as she runs her hand up and down my chest, trailing her fingers along each muscle and making goosebumps run along my skin.

“It’s been awhile...” she says.

I swallow hard. “It has been.” Weeks .

“Are you sure you’re going to be able to handle this?” she teases.

“Let me show you what I can handle,” I say cockily, pulling her on top of me.

She’s laughing, but her laughing stops as I lean up and take one of her nipples into my mouth. I suck slowly, taking my time, enjoying her sharp intake of breath. I enjoy knowing that I’m making her wetter for me.

Switching to the other breast, I can’t help feeling satisfied when she wiggles on top of me, then slips down further so she’s straddling just above my cock. She lowers herself and begins to rub my length along her wet folds, making me choke on my air.

My lips leave her breasts, and we’re back to kissing while my hands find her hips. I adjust her so that my tip is level with her opening and then slowly push myself inside.

I have to stop for a minute when the pleasure becomes too strong. Fuck it. If I lose control this soon, I’ll never hear the end of it. I try to think of my history class, recalling the dates of events that had taken place until I start to calm down. She wiggles on top of me, frustrated, and I internally curse. It’s like the woman doesn’t have a clue how close I am to ruining this whole thing.

But then I take several deep breaths and begin to lower her on top of me once more. She breathes hard against my lips, and I suck my way down her throat until I finally come to my hilt. We stay that way for a long minute, just feeling each other.

Damn have I missed being inside of her.

She starts to wiggle again, and I know what she needs. I draw back out of her, then slam back in.

“Oh my gods, Callum!”

I love the sound of my name on her lips. I pull back out, then slam back in. She starts to work herself against me, taking my cock in and out with more force, quicker, building a rhythm that my body matches. We go faster and faster until I can hear her catch her breath, and then her inner muscles clench me so hard that I nearly come. Instead, her orgasm hits, and I get to feel her body working around my cock. I get to see her exquisite face as she crashes over the edge, and then, I finally come.

It feels like breathing for the first time. Like being a creature of only light and nerves and feelings. This is everything. I wish I could always feel like this. I wish I could stay inside Elora forever.

She collapses on top of me, and I kiss her head, hugging her close to me, thanking the gods for bringing this extraordinary woman into my life.

How did I get this lucky?

“Elora?”

“Yes?” she says, sounding tired and happy.

“I’m happy to have you in my life.”

She laughs. “I feel the same way.”

I close my eyes, feeling like the luckiest guy on earth. Even though tomorrow I have no idea what we’re going to face.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am

SIXTEEN

Beva

I'm going to die. Oh my gods, I'm going to die.

The last few days have been a blur. We'd made it to the woods before we were spotted by Security. All of us started running, but when Security started firing shots, we scattered. I'd lost sight of all the others days ago, leaving me alone in the woods. The only bright side? I'd lost sight of Security too.

Not that that helps me now.

I have no idea how to survive in the woods. It's dark. It's night. I haven't had anything to eat or drink all day. I can hear wolves on the mountain and can barely see by the light of the moon. All I know how to do is keep going, hoping to catch sight of the others.

"Anyone?" I shout. "Is anyone there?"

No one answers. Not that I thought they would. I'm totally screwed.

Outside of Veric and Ari, I doubt anyone has been this high in the mountains since our ancestors first came here. I have no idea what member of my family was even on that trail. The records of my family were lost from that time. But now, I can't help but think of them, lost in these woods, just praying to find someplace they could live.

How could they have known that Paradise Falls would change from a paradise to a prison?

I was so close. So close to getting out. One more fucking day, and I would have left this place behind and been safely on the outside.

Now, I don't know what to do.

Wolves howl from my right side, and I startle, naturally moving toward the left as I continue to climb. Another howl goes up in front of me, and I freeze, unsure what to do. I start heading to my left, stumbling as I go from exhaustion and hunger. I can't keep going much longer. Not that I think I'm going to survive long enough to starve to death.

"It's just perfect," I say, laughing to myself.

I'm not even sure I want to live on the outside. All I know is that it's my only choice. There is no third option. There's just Paradise Falls, and the outside. The thing is, I know nothing about the world out there, I just hope I might be able to carve out some small corner in it to read my books and just enjoy life.

Hopefully, that's what life will be like for my family now.

Tears roll down my face. That's the one blessing to all of this. That my family got out. At least if I'm going to die out here, I know they're safe.

The wolves howl louder, closer, from behind me, from in front of me, from my right. I can feel them closing in on me. I know deep in my heart that I'm being hunted, that I'm their prey.

I just can't do anything about it.

Moonlight catches on something near me. It looks like... a wall of thick vines. It's the closest thing I've seen to a place to hide here, so I decide to head toward it. Maybe if I can get deep enough in the bush, they won't be able to get to me.

I reach the massive plant—a plant the likes of which I've never seen before— and start pressing myself deeper and deeper into the vines. The moonlight reflects on a surface... It's almost like a green surface that moves and changes in front of my eyes, but maybe that's just my exhaustion. My hunger. My thirst.

I start pushing on the wall of green and feel myself pushing against something like putty. It pushes back against me for a long minute, but I'm desperate. This hiding place is my only chance of surviving. The only place that the wolves might not be able to get me.

Finally, the putty seems to stop pushing me away... Instead, it starts pulling me in. Some foreign instinct causes me to struggle, but it's too late; I'm yanked into the strange wall. Putty is in front of me, behind me, all around me. For a minute, I feel like I might suffocate. I might die.

I pop out of the putty onto my knees, and the air is instantly chillier than it was just a moment ago. Slowly looking up, I startle. There's a glowing path in front of me lined with flowers. Mist hangs heavy over the air, and it appears... I'm on a giant branch.

What is this?

“Hello!” I shout.

Nobody answers.

I rise to my feet, instantly drawn to the glowing path of flowers. “Hello? Is anyone there?”

No longer scared about Security, I shout and shout, tears streaming down my face as I walk along the glowing path. Nothing emerges from the darkness. There's nothing familiar even to cling to. If I thought I was lost before, I was wrong.

This place is impossible. It can't exist. Am I losing my mind?

Finally, I collapse onto the path, dropping my bag next to me. I'm hungry, thirsty, exhausted, scared, and alone. I can't do this anymore. I'm Beva. A book nerd. A future scientist. Not some brave explorer.

"Are you alright?"

My gaze jerks up, and I come face-to-face with the most beautiful man I've ever seen in my life. He has long black hair that frames a face more beautiful than the best-looking guy in Paradise Falls, with gray intelligent eyes that tug at my heart. And he has... he has wings. Beautiful black wings growing from his back.

I wipe the tears from my eyes, then realize I'd done so with my injured hand and try to hide it from his sight. "Hello."

He kneels down, looking at me gently. "Hello, Little One."

I stare, unsure what to say. "Are you real?"

He laughs, his expression surprised. "Yes, I'm real."

Except, he can't be. "How can you be real?"

He shrugs his big shoulders. "I just am."

I have a logical mind. There has to be a way to test if I'm seeing things, or if this is

real. Think.

“Pinch me,” I say.

He looks horrified. “I would never want to hurt you.”

I frown. “It’s the only way I’ll know you’re real.”

With a lot of hesitation, he reaches over and pinches my arm lightly.

I jump. It hurts. “So, this is real? You exist?”

“Yes.” He cocks his head, looking at me with concern. “Are you alright?”

“I’m sorry,” I say, and the tears start falling again. “I was just running away from home, because they were going to kill everyone. They were going to kill everyone . Except then I was lost in the woods, and wolves were chasing me, and I didn’t know what to do. Then, I found this weird wall, and I pushed through it, and I ended up here... I don’t even know what here is. All I want is a warm bed and a book, but that’s just too much to ask for.” I’m rapidly wiping the tears from my face, hating that I’m crying.

He smiles at me, and his smile is breathtaking. “That’s not too much to ask for. I can give that to you right now.”

I stare at him, trying to decide if he’s kidding. “I don’t think you understand. I literally have nowhere to go. No home. No safe place to land.”

“You do now,” he says, without a hint of humor in his voice. “My home is very warm, with a big comfortable bed, and the walls are lined with books. If you want to stay with me, I’ll always take care of you. You’ll never be hungry. You’ll never want

for anything.” His eyes are gentle. “I should warn you though, my life is very boring. There are only a few people here like me, and lots of empty homes full of books.”

“Is this a joke?” I ask, because what he’s describing sounds like paradise.

He shakes his head. “I’d never joke about such things.”

I hesitate, looking around. “I’m really safe here?”

He nods. “And if you realize you are not happy with me, I can simply take you right back here, and you can continue to cry and wonder what to do.”

I laugh.

He smiles. “You have a very beautiful laugh. It matches your beautiful face.”

For some reason, I show him my hand. “Not everything about me is beautiful.”

He cocks his head. “I’m afraid you must have trouble with your sight, because everything about you is wonderful. Don’t worry, we can get your eyes looked at. I know a man who can help.”

I laugh again and climb to my feet, putting my bag on. Going with him is crazy, right? I just met him. He could be planning on chopping me up into little pieces and eating me. He’s not even human.

And yet, what do I have to lose?

“I’m Beva, by the way.”

“Xarex,” he tells me.

I offer my hand and he kisses it, then slides closer, wrapping his strong hands around my waist. My heartbeat quickens as he looks down at me, and his gaze slides to my lips, but he just begins to flap his wings, and then we're in the air.

And I might be crazy, but this feels like my kind of adventure. The kind I'll survive from.

SEVENTEEN

Elora

We hold hands as we stare at the barrier to the Ash Realm, which moves in front of us like a translucent bubble. Only, we can't see what's on the other side. It whispers of danger and uncertainty, and I try to fight my nerves as Callum nods in my direction.

It's time.

I part my lips and repeat what my father said in the journal, "The Ash Realm is dangerous. Pack lots of food and water. Dress for warm weather. Do not touch the lava, the hot liquid. Eat the Lava Spiders, Iron Snails, and Lava Snakes; they will keep you alive. Do it. Drink the brown plant with water. Eat the red berries. Trade or you will die. Be respectful. Bow often. Do not hold eye contact. Do not go far from the path and trust nothing that flies in the Ash Ecosystem. It's unlike anything you've experienced before."

Callum nods. "We've dressed lightly."

Our capes are stowed away at the cabin, along with our heavier layers. We're both wearing t-shirts and the shorts we go to bed in, paired with the swords we were given for this realm. We'd both decided that having a weapon would make us feel more confident.

Callum pats my backpack. "And we have as much food and water as we can possibly

carry.”

I hope the weight wouldn’t be too much. Goldarium isn’t very heavy, but Callum is carrying the entire crystal chest strapped to the outside of his backpack. It’s not a light thing to carry. And that along with all the extra food and water, well, it’s heavy.

And we have a long way to go.

He hadn’t wanted me to carry anything beyond what I needed to carry, but I’d convinced him that we needed to fill everything up with food and water, based on what we’d heard about the Ash Realm. Eating red berries, dried berries, jerky, and trail mix seems a lot better than Lava Spiders, Iron Snails, and Lava Snakes. Plus, there’s the whole brown water thing... I prefer our clean water over that, and I haven’t even tried it.

“Have we forgotten anything?”

He shakes his head. “No, we’re ready. Let’s do this.”

I take a deep breath. “Here we go.”

Callum grips my hand more tightly. “Here we go.”

We step through together, and there’s a minute where we’re disorientated, where it feels like we’re being stretched and squeezed, and then we pop out into the kind of heat that sucks your breath from your lungs and makes your face burn. I try to take a breath, and the air burns down my lungs. My eyes flash open, and I see the strangest realm I could ever imagine...

The landscape is mostly barren and filled with rolling hills. The ground is mostly black, but between the black there seems to be little rivers of pale orange that flow at

a slow pace. There isn't much in the way of plants and trees, with the exception of some squat brown trees that dot the landscape, and not much else.

It's ugly, ugly and barren, but the miserable-looking place is nowhere near as miserable as the way I feel with the heat that scorches my flesh. How long is this realm? It can't be too long. We won't make it more than five or six days with the supplies we have, and there doesn't seem to be anything to eat or drink in any direction.

Callum looks at me, his expression unreadable. "Are you sure we shouldn't turn back?"

I hesitate. Up ahead, we might find our fathers. We might find the source of goldarium. Up ahead is filled with possibility, and behind us, with only limitations. We need to go forward. It's what's best for our baby.

"No, we should keep going. We can always go back. Besides, there's brown water and lava spiders to eat if we get desperate." I smile. He squeezes my hand tighter, then lets go.

"We should get moving. Becoming dehydrated from this heat is probably our number one worry."

We start moving. At random, little orange rivers cross through our path. I stop and kneel beside one of them. "Do you think this is the lava my dad spoke about?"

"Yes," he says without hesitation.

I reach out.

"He said not to touch it!"

I smirk at the concern in his face. “I wasn’t going to. I just wanted to feel above it to see if it’s really that hot.” As I draw my hand closer, I feel the heat. “Yeah, we definitely don’t want to touch this.”

We step over the lava rivers and keep going, staring out around us. The heat on my skin is almost unbearable. I can practically feel my skin becoming chapped. Never in my life have I felt heat like this. In Paradise Falls, they always kept the temperature fairly nice, and the Forest Realm and Mist Realm were on the cooler side.

I hope coming here wasn’t a mistake.

There’s movement on the landscape near us. A dark shape. I move forward slowly and see something black emerging from one of the lava rivers. It seems to unfold itself into a black shape with long legs. As it fully lifts out of the lava, I realize that it’s a spider. A spider the size of a bird.

“Look!” I say, pointing.

Callum comes to stand beside. “Whoa. We’re expected to eat those things?”

I shudder. “Only if we run out of food.”

“Let’s hope we don’t run out of food.”

Right?

We keep going, and I ask, “How do you think we’d go about killing one of those things?”

He points to his sword. “We’d have to be fast... and deadly.”

I nod.

Hours pass before we spot red on the landscape, a striking color when everything other than the lava is so dark. We come closer and find a black bush not far from our path, covered in red berries. Lots of red berries.

“Should we...?” I ask.

Our fathers had said to collect the red berries.

“Yeah, let’s fill up our shirts and eat them as we travel. Then we won’t have to dig into our supplies just yet.”

Looking all around us, we carefully step off the path and make our way to the bush, stepping over lava rivers as we do so. We each pull one berry off the bush and pop it in our mouths. It’s a bit bitter, but it’s edible. We instantly lift our shirts like aprons and start to fill them up.

We’re mostly done when I see movements in the lower branches of the bush. Kneeling, I spot huge snails, about the size of my fist, with shells that look like they’re made of metal.

I pluck one off the branch and hold it up to Callum. “Should we eat them?”

He wrinkles his nose. “Not yet.”

“Agreed.” I laugh, putting it back.

We finish filling up our shirts and turn to go. I stretch out a hand, stopping Callum from going forward. He looks at me with a question on his face, when the ground seems to move and a long black snake moves across our path, its belly shimmering

like metal. We wait until it passes, then hurry back to the path.

“Do you think the snakes are poisonous?” he asks.

“Let’s not find out, okay?” I laugh.

We continue walking, eating the berries slowly. Sweat mists my skin, and I feel like reaching for my water, but I don’t. Instead, I try to focus on drinking the juice from the berries. However long we’re stuck here, we need to ration our food and water carefully. That’s one thing Xarex and our fathers had made clear.

What if our dads never made it out of the Ash Realm? I swallow the berry in my mouth roughly. We can’t think that way. I can’t. Callum is already unsure about our plan, so I have to be confident for the both of us. Me picturing the two of us stumbling across our fathers’ bodies is the last thing I should be doing.

Still, I think back to the Mist Realm with more fondness. It wasn’t a bad place to be. We might have been able to make it a home. It just didn’t feel like the right place to me. Something inside of me is just pulling me forward, and I feel like I need to listen to that instinct.

“At least we can see trouble coming, for the most part,” Callum says.

It’s hilly in all directions, but there are so few trees and bushes that the landscape doesn’t hide much. If something dangerous were to come over one of the hills, we’d likely see it approaching long before it reached us, unlike with the Forest and Mist Realms.

I guess that’s something to be grateful for.

“Callum?”

“Yes?” he asks, a little amusement in his voice.

“Is there some small part of you that feels like continuing forward is the right decision? That there’s something waiting for us at the end of the Phoenix Trail?”

He seems to think for a minute. “In my experience, the thing I can trust most is your instincts. My feeling is that if you think continuing forward is the right move, then it’s the right move.”

I smile at him. “And you know no matter what we find, it’s probably going to just be you and me at the end of this.”

He returns my smile. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“You won’t get too lonely?”

He shakes his head. “I was lonely in Paradise Falls. With you, I’m never lonely.”

Ah, that’s sweet.

“I was lonely too,” I confess.

“Well, you never will be again,” he declares, and it sounds like a promise.

We start climbing the bottom of a hill. “Can I say something?” I say.

Callum nods.

“I’m kind of surprised that in the end my stepmom was the one to betray us, and your mom was the one who tried to save us.”

He doesn't hesitate. "I was surprised too. I was honestly never sure if my mom actually loved me, but I guess she loved me in her own way. She was just a woman who cared about power nearly as much as her own child, but chose her child in the end."

"What do you think she's doing now?"

He runs his hand through his blond hair. "She'll want to continue having power any way she can. She'll be left with a choice: make Paradise Falls into something that can work without goldarium, or abandon it all, taking whatever power and wealth she can with her as she does so."

"What do you think will happen to the people?"

"It depends on whether or not she wants to use them as a tool to create her new Paradise Falls, or if she's going to discard them like broken toys."

The truth is, I have no idea what she'll do. I just hope our people are alright.

He takes my hand again. "We can't waste our energy thinking about them. We need to focus on ourselves and our new life. We need to be smart about every single thing that we do." His gaze slides to my stomach, and I know he's thinking about our Little Bean again.

When we get to the top of the hill, we both stiffen. There's a child floating near the path up ahead, a little girl who seems transparent, glowing with a pale blue light. She has long blonde ringlets, big eyes, and a little dress.

She starts flying toward us. "Please, I'm lost. Can you help me?"

Callum releases my hand and starts toward her, but I grab his backpack and haul him

backward. He turns to me with a frown, and I know he's bewildered by how little I care about the girl.

"They said not to trust anything that flies."

"But it's a child," he says, as if I'm crazy.

"Callum, we don't know anything about this world. How do you know that's an actual child? Our dads said anything that flies is dangerous. Shouldn't we trust them over some strange creature?"

He seems to calm. "You're right. I was just thinking about our child, and then this appears, and I wasn't thinking, but you're right."

I turn back to the child. "I'm sorry. We can't help."

Her eyes seem to get bigger as she floats toward us, but she never crosses the path. If she was really some innocent little girl, wouldn't she be able to cross the path? Her inability to must mean she means us harm, right?

She stops when she's just feet from us. "Please, help me. Help me find my daddy."

Callum's jaw clenches, and he folds his arms in front of his chest. I know he wants to help. I know some instinct was born inside of him the moment he found out I was pregnant, and now he wants to help this "child." But every instinct inside of me is screaming that this isn't a little girl, and that this creature means us harm.

"No," I say. "Go away."

"Please," she begs, tears rolling down her chubby cheeks.

Callum looks away and squeezes his eyes shut.

“Not a chance,” I say.

“But I’m little and all alone.” Her voice is just above a whisper.

“You also can’t cross onto the path because you mean us harm,” I say.

She stares at me, and her innocent expression shifts into something more intense. Something creepy. Her mouth opens, and she flashes teeth. Teeth that slowly sharpen.

I grip Callum’s shoulder, and his eyes flash open. Before our eyes, the child stretches into some long, human-like being with no legs, just a flowing gown. Her eyes are pits of black, and she opens and closes her mouth—which is filled with the sharpened teeth—like a fish in the water. It sends a chill right down my spine and leaves goosebumps raising up and down my skin.

Then, she’s gone.

“What the hell was that?” Callum asks in a hushed voice.

“I don’t know, but the flying things here are tricky. We need to never forget that.”

He nods, looking pale.

We keep going on the path. Everything around us whispers of danger, and nothing but my faith leads us into the unknown.

EIGHTEEN

Elora

We managed to stretch the food and water we carried, along with what we found along the path, for six days. Today, we have nothing left. No water. No food. And no signs of anything edible along our path. We're moving on autopilot, just trying to put one foot in front of the other, but we're both exhausted.

Callum doesn't say it though. His whole body language screams that he's exhausted and worried, unsure about how we're going to make it through, but his words are always chipper. It's like he thinks being positive enough will keep me going.

We come to the bottom of a hill.

Callum takes my hand. "So, when we get to the end of the Phoenix Trail, where do you want to build our home?"

I know he's trying to distract me. Hills suck. But for his sake, I decide to go with it. "Not on a hill, that's for sure."

He laughs, even though it sounds a little hollow. "I want a garden. I found a few seed packs at my family cabin, so I brought those with me. We can grow carrots, tomatoes, and bell peppers. There were even two packages of melons."

"Ooh, what a smart idea! I'd miss all of those if we didn't have them."

He grins. “With the tomatoes we should be able to make pizza.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “We just need cheese and dough.”

“Well, we’ll find something to milk for our farm. And people have been making dough for centuries, I’m sure we can figure it out.”

I smile at him. “Since when did you become so chipper?”

He returns my smile. “Since I got a future with the woman I love.” He hesitates. “It’s not that I wanted Paradise Falls to collapse into ruin and for us to be trapped in Neverwood, I’m just glad there was a scenario where you and I could be together and Ferone didn’t have to play the role of dad to my kid.”

“Because you were so on board with that idea,” I tease.

He laughs and pulls me into his arms, and I don’t even mind that we’re both a little sweaty. His lips find mine and he kisses me until I’m out of breath. Then he pulls back, and we’re both breathing hard. It’s strange, we’re in an absolutely desperate situation, but it doesn’t even seem that bad, as long as I’m with Callum.

“We could set up camp...” he suggests softly.

“Callum!” I run my hand through his hair. “We need to find food and water before we die. You’re going to have to keep it in your pants for a little longer.”

He groans, but pulls away. “You’re right.” Then he mutters, “Although, sex is sort of necessary too.”

I grab his hand, grinning at him, while we climb to the top of the hill. As we look down, we see a large brown plant by the side of the road. We each pick up our speed

and hurry toward it. Callum uses his sword to check for snakes, and then we kneel down and start breaking the branches and sucking the brown liquid out. It tastes a little like thin applesauce, but not nearly as sweet.

Glancing at Callum, I see that he's stopped drinking. "There's more, I tell him."

"I'm fine," he says. "You drink it."

I shake my head, frowning. "Callum, you can't do this. We both need enough to keep going."

"I have enough," he tells me stubbornly.

I stop drinking and fold my arms in front of my chest. He groans, looking frustrated, but goes back to drinking, and I do too. Even though he's going painfully slowly.

I know what he's doing. He's been doing it the whole trip. He's trying everything in his power to take care of me and the Little Bean. I appreciate it. But if he collapses out of dehydration, it's not like I'm just going to leave him behind. We both make it, or neither of us does.

We drink everything we possibly can from the bush and then collapse beside it. I feel better, but it's still not enough. Even if we find these plants littering our path, I don't know that this amount of liquid will be enough to ensure we survive this trip. What the hell are we supposed to do? Head back? Try again with more supplies?

I don't know.

"Elora!" Callum gestures to a hill not far from us.

There's motion. Something is coming toward us.

Callum helps me stand, and we both hurry back to the path. When we're safely on it, we look back and watch as about a dozen strange creatures make their way down a hill and toward us. They're short, about waist high, with shimmery metallic skin and lots of packs on their backs. They even pull along black and metal creatures that are some strange mix between a short horse and a donkey. There are more packs on the backs of the donkey-creatures too, which makes me wonder if they're journeying from a long distance.

"They're... people," Callum says.

People with shoes, clothes, and animals that work for them. They must be intelligent in some way, yet I wonder if they speak our language. I wonder if they mean us harm.

"Do you think these are the traders our dads warned us about?" I ask, suddenly excited.

If they are, we could trade for food and water. This could be our chance to actually survive until the end of this realm. Our only chance.

"I think so," Callum says warily.

"Do you remember what our dads said about them?"

He thinks for a minute. "Trade or you will die. Be respectful. Bow often and do not hold eye contact."

My heart hammers. "Okay, then that's what we do."

As they approach, I start to bow. Callum does the same beside me. I'm not sure how much bowing is the custom, but we do it every minute or so, trying to convey that we're not a danger to them, that we're open for trading.

They stop a few feet from the path.

“Hello,” Callum greets. “We’d like to trade if that's possible.”

My gaze meets one of their dark eyes, and I dart my glance away, not wanting to cause trouble. All we know about these creatures is what our dads told us, so we better listen to their warnings really well. It might be the only way we survive this.

The creatures set into motion, laying a metallic-looking piece of leather over the ground, then setting up things all over it. In one area, they have items that shimmer and shine. Things that look like gems and gold. I’ve never seen anything as beautiful as some of the things they have. But the thing is, we’re not here for gems.

They set out other items, things that look like tools that I imagine are very useful here, but we don't know what they are, or how to use them, so they’re not useful to us.

Finally, they set out glass jars that seem to be filled with water, along with different foods they unwrap to show us. None of the food looks particularly good, since it appears to be dead snails and pieces of meat wrapped with brown leaves. But it’s what we need.

“Stay here,” Callum whispers to me.

I tense, but I do as he says.

He leaves the path and kneels down, taking his backpack off. The first thing he does is take the chest of goldarium off the backpack and set it down. I tense. The goldarium is what we can part with the most. We don’t need it for survival, and yet, when we reach our destination, we intend to use it to build our farm, so we can’t give away too much.

The small men seem very excited about the goldarium, luckily. They start whispering between each other, and then point to each of their piles. Callum points to the food and water, and they pull out more food and water. When they seem to have it all out, they point to the goldarium and start to show the size of it that they want.

To my surprise, Callum negotiates, decreasing the size with his fingers, going back and forth with them, but eventually they agree upon a size. Callum opens the goldarium and pulls out a part of it, melding it like putty between his hands before he gets a ball the size of what they want.

When they see the size, they suddenly get angry. Swords come out, so fast I can barely follow them, and Callum is surrounded on his knees.

Callum bows to them several times. “It’s okay. Everything is okay.”

“Give them more goldarium,” I tell Callum softly.

When the creatures look in my direction, I bow, not looking them in the eyes. I do my best to convey to them that I’m not a threat, and that Callum isn’t trying to screw them over.

Callum slowly pulls more of the goldarium from the crystal chest and reforms the ball so that it’s bigger. The swords drop. The tension decreases, and Callum bows again.

Holding my breath, I watch to see what will happen next. They put all the food and water in a backpack for Callum, hand it over to him, and then he hands them the goldarium. All of them surround it, chittering in voices similar to those of small animals. Callum re-secures the backpack and goldarium, then puts the one with food and water in it on his front, before heading back to the path.

There are no waves goodbye. No acknowledgement at all. They just leave back the

way they came, and Callum takes my hand. It's sweaty.

"Are you okay?" I whisper.

He nods. "Let's just get a little distance and then get something to eat and drink."

I release a slow breath. "Okay."

As much as the food and drink we traded for didn't look great, it's still something to eat and drink. I just hope it's enough to allow us to survive here.

NINETEEN

Elora

Hunger burns through me, a painful pit in my stomach. We'd been in this hellish place for eleven fucking days, and there doesn't seem to be any end in sight. Callum and I have already made the hard decision that we would need to hunt and live off the land to survive now that we'd gone through everything we got from trading, but it's proving more difficult than it sounds.

The lava spider skitters past me as I strike out with my sword, but I narrowly miss it. Again. Callum is poised to strike just a few feet away, but he's gotten better, having struck too early the last two times we'd tried, and failed, to get something to eat. He waits. And waits. Then he strikes.

His sword tip goes through the center of the spider, and it makes a terrible crunching sound. The legs continue flailing around for several long minutes before it finally stops moving.

Callum lifts the sword that the spider is impaled on and does a little dance. "We got it! We got it!"

I laugh. "I just hope this is better than the snails."

The snails were hard to find, usually living in the brown bushes, but easy to catch. Unfortunately, eating them was like eating a giant booger that tastes like ash. I'd hurled after our last two meals, so Callum is desperate to catch something I can keep

down.

We return to the path, then stare at each other.

“There’s no way to cook it,” Callum says.

I nod. Even the brown trees can’t be burned here. We’d tried.

“So... we just... eat it?” he asks.

My stomach growls and rolls at the same time. If the baby didn’t want snails, the baby sure as hell doesn’t want spider guts, but we have to eat or die.

No one ever said being a Gold Keeper was easy. Or that being a mom who is trying to do everything to care for her baby is fun.

“I guess so.”

“Do you want a leg?” he asks and shudders.

I reluctantly nod.

He reaches forward and takes a leg, twisting it until it snaps off the body. Then he hands it to me. I stare at whatever is dripping out of the leg, then the hard surface.

“It’s crab,” I say. “Just a crab leg.”

Callum twists off his own leg, then offers it to me. We clink them together like champagne glasses before moving them to our mouths and beginning to suck the ends.

My stomach doesn't immediately revolt against the taste. It's like a mixture of ground beef and crab. It's not entirely appetizing but better than the ashy booger. I definitely don't want to eat this every day, but I think I can keep it down.

"What does Little Bean think?" he asks, studying me carefully.

I smile. "Little Bean... finds it tolerable. I think."

He grins. "Then I'll become the best spider hunter you've ever seen."

"Yay," I say, but I sound tired, even to my own ears.

He moves our packs away and shifts behind me so I can lean on him, then continues to break legs off the spider as we eat.

"This is pretty romantic," I say.

"Oh yeah, I know how to treat a lady," he teases.

I look back at him. "You're going to be a really good dad, you know that?"

He smiles broadly for a minute before it fades. "I hope so, because I have no idea how to do this dad thing. Archer wasn't exactly dad of the year."

Thinking about the cruel way he spoke to Callum, I understand. "He was always so angry."

"He wanted a life different from the one he had. He didn't like being married to my mother. He'd married her because people wanted him to marry her, and she'd married him for the power. His title meant he didn't have any real friends in Paradise Falls, and he resented having to go to Neverwood to help people he didn't care about. I

honestly don't know anything that he actually cared about, including me."

My heart aches for him. "I can see why you don't care all that much about finding our dads."

"That's not true," he says, surprise in his voice. "Your dad loved you so much. He loved you with his whole heart. I saw that, every time I looked at the two of you. I want you to have your dad in your life. I want our child to have your dad in their life. I just... I just want to keep you safe. Walking into the unknown goes against just about every instinct I have."

I kiss him again. I can't help it. He used to approach me with this big ball of possessive jealousy, but now it's a more tender possessiveness, like his sole focus in breathing is keeping me safe, and it's so, so sweet. Our child could do worse than him for a father, that's for sure.

We finish the spider legs and go for the body. The stuff inside it isn't nearly as tasty, but we finish it and actually feel full for the first time in awhile. Both of us know it's unlikely that we'll meet traders again, so we fully need to find a way to live off the land until we get out of here. If we can.

"Do you want to rest for a while longer?"

I shake my head. "We should keep going."

"We don't have to be as careful. There's no world in which the Council could follow us this far into Neverwood."

I smile. "Yes, but I don't want to stay in this realm one day longer than we have to."

"Fair enough," he says, standing. He puts his backpack with the crystal chest tied to it

on. He'd abandoned the one the traders had given him once it was empty. Then he offers me his hand. I take it, and try to pretend that I'm not as exhausted as I feel.

"We just have to keep going. We have to keep hoping we'll get out of here soon."

"I just wish there was a cabin," Callum says. "One night sleeping in a real bed with a roof over our heads would be amazing."

"Agreed," I say, suddenly daydreaming of a cabin out in this lava world. "But I bet the lava would burn down a real cabin."

He winces. "Probably."

We keep going, climbing one hill after another as afternoon gives way to evening. Soon, we'll be able to rest for the night, but not yet. Not when there's still daylight.

As we get to the top of the next hill, I inhale deeply and take a step back. On all sides of the path spreading out on both sides of us are glowing blue creatures that are flying, just like the little girl we saw. For now, they all look like something close to jellyfish, just glowing and bobbing in the air.

I take Callum's hand. "Don't trust anything that flies."

His hand tightens around mine. "This will be easy. We just keep walking, one foot in front of the other. We don't leave the path for any reason."

"Right," I say, and then we start walking.

As we draw near, the creatures shift shapes, looking like lost kids, looking like the people we traded with, even looking like cuddly-looking animals. They beg and plead with us to come save them, to help them, but we just keep moving.

It's weird. I know none of them are really what they pretend to be, but something about them makes me want to go toward them. My feet keep turning toward them, and I have to physically force myself to stay on the path. It must be whatever magic they're made of. Whatever they've learned to do to survive in an environment like this.

Suddenly, the creatures part and a large one of them appears. It's probably five sizes larger than the other ones and pulses as it moves, like a jellyfish. Instead of just having a blue light, it changes between green, red, orange, and yellow, melding from one color to another in a way that's mesmerizing.

"Don't look at it," I warn Callum.

He shakes himself, and we keep walking. But then music begins to emit from the creature, and I feel a strange feeling come over my body. It's like I'm suddenly really tired. My eyelids feel heavy, and the world takes on a dreamlike quality.

Callum starts to head off the path.

I push away the strange feeling, knowing that going off the path is trouble.

Stepping in front of him, I press my hands to his ears, covering them, so he can't hear the music. He blinks down at me, as if seeing me for the first time, but the music continues to pull at me, to draw me closer to the creature, even though all logic says I need to stay away.

My hands drop from Callum's ears, and I make a movement to step off the path. Callum's arms encircle me, pulling me backwards, and he's breathing hard. Then we're both moving toward the edge of the path.

A squeal disturbs the music, and I jerk, my focus moving from the creature to an

animal. It's one of the donkey-like animals that the traders had had. It runs straight for the big creature, seeming caught up in its music. When the donkey-thing reaches the creature, the floating being stops playing music and leaps down onto the donkey-like animal, covering the animal in its translucent body.

The animal begins to scream and wail as we watch its skin being peeled from its body. All the creatures descend on it, and it screams and screams as they fight over it. Blood flies everywhere. Flesh scatters around, and the creatures race around, consuming the splattered flesh.

I look at Callum with horror in my eyes. "Plug our ears and run?"

He nods.

We plug our ears and start running, and we don't stop running, even when the flying creatures are far behind us. Even when we're sure the music can no longer reach our ears. We run and run until we crest a hill and spot a cabin along the path down below. What's more... the entrance to the next ecosystem is just beyond it.

Finally, we stop running. We stand together on the path, breathing hard. We've reached the end! We've finally reached the end of this horrible place!

Callum picks me up and throws me in the air. I laugh, and then we're hugging and spinning. Whatever comes next, it has to be better than this place. It has to be.

"What should we do?" Callum asks, grinning. "Escape or rest?"

I let my mind work. "We don't know what we're going to face in the next ecosystem. It'd probably be best to spend the night in the cabin. Maybe there are even supplies in it." But at the very least we know there will be fresh water because of the magic of the cabin.

He doesn't say a word, just starts heading for the cabin, with me at his side. We're exhausted, but there's a pep in our step at just the thought of a night spent in a bed and a cool shower. Any chance at an escape from this brutal realm.

We reach the cabin, go inside, and turn on the flickering light around the room. It's immediately cooler, I mean like by twenty to thirty degrees at least, probably something our fathers had weaved into the goldarium when they built this place. We throw our stuff on the floor and don't have to say a word before we're both stripping and heading for the shower.

I moan as the cool spray washes over me, and Callum groans behind me. Then we're opening our mouths and drinking as much as we can. I spend a full minute just standing under the falling water drinking before I start scrubbing myself clean. Callum does the same, both of us tired of being yucky and sweaty.

When we're done, I ask him, "Do we really need to get out?"

He gives me a wicked grin. "I have another excuse for us to stay in..."

I laugh as he pulls me into his arms, and we start kissing. Our kisses move from sweet to hot within seconds, and my body heats up for him. How long has it been since we were together?

Too fucking long.

He lifts me up and presses me against the wall of the shower, his mouth never leaving mine. My legs wrap around his back, and his tip presses into my channel. I let out a rush of air against his lips as he squeezes inch by inch into my wet and willing body. The fit is tight.

When he's fully inside of me, he breaks our kiss, breathing hard. "I love you."

“I love you too,” I say, digging my nails into his shoulders.

He starts thrusting into me, and it’s as if the heavens have opened up and swallowed me whole. Every muscle in my body is tense. Every nerve is alive and aware of every inch of him touching me. And he feels... so incredibly good inside of me.

“Callum,” I moan his name.

“Marry me,” he groans, thrusting into me harder.

My head rolls back. He sucks his way down my throat, and I love the feeling of my hard nipples rubbing against his chest. Every part of him feels built for every part of me.

“Marry me,” he asks again, picking up his pace. “Elora, marry me.”

“Yes,” I whisper, and as he starts pounding into me, “Yes, yes, yes!” slips out.

My inner muscles tighten. Pleasure explodes over me and my orgasm hits, rolling through me like a tidal wave. I move my hips, taking his thrusts harder and harder as I ride the waves of my orgasm, and then I feel him come inside of me.

I clutch him harder, pull him closer, loving the feeling of his hot cum inside of me. I love knowing that the man I adore, the man I’m going to have a child with, can make me feel this good. This cherished.

Slowly, his thrusts calm, and he kisses me again and again. My forehead. My eyes. My cheeks.

“I just love you so much,” he rushes out between ragged breaths.

“I love you too,” I tell him again, smiling as I comb my fingers through his wet hair.

His baby blues lock onto me, and he says, “I meant it when I said I want to marry you.”

I don’t hesitate. “And I meant it when I said my answer was yes.”

The smile he gives me could light up the darkest night, could fill up my soul on even the bleakest day. This man is my everything, and I swear to the gods that I want him to always be at my side.

He sets me down gently. We turn off the water, and then he uses a towel to dry me gently before he picks me up and places me on the bed in the cabin. Then, he goes to dry himself.

“What do you need?” he asks me.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

He frowns and goes to dig in the chests before coming out with bags of food. “I’m going to make a stew. You need to eat more.”

It’s hard not to watch the gorgeous, naked man making food for me. Hard not to want him all over again.

When he finishes, our eyes meet. He washes his hands, then slips under the covers with me. I don’t know what he’s planning on doing when he slips under the covers and his mouth finds my core. My hands clench the sheets. Every muscle in my body tenses, and he proceeds to lick and suck me until I feel like I’m losing my mind, and then my orgasm hits me like a ton of bricks.

I'm screaming his name as stars burst in front of my vision and my nerves sizzle with pleasure. He continues to lick me long after my orgasm passes. I have to reach down and tug on his hair to get him to come up, and then he's grinning like he just won the lottery.

"Wow," I manage.

He laughs. "I could tell you weren't fully taken care of."

I try to give him an innocent look. "Well, what if I'm not fully taken care of later on tonight?"

He grins. "What my lady wants, my lady gets."

We cuddle together for a while, listening to the stew cook over the fire, enjoying the cooler air and the soft bed beneath us. I start to feel like I might fall asleep, and I force myself to stay awake. I want to eat first.

"Should we see if they left a journal here?"

Callum kisses my forehead, then slides out of bed and starts digging through the chests. After a minute, he produces a brown leather journal. We sit in bed together and open it, noticing there's only one page with any writing on it.

"Is this a good thing or bad thing?" he asks me.

I shrug. "I guess it depends what's on that page."

The entry is in my dad's handwriting. "The next ecosystem is the Cloud Realm Ecosystem. We only know this because of something we learned from the traders. We have never been to the next ecosystem, so we have no idea what you'll face there.

We have no words of warning. No words of caution. All we can hope is that Callum and Elora made it this far, because we sense we are nearly to the end of the Phoenix Trail. Can you feel it too? The pulling. The desire to keep going, even though you don't know why? If you're here, keep going. Paradise Falls is not the place you think it is. We are not respected the way you think we are. We are tools for the Council and the people. We will never have real lives, or happiness, if we remain in Paradise Falls."

Callum sets the book down. "What are you thinking?"

What am I thinking? "I'm a little nervous that they don't know what's coming next, that we don't know what's coming next, and that they never returned back this way."

"Yeah, all we can hope for is that the Cloud Realm is better than the Ash Realm."

He's right.

Then he glances at me. "Do you feel the pulling they were talking about? A need to keep going?"

After a second, I nod. "It's like there's something inside of me telling me that we'll find our home at the end of the Phoenix Trail. That everything we're looking for is there."

He sighs. "I wish I had that feeling. The only thing I feel—" he hesitates, then continues, "is a need to keep you and our baby safe."

I smile and kiss him. "Your dad instincts are just dominating everything."

He returns my smile. "It's weird that someone's going to call me dad one day. Weird, and good."

I kiss him again, then look back at the journal. “Do you think they knew about the Council’s plans for us?”

Callum takes a long minute to answer. “No, I don’t think so. I think they ran to protect themselves from something, but I don’t think they ever thought we were in that kind of danger. I think they just didn’t want us to be mindless tools for the Council. And I think they knew that our only way out of Paradise Falls was Neverwood.”

I feel strangely relieved. Some small part of me has been wondering what our fathers knew since the day we learned about the labs. I mean, if my father knew they were going to imprison and torture me, and he left me behind, he’d be a pretty shitty dad.

Sighing, I close my eyes and cuddle into my pillow, suddenly very tired.

Callum kisses my forehead. “I’ll wake you when the stew is ready.”

“Uh huh,” I murmur, and then everything goes dark.

TWENTY

Callum

We hold hands as we stare at the barrier into the Cloud Realm. Horrible images flash through my mind of what we might find there, but I grit my teeth and offer Elora a smile, since I can feel her nervousness. Taking her hand, I bring it to my mouth and kiss it, which makes her smile and shake her head.

Gods, I'd do anything to see her smile.

We hold hands, give each other a nod, and then step through. The pulling and bending feeling only lasts a minute, and then we come into the new world. Immediately, the temperature changes to one that's not only bearable, but perfect. Like, easily the most perfect temperature I've ever felt in my life, and we lived in Paradise Falls.

The world around me is also... beautiful, unexpectedly so. There are clouds that peek out from the foliage all around us, but also lots of trees, plants, and rivers. I even see little animals running around the woods, looking happy and content.

Above us, the sky is a brilliant blue color the likes of which I've never seen before. A rainbow is the only thing that interrupts the sea of blue, and the colors, red, green, blue, yellow, and orange, stand out so boldly it's as if some child drew the rainbow with their crayon.

"Wow," I say.

“Wow is right,” Elora says beside me. “But a world this perfect has to be secretly dangerous, right?”

“Yeah, definitely. I bet the rivers are filled with poison, and these little critters are all thirsting for blood.” I’m half teasing, and half not. Everything in Neverwood is dangerous, no matter how safe it seems.

We make sure we stay on the tiny path and slowly continue into the Cloud Realm. I can tell Elora is equally as blown away as I am by how lovely everything is. She just keeps staring and staring, as if she’s not sure she can believe her eyes.

After a while of walking, I spot some fruit trees just off the path. They have triangle-shaped yellow fruits that look especially good after the disgusting stuff we ate throughout the Ash Realm. And there are plenty of birds in the trees eating the fruits, so I imagine they’re safe.

“Why don’t I get us some of those?” I suggest, pointing.

“We can both go,” she says.

I give her a look. If I tell her I don’t want her to go because she’s pregnant and the most precious thing in my world, she’ll want to come anyway. “We don’t know anything about this world. You stay here where you can give me help if I need it.”

“Okay,” she says reluctantly.

I creep off the path. Something that looks like a cross between a squirrel and a bunny stops to watch me as I carefully walk to the trees. Putting my hand on my sword, I try to look big and threatening as I stare down at it, but it just looks up at me with big eyes.

I step around a cloud, unsure if it can hold me, and make it to the tree and pluck one of the fruits off. Staring at it, I don't see any peel or shell, so, glancing at Elora, I bite into it. And, oh, holy hell, it's good. It reminds me of some cross between a star fruit and a dragon fruit. There aren't even any seeds in it.

I eat a whole fruit, then pack a bunch in my bag and use my shirt to put even more of the fruits in. Then I carefully make my way back to Elora. A creature that looks like a cross between a puppy and a kitten darts across my path, stares at me in fear, then takes off. I keep going, wondering which of these innocent-looking creatures is going to kill me.

When I reach Elora safely on the path, I release a slow breath. "The fruit is good."

She smiles, and we sit down to devour the fruit on the path. I watch her every step of the way out of the corner of my eye, hoping the baby likes the new fruit. The Little Bean seems to, which makes my day. There's nothing worse than seeing Elora desperately in need of nutrition and hurling it back up.

We finish, and I say, "Should we keep going?"

She nods eagerly, and I help her to her feet.

We spend several hours walking along the small path through the Cloud Realm, and I think both of us are wondering what the catch is. Everything looks beautiful and safe, which probably means everything in here is dangerous and will try to devour us at any moment.

"The cloud part seems secure," Elora says.

I nod as we step on another cloud. It feels soft, like a hard dough, but we don't sink through it. "Do you think the ground here is just made of clouds? Or do you think

we're in the sky?"

She looks at me with wide eyes. "You think we could be in the sky?"

I chuckle. "Probably not. None of this would be able to grow if there wasn't some earth somewhere, right? Plants and trees need ground to grow in."

Her expression calms a little. "Right."

We hear the sound of a river and continue forward until we see a river heading in our direction, before its path takes it back into the trees.

"Should we refill our water skins?"

They're pretty full. We just left the cabin, but it's never wise to turn down water when we can get it. There are a lot of things we can do without while traveling. Water isn't one of those things.

"Let's at least try it and see if it tastes fresh," she says.

We cautiously head off the path and reach the side of the river. To my shock... it looks to be made of gold. I kneel down and reach inside, when a familiar tugging comes over me. I scoop the bottom of the river and find goldarium twisting and turning in my hand.

"What the hell...?" Elora says, completely shocked.

I look at her. "Goldarium seems to be lining the entire river. How is that possible?"

"Should we... take some?" she asks.

I shrug. "If goldarium lines all the rivers, we probably don't need to."

She opens her mouth, but then silver fish begin swimming through the water. Flashes of light flicker against the gold. Elora kneels down, looking thoughtful as she stares at the river. Between the fish, little creatures are playing. They're no bigger than my thumb, and they have wings. And they're... riding on the fish?

One turns, looks in my direction, and smiles. She looks entirely like a tiny human being.

"What is that?" I ask.

"No idea, but it seems friendly."

"Everything seems friendly here," I say, which troubles me.

The other shoe is bound to drop soon, and I don't want Elora hurt when it does. Everything about this place seems to be set up to make us feel safe and at ease, which means we shouldn't be. Right? Or have I gone totally crazy?

The fish disappear, and I try the water. "It tastes fresh, cool, and crisp," I tell her.

She smiles and kneels down and fills up her own water bottle, while I scoop fresh water into my mouth, trying to make sure I'm fully hydrated. Then she drinks until she seems to be content, and we both head back to the path.

Her hand slides into mine. "I like the Cloud Realm so far."

"I do too, which makes me not trust it."

She laughs. "But wouldn't it be nice if this is really what it's like?"

I consider that for the first time. If the Cloud Realm is really this nice... If it's really a place that's safe, with an abundance of food and water, we absolutely should settle down here. We shouldn't keep going and hoping we can find a better place.

But I can't say that to Elora yet. Her heart is set on finding our dads and finding the source of the goldarium. Besides, I still don't know enough about this realm to trust it.

As we continue, Elora points to a tree near our path. "Is that... more goldarium?"

We come closer and, sure enough, it's goldarium. Several large pieces are just dripping from the leaves of the tree.

"It's strange though, I don't feel the same pulling and tugging as I did with the goldarium in the past," I say, realizing it at the same time as I say it aloud.

"I think maybe that's because it's everywhere here." She does a spin around her. "I mean, don't you feel it? This whole realm is calling to us."

Frowning, I try to feel what she does, but I don't. I just feel an overwhelming need to keep Elora, and our baby, safe and happy. I'm on alert for anything that might hurt her. I don't have it in me to feel some deep yearning for something I don't understand.

"Could this be the place we've been looking for?" I suggest, even though I'm not sure.

Elora thinks for a minute. "No, not yet, but we're close."

The we're close calms me a little. We need to stop chasing a dream. Instead, we should be settling down. Building a home. Learning to live off of the land and

creating a safe place for a child.

But the not yet means we're going to keep going.

Up ahead, one of the bunny-squirrel things crosses our path, looking at us with innocent eyes before darting into the bushes once more.

"I guess those things aren't dangerous to us," I say, since it could come on the path.

Elora nods. "Not that they look dangerous."

As the afternoon turns to evening, more and more creatures walk on our path, to the point where I start to wonder if we're protected from anything on this path any more. Is everything just safe here? Or is the path not protecting us any longer?

"Elora..."

"I know," she says softly. "The path might not be working."

We hold hands, but my free hand is on my sword. If anything tries to hurt Elora, it'll regret it.

Up ahead, a cabin separates itself from the trees. We hurry toward it, grateful to see something familiar in this strange new landscape. This landscape may be more dangerous than any we've encountered before, because our paths might not be safe here. But as we get closer to the cabin, we realize something is wrong.

"It looks... different," Elora says, and there's nervousness in voice.

"It does. But it's still a cabin."

We reach the cabin and just stare at it. It's made with white wood, something no Gold Keeper cabin has ever been built with before. There are cute little windows with shutters and the door has been painted blue, although the color has faded. Cobwebs are gathered in the corners of the windows and the door, something that doesn't happen with cabins made out of goldarium.

"What is this?" I ask.

Elora shakes her head. "Let's go in and check it out."

My muscles tense. "Maybe I should go in and check it out, and you should stay out here."

She rolls her eyes, goes to the handle, and pushes it open.

I'm by her side in an instant, my hand on the handle of my sword. We creep into the darkness and see... a tiny house. It's different from a Gold Keepers' cabin, with rooms in the back hidden by curtains that are partially open. One of the rooms was clearly a baby's room with a little bassinet and a rocking chair. The other room has a large bed and nightstands. There's a four person table by the fire, a little kitchen, and... it all seems to have been made by hand.

"What is this?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Our dads didn't make this."

They couldn't have. It would have taken months to build something like this. More than that, I don't know that they would have the skills to make a cabin by hand.

"Which means that there are other people in this realm."

She turns to me with wide eyes. “Do you think they’re like the elves, or Xarex?”

Her stomach flips. “I don’t know, but we should be very careful.”

We need to be even more cautious in the Cloud Realm, because we’re not alone here. And as dangerous as animals are, we’ve already learned how much more dangerous people can be.

TWENTY-ONE

Ari

We've been traveling for weeks, following the maps we created that we believed would help us find the ancient trail leading out of Paradise Falls. But so far, we haven't seen anything to indicate that we're going the right way.

The weather has grown colder. Veric and I walk side-by-side, with Teth and Serrill trailing behind us. They've struggled to keep up with us each and every day, making an already miserable process even worse. I'd considered leaving them behind, but Veric had refused. I don't know what it is about him. After his father dying and mother going missing, he shouldn't care about the world. He shouldn't care about other people.

I don't.

But somehow, he still does.

He slows our pace when it gets to be too much for them. He stops and gives them a break when their new, not-worn-in boots hurt their precious feet. When he catches game, he makes a fire and shares the food with all of us, even though the two men don't deserve it. We lead them to water, we find mushrooms and berries to eat, all while they stare around in fear.

They're useless to us. Useless, and yet, unless I want to carry on by myself, I have to tolerate them. I have to accept that they're here, dragging us down, even when this is

a life-or-death situation, and I hate it. Isn't it enough that we've taken such a gamble to try to survive?

"I can't believe everyone in Paradise Falls is probably dead by now," Serrill says, sounding out of breath and sad.

"So many lives lost," Teth murmurs.

To my surprise, Veric stops and looks back at them, and I know he's going to speak even before he does. "Maybe not."

"Why do you say that?" Serrill asks, looking confused.

It takes Veric a minute to form the words. "When everyone went to pack, I warned my old caretaker about what was going to happen and showed her the map. She said she had a phone tree, a way of getting in contact with a lot of people in town very quickly, and she was going to warn everyone she could. If she did it, there could be many more people following behind us."

I'm shocked. "You did that?"

He nods.

"Why? Those people are assholes. All they care about is themselves."

He cocks his head. "They didn't deserve to die."

I fold my arms over my chest. "And what if they catch up to us and cause problems?"

He shrugs, his green eyes holding mine, saying a million things his lips will never share. "I wasn't going to just let them die. If I did, I wouldn't be any better than the

Council.”

When he keeps walking, I follow after, feeling uncertain. Veric is the only person who makes me feel this way. Who makes me feel like he can see inside of me, to every tiny crack, and knows how to fix everything that’s broken inside of me with just a word. Maybe it’s because his words are so rare and precious, I don’t know.

Veric suddenly stops ahead of me.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, hurrying up to him.

Just in front of us, there’s... there’s a path lined by glowing flowers. They’re golden and beautiful, unlike anything I’ve ever seen in my life. Nothing grows between the flowers, not even grass. It’s just a perfectly formed path.

“What the hell is this?” I ask.

Serrill and Teth come to stand beside us, gaping. This feels unreal. Like magic. Like something that shouldn’t exist in the world.

“It’s the ancient path,” Veric says softly, and the minute he says it, I know.

“We’ve found it. We’ve found the way out!” I’m ecstatic.

This doesn’t mean our adventure is over. If anything, it means it’s just begun. We have to take this path through the mountains and somehow come out to the outside. Then, we have to find a way to survive in a dangerous new world we know nothing about.

Veric surprises me by taking my hand. Our eyes lock, and that tension that’s always between us sizzles the air. I want to be closer to him. I was to press myself against his

big body and maybe not be strong for just a minute. Maybe trust someone else for the first time in my adult life.

But he turns to face the path, and we start walking.

Somehow, I expected the path to feel different, but it doesn't. We just continue on it, knowing for the first time that we're going in the right direction. That there's a way out of our nightmare.

The hours tick away and the path stretches out before us. Teth and Serrill breathe heavily as we climb higher and higher, and I try to will myself not to be annoyed by them. Maybe at some point I'll be grateful for them. Just not now.

"What's that?" Serrill asks, pointing.

I follow his finger and see something strange, just off the path. It looks like a big wall of tangled vines, except there's something green underneath. I know what it is. I'm probably one of the few people in Paradise Falls who have gone close enough to the wall to Neverwood to really see it for what it is.

"It's an entrance to Neverwood," I say, "but I never thought there was more than one."

"Impossible," Teth murmurs.

"Why do you think it's here?" Serrill asks.

My mind starts working. "I wonder if some of the original families were able to go through the entrance."

"Should we try?" Serrill asks.

Everyone looks at him in shock.

“Only the two families can step through,” I tell him.

He gives me a strange look. “Maybe. Maybe not. We’ve never tried, so how do we know?”

On one side of us is the entrance to Neverwood. On the other side is the path to the outside. For some reason, this feels like an important decision. A choice we can never take back.

What should we do?

TWENTY-TWO

Elora

The afternoon sunlight streams over us and butterflies flutter past. A field of flowers bend their heads in a breeze that sweeps through, and the trees drop their leaves. We walk together in a calm silence, just looking around. Each turn of the bend seems to reveal new and beautiful things.

Maybe we should stay here. The nagging thought won't seem to leave me alone. I just keep wondering what the next realm will be like. How many more realms will we have to travel before we reach the end? Too many, probably, and yet some strange feeling keeps pulling me along, whispering that I'm not there yet. I'm close, but not yet.

"I can't believe a place like this exists," Callum says.

"Do you think it's real?" I ask. "Do you think it's really as safe as it seems?"

We'd slowly begun to shake off the fear of being uncertain if the path is still protecting us. We've seen no big predators. No creatures that make us wary. Nothing to indicate that there are secret dangers waiting for us in the shadows.

He sighs. "Honestly, this place is growing on me. I can't imagine there will be a better place than this..."

I wait for him to say more. He doesn't, which I'm grateful for. I know Callum thinks

we should stay here, and I'm wavering enough that if he tries to convince me, I might crumble. But then I'll be left with this nagging feeling I can't seem to escape.

"What's that?" Callum asks, pointing.

There's something up ahead. We walk a little faster and see that there is a break in the woods up ahead. A break where... houses seem to be built. Slowing, we make our way closer until we see what appears to be an entire abandoned town. There are cobblestone streets, wooden buildings, even little shops.

"What is this?" I ask.

Callum looks at me, his eyes wide. "This isn't one lone person like Xarex. This is evidence of a whole society of people. There are intelligent people in this realm!"

My mind starts working. "So it all depends on whether they're like Xarex or like the elves."

Without a word, I know we're both thinking it. If these people are like the elves, we have a reason to be really afraid. More afraid than we have been in any other realm. But if they're like Xarex, possibilities are opening up in front of us. A possibility for us to have help in the future. A possibility for us to have other people in our life, people in our baby's life.

But that's only if we stay here. And I don't think we should stay here... yet.

I glance at Callum, frowning. "Should we check it out?"

He nods. "Let's just be really careful."

We cautiously leave the path and slowly make our way through the streets. It's clear

the houses were once painted with bright colors. Shutters frame the windows of the little wooden cabins, and there are even light poles and an empty fountain in the middle of the town square.

At the back of the town, we spot a large house set away from the others. We climb up the hill and come to the house to find a fence surrounding an overgrown garden. Behind it, there are fields filled with what looks to be different vegetables, and surrounding the field, various fruit trees are growing.

Callum heads to the house and opens the door. Inside, it's dusty and full of cobwebs, but there's a lovely sitting room, a kitchen, and a dining room. We discover one bedroom, a child's room, a nursery, and two bathrooms. Everything is in good repair, considering how old it must be.

I stop at a window that's made of stained glass with pictures of yellow flowers. "This place is beautiful."

Callum turns to me. "I think we should stop here. We should stay here and make it our home."

My heart aches, but the pulling inside of me continues. "This place is amazing, but I think we should keep going."

His gaze meets mine. "How could we ever find a better place than this?"

I nibble my lip. "Isn't it strange though how everyone is just gone? Where did the people go?"

He looks surprised. "I hadn't thought about that."

The disappointment in his expression hurts my heart. I hadn't really meant to imply

this place was dangerous. I just don't feel like we should stop yet.

“What if we keep this place in mind? And if we don't find what we're looking for, we come back.”

He smiles. “I think that would be good.” Then he glances at the big bed. “Maybe we should stay the night though. Did you see the stream full of fish? And all the vegetables and fruits? We have no idea what's coming next. We might want to be well-rested and well-fed.”

I nod, not missing what he's saying. “You think there is trouble ahead of us?”

His expression is regretful. “Based on everything we've seen of Neverwood, yes. I think things will get far worse before they get better.”

It's hard to hear those words. Hard to think about pushing ourselves harder, being hungry again, being uncomfortable and miserable, especially with a baby coming in six or seven months. But no matter how hard I try, I can't ignore the nagging feeling inside of me that this isn't where we're meant to build our home. That there's something more. Something better.

Callum leans down and kisses me. “We should catch some fish, then gather some food. We'll have a feast tonight!”

I smile. “A feast sounds perfect.”

But in the back of my mind, I'm just praying that I'm not taking us away from paradise, all because of my silly faith.

TWENTY-THREE

Elora

It's been four days since we left the perfect little house behind, and this realm seems to stretch on forever. Part of me is relieved we haven't had to go to some new awful realm, but another part of me is losing faith. Did I make a mistake in coming here? Should we turn back?

That nagging feeling inside me only grows stronger, whispering that it's just a little further. That I just have to keep going a little longer. But I'm not sure I trust that feeling any longer.

"Callum?" I say.

He glances over at me.

"Should we go back?"

He frowns. "I thought you said we need to see this thing through? That we needed to see the end of the Phoenix Trail?"

I bite my lip. "I know I said that. I'm just starting to wonder. What if... what if I'm wrong?"

He turns to me and takes my hands, his gaze locking onto mine. "I don't know if I'm crazy, or if it's just because I love you so much, but I've started to feel that nagging

sense that something is pulling us along too. We've come this far. I think we just need to keep going. To have faith."

I smile. My heart aches. It's like he knew exactly what I needed to hear.

Leaning up onto my tiptoes, I kiss him, and he melts against me, holding me tightly against him, until I have to break our kiss to breathe. "You always know just what to say."

He smiles. "That's because we're made for each other."

I return his smile, and we start walking again, hand in hand.

We start climbing up a hill, and I slow. Climbing has become more difficult for me, for some reason. Callum slows to meet my pace, and I place my free hand on my stomach. This baby, surprise that it was, is our whole world now. We just need to find a safe and wonderful place to raise them. Nothing else matters.

Reaching the top of the hill, we both freeze. My mouth drops open, and I stare. We've come to a large city of houses and shops that surrounds a stone castle. Below us, we can see people moving about the cobblestone streets, and the scent of cooking food comes to us.

And at the entrance to the city, our trail ends.

It seems we've reached our destination.

Callum squeezes my hand. "There's no more path after this."

"The trail ends here," I say, the words sounding strange and foreign in my mind.

He turns to me, and I look at him as he speaks slowly. “Do we go to the town?”

My heart starts hammering. These people could be like the elves. We could be in danger if we go into the town. But... this is what we were looking for. This is the end of the trail. We’d be fools not to explore the place we’ve nearly died several times to reach.

“We should go. Carefully,” I say.

He nods. “The first sign of danger, we run.”

My legs feel tingly and wrong as we continue forward. We make our way closer and closer to the city, eyeing the large stone fence that encircles the city and its people. Every step of the way my nerves wind tighter and tighter until we’re approaching the gate.

I see the flash of movement on the wall. I flinch, expecting an attack. Maybe an arrow to our skull. But instead, the gate slowly opens in front of us.

On the other side of the gate, one guard stands with his back straight. He looks exactly like us, except his skin is slightly tinged with gold.

“You must see the queen,” he says, his voice loud, but his tone respectful. “Follow me.” Then he spins around and starts walking toward the castle.

Unsure about what else to do, we follow behind him.

There are golden people everywhere in the streets. Children run this way and that way. Every time they see us, they stop and stare, moving out of the way and smiling at us, like we’re long-lost friends.

I don't know what to make of it, but I'm aware of the sword at my side. If we need to use it, we will. I'm just glad they haven't given us a reason, because I'm not sure we could take down enough people to be able to escape.

We come to big doors that lead into the castle. The doors are promptly thrown wide open. Dozens of golden people line our path into the castle, all smiling at us in that same strange way.

We're led to a throne room, where a beautiful woman with silver hair and deep golden skin sits in a silky golden dress. There's a smile dancing over her lips, and she seems excited as her gaze falls on us. I'm not sure if it's a good thing or bad thing.

Is she excited to make a new friend? Or does she plan to eat the skin off our bones? It could be either: we're here in Neverwood, after all.

"Hello, children," she greets. "It's been a very long time."

We stare at her, unsure.

"We've missed you."

I find my voice, hoping I'm not making a mistake. "Actually, your highnesses, we've never been here before."

She tilts her head, an amused smile on her lips. "Perhaps you'd like to hear the story. It's one I've become used to telling." Without hesitation, she says, "Once, a very long time ago, a group of mischievous young fae children decided that they wanted to explore beyond the safety of our realm. Unfortunately, those children stumbled far and wide, searching for their way back home, with no luck. Instead, they eventually found the Earth Realm, and a group of lost humans who would never survive the winter. They used their ability to step between worlds and collect our gold to build a

world in which the humans could survive. But they were never forgotten by the fae people. For many generations, the fae waited for their lost children to return home. And now, they have.”

I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what to do. “You’re saying... we’re these fae children?” I ask, confused.

Her smile widens. “You are the descendants of our lost children. With each generation, the gold in your veins has been diluted by the human blood you’ve mixed it with. But the two of you have the purest blood of any of those children. With you in the human realm, none of the other fae children would be able to pass through to Neverwood. Now, however, they will be able to.”

I don’t know what to say. “So, we’re your... lost descendants?”

“Precisely,” she says. “And you two, in particular, come from two separate royal families. The loss of your lines was a great and terrible thing, as is the loss of any child.”

“All of this is hard to accept,” Callum says slowly.

She smiles over our heads. “Maybe they’ll be better at explaining it.”

We turn, and I stop short. Our fathers are standing together in matching golden outfits. Their skin is tan, and their hair has less gray than there was before. They look like themselves, only younger and happy.

My dad... he’s alive.

Without thinking, I run to him. He catches me and pulls me into his arms, and before I know it, I’m sobbing, clinging to him like I did when I was a child, murmuring

things that make no sense, while he reassures me.

“It’s okay, honey, I’m here now. Everything is okay. All of your traveling, all of your sacrifices, they’re done. You’re home. You’re safe.”

I pull back to him, tears rolling down my face, then see Callum, standing still. Staring at his father.

Giving my dad an apologetic look, I go to Callum and wrap myself around him, not sure what to say. I know he loves his dad. I also know his dad doesn’t deserve any of that love, not with the way he’s treated him all his life.

“Son...” Archer begins, looking to my dad like he’s lost.

“Just be honest with him. Say what’s in your heart,” my dad tells him.

Archer clears his throat, running a hand through his long white hair. “I was never a good dad to you. I was never there for you the way you needed. I was cruel with my words. I was awful. There are no excuses for that, but I want to try to explain. You know I wasn’t happy. I hated going to Neverwood. I hated being in Paradise Falls. But more than that,” he hesitates and looks at my dad again, “I was in love with someone I could never be with, and it killed me each and every day.”

My dad nods at him.

I stare, not quite comprehending. What is he saying?

Archer continues. “I’m sorry for everything, and I know you won’t forgive me now. I don’t expect you to. But we’re going to have a whole life together in this beautiful place, so I hope one day you’ll find a way to at least understand me.”

I look at Callum, then squeeze his hand.

Callum shifts awkwardly. “Maybe.” Then he looks back at me. “But we have a lot more pressing things to figure out.”

After an awkward moment, I say, “I don’t understand what she’s talking about. She said there are lost fae and we’re them?”

My dad nods. “See, the fae are magical human-like beings who can go between realms, but they never do. It’s one of their hard and fast rules, so when they had teens disappear, they didn’t go after them. Those teens ended up in Paradise Falls and met the humans who had wandered into the valley between the mountains. The fae, didn’t have paths in the other realms then. They made a life on earth. Only their kids, and their kids’ descendants, were able to make it back through to Neverwood. We actually learned that there are more than two families that can make it through, but their blood was so diluted that by some weird trick the ones with less fae blood in their veins couldn’t come through while we were on earth.”

“So we’re fae ?” I ask.

My father nods.

“And there may be more people in Paradise Falls who can go into Neverwood?”

“Yes. Neat, huh?” He smiles.

My head feels like it’s spinning. “And can we actually make a home here? Are we safe?”

Archer answers this time, taking my father’s hand. “We’re absolutely safe here. More than that, we are all fae royalty. We’ll be able to help to lead the fae, and our lives

will be spent in this castle, comfortable and happy.”

I look at where they’re holding hands. “Why–?”

“They’re together, like Teth and Serrill,” Callum says, very matter-of-factly.

Archer tenses, his eyes locked on his son. “Is that... is that okay?”

“But you like women,” I say to my dad, feeling dumb.

He gives me a soft smile. “When I had your mother, I could never love another soul, and I never thought I would. But then, something changed between Archer and I, and I realized that that part of me hadn’t entirely died.”

“That’s why we had to leave Paradise Falls,” Archer says. “They found out. They had the two of you as Gold Keepers, so they were planning something awful for us.”

“Not nearly as awful as what they planned for us,” Callum says angrily.

He’s right.

My father looks confused. “How could they do anything to you? You were the only Gold Keepers.”

Callum answers readily. “They planned to imprison us in a building made of goldarium, so they could steal her eggs and my sperm and grow our babies in test tubes, to build an army of Gold Keepers.”

“What the fuck?” Archer says.

My dad shakes his head in disbelief and some small part of me eases. They didn’t

know. They didn't leave us there to be tortured.

"It's how mom died," I tell him gently. "She found out their plans when I was a baby and went in and burned down the building made of goldarium. They realized she knew the truth and they didn't want you to find out, so they staged it to look like she died in the fire."

"Those bastards," my father says, and there are tears in his eyes.

Archer wraps an arm around my dad, and I squeeze Callum's hand tighter, feeling lost and confused. This is the end of the Phoenix Trail. We've found our dads, and now we know that we're fae, fae royalty. Is this... is this the end?

"Elora?" my father asks.

Callum wipes tears from my cheeks that I didn't even know were there.

"Yes?"

"Are you and Callum...?"

I realize he doesn't know and smile. "Callum and I are together." Then I glance at Callum. He smiles and nods. "And we're expecting a baby."

Smiles break out on my dad's and Archer's faces, and they come to us, hugging me eagerly, and then Callum more awkwardly. My dad keeps repeating, "I'm going to be a grandpa," over and over again, looking happier than I can ever remember him looking.

"A baby?" the queen says behind me.

We spin around.

“A baby from the two royal families. This is a rare and wonderful thing!” And she looks as happy as our fathers.

Coming off her throne, she comes to me and combs my hair back behind my ear, smiling tenderly. “I know that you’ve been through a lot and that your journey here was impossibly difficult. I know that everything we’ve told you is a lot for you to take and that you’ll need time to wrap your head around it. But I want you to know, we will do everything in our power to make you happy here. To make you feel glad to call this your home.”

I smile, already feeling loved. “Thank you.”

Her gaze moves between us. “This is the end. The end of your journey. Elora and Callum, you are home.”

TWENTY-FOUR

Ten months later...

Elora

I wake to the sound of crying and jolt upright. At my side, Callum rises sleepily. My gaze sweeps over our massive room, past the fire crackling in the fireplace, to the little bassinet against the wall.

Time to feed the baby.

I pull back the blanket, but Callum stops me, saying, "I've got her."

He climbs out of bed groggily and goes to the bassinet. He scoops our daughter up into his arms and carries her to the bed. I instantly take her and begin nursing her, and she quiets, happy. Her little hand is in a fist at my breast.

"She has her dad's hunger," he jokes.

I smile, looking down at her blonde hair, mismatched eyes, and chubby cheeks. "The child does love to eat. All the time. I just wish she noticed when it was light and dark outside." Although, technically it's light out. The early morning rays are already coming through our open balcony doors.

I nurse her for a time, and Callum sits beside me, staring down at her. From the moment she was born, all he's wanted to do is watch her. Every little thing she does

seems to fascinate him. I don't blame him though. She's absolutely perfect.

She finishes nursing, and I cover up once more. Callum takes her and puts her over his shoulder to burp her until she gives him a couple that he seems super proud of. Then he lowers her and stares at her. Happiness illuminates his face as she smiles up at him.

"Best burper in the kingdom," he says. "Our little princess."

And she is.

She plays with his hand, making little noises, then her little hands focus on the gold band on his finger. I have a similar ring, only it has a rainbow of stones on it. Callum had it made for me before officially proposing, and we'd married in front of the whole town just a short time later.

There's a knock at our bedroom door. I know who it is before Callum tells them to come. Archer and Victor are there, smiling, looking happy as clams, probably because they'd already been fishing this morning.

"We heard her crying through the wall and thought we could take her out for a little walk," my dad says, not even trying to hide his love for our daughter.

I laugh and look at Callum. He nods, a smile playing on his lips.

It's like the entire kingdom is obsessed with our daughter. Every person in the street would throw themselves in front of a knife for her, and that most certainly includes our fathers, who seem to be eager to take her, day or night.

My dad comes to Callum's side of the bed and takes our happy baby, scooping her up into his arms. "All fed and happy for a couple hours, huh, Princess?"

Archer goes and gets her blanket and says, “I wouldn’t count on it. She’ll be here eating again before we know it, getting big and strong, just the way she should.”

At first, Callum was reluctant to let Archer spend time with our baby, but his dad had been patient at every turn, letting Callum set the pace with their relationship. And every time he had a chance to show he’d changed, Archer had proved himself to be a better man than the one who had mistreated Callum for all those years. Their relationship wasn’t perfect by any means, but it was a lot better.

I think it’s partly because Callum understands what it does to a person to not be able to be with the person they love. He seems to never be able to forget how cruel he was to me when he thought I’d betrayed him with Ferone. Not that I held it against him any longer.

Time heals all wounds.

I look at my dad, who’s smiling between his partner and his granddaughter, and my heart gives a little squeeze. After my mom died, he’d been so broken. He hadn’t been happy when he’d been forced to marry my stepmom. His only joy came from me.

He finally has someone else to make him happy, and that means the world to me.

“Get some sleep,” my dad says as they head for the door.

“Thanks,” I say, and mean it.

Except when they leave, I’m not tired any longer. “Want to get a little air?” I ask.

Callum nods and we head for the balcony. He wraps his arm around me, and we stare out at a kingdom that will one day be ours. It’s a kind of paradise we never imagined could be in any realm. A place where we are happy to raise our daughter.

I wish everyone I love can live like this.

My thoughts go to Beva and Serrill. “Do you think they’re happy at their colleges? Happy in the outside world?”

Callum squeezes me. “I think they’re exactly where they’re supposed to be, just like us.”

I turn to look at him, and he kisses me, stealing my breath, making me feel alive and incredible all at once. When we pull away from each other, our eyes are locked and our breathing is rough.

“Should we try to give Natalie a brother or sister?”

Laughing, I shake my head. “You’re having the next one.”

The thing is, I wouldn’t mind another baby. The more loved ones in this perfect life, the better. I’ll just give thanks each and every day that all the events that happened before this led up to this happy life with the people I love most in the world. With the man I love most in the world. What more could I possibly ask for?

A guard is suddenly at our door. “My lady...”

“What?” I ask, frowning, my heart racing at the unexpected interruption.

“There are people on the Phoenix Trail.”

“People ?” I ask Callum.

He shakes his head.

Who in the world could that be?

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