



# Bonded to the Fallen Shadow King (Of Fae and Wolf Trilogy #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Stolen from Earth, Fated to be His Ruin.

Taken from Earth and thrust into a ruthless bridal competition in a fae realm, I'm forced to fight for a crown I don't want in order to survive.

Vad, the dark, sexy, powerful heir of the Shadow Fae Kingdom, is doing the one thing he never wanted—searching for a bride.

But I don't fit in here, and the top contestants want me dead as soon as I arrive.

Bound by Fated magic and trapped in a deadly game, Vad's every cold glance and harsh words remind me that he doesn't want me, and I sure as hell don't want him.

Yet there's no denying the sparks between us, and the way his touch ignites something in me I can't control.

As the contest grows more dangerous, all I can focus on is survival which becomes harder and seems to be slipping through my grasp.

But I won't go out without a fight even if it kills me sooner.

**Total Pages (Source):** 25

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm*

## Chapter One

### Briar

I dropped the maroon glass mixing bowl onto the beige tile floor with a crash .

Blinding-hot pain engulfed my left hand, and I turned toward the kitchen sink. My feet and legs stung from where small shards had cut into me, but that pain didn't hold a candle to the burning on top of my hand.

I gasped as the agony intensified, making it feel as if I'd thrust my hand into a fire of blue flames.

On the floor, red velvet cake batter splattered the tile, reminding me of blood.

My heart clenched. I'd seen too much blood already; I didn't need to see anything resembling it again anytime soon. At least the bowl had been nearly empty.

My older sister, Ember, yelped and shoved the cake pans into the oven behind me. She quickly closed the oven door and turned to me.

Are you okay? she asked, using our pack link.

I'll be fine, I reassured her as I turned on the cold water and put my hand underneath it. Even then, the pain didn't ease—in fact, it increased.

Are you two okay? Ryker, our pack alpha and my sister's fated mate, connected. Are

you being attacked? There was a thump above our heads from what must be him jumping out of the shower.

We're fine. I hated that I'd caused panic. Both my sister and Ryker deserved a little bit of peace. That was why I'd offered to bake with her, after all. It's just... My hand is killing me. It feels as if it's on fire.

Ember was at my side in an instant, her copper-red hair falling forward as she bent to examine my hand under the running water. The harsh kitchen lights made her olive skin appear pale.

"Let me see." Her light-green eyes narrowed with concern as she gently took my wrist.

I winced as she turned my hand palm down. The water ran over my skin, but the burning sensation didn't subside. I'd never experienced anything like it before.

"What the hell?" She gasped as her fingers hovered just above something forming on top of my hand.

Through the haze of pain, I followed her gaze. Black lines twisted on my skin, forming an intricate pattern. The design looked like some kind of butterfly.

The black butterfly pattern shifted before our eyes, its lines blurring and reforming. I inhaled sharply as the wings began to extend, stretching across my knuckles and down my wrist. The black ink transformed into a deep crimson that pulsed with its own light.

"Ember, it's moving." I couldn't tear my eyes away.

The wings elongated, curling around my wrist. The edges transformed into licking

flames that seemed to dance across my skin. What had started out normal now something impossible, a fire butterfly with flames that formed perfect wings extending from a normal body.

“Ryker!” Ember shouted aloud this time, her voice tight with fear. "Get down here!"

Heavy footsteps thundered down the stairs as I stared, transfixed, at my hand. The flames weren't just burning. They were becoming part of my skin.

Ryker burst through the kitchen doorway and stepped up to my sister, water dripping from dark brown hair that clung to his forehead. Beads of water ran down his bare, muscular chest to the waistband of his jeans. His gold-flecked brown eyes locked on my hand.

"What is that?" He leaned down to examine my skin more closely. His presence usually calmed me, but even his steady pack-alpha energy couldn't quell the panic rising in my chest.

“If we knew that, I wouldn’t have been frantically calling for you.” Ember rolled her eyes.

I almost laughed. I loved how snarky she could be. Still, now wasn’t the time to lose focus.

I...I don't know. I went back to using our pack link, afraid of how my voice would sound. With Ryker being my alpha, he’d know how much I was panicking. But I also knew he wouldn’t want my sister to freak out, which she often did when it came to me. It just appeared. One second I was cleaning up cake batter, and the next... I trailed off as another wave of fire radiated from the mark.

Ryker's fingers hovered over the design, not quite touching. "I've never seen anything

like this."

"I would say it's witchcraft, but there are no shadows over it." Ember tilted her head as she studied the intricate, fiery lines crawling across my skin. Unlike most wolf shifters, due to our unique heritage, my sister could see the magic of witches' spells.

Ryker shook his head, and water droplets from his hair hit my face. "Yeah, I wouldn't think a witch could do that."

"Fuck!" Ember slammed her fist against the pale-gray granite counter. "It has to be a fae thing. Nothing else makes sense."

The word fae sent ice through my veins despite the burning in my hand. Ember and I had believed they were just fantasy stories until a week ago, when our Many-Greats-Grandfather visited us.

We shouldn't have been surprised. Humans didn't believe that wolf shifters, witches, and vampires existed, and the few who did were considered crazy.

"But why?" The crimson flames pulsed brighter, and I could feel each movement slither across my skin. "I thought you said that only your fae magic would be activated, not mine."

Ryker's brow furrowed. "We don't know enough about fae magic to—"

The burning sensation suddenly shifted, transforming from a piercing agony to a gentle warmth pulsing beneath my skin. I sighed in relief. The fiery butterfly continued its dance across my hand, but now it felt almost...pleasant. Like fingers gently tracing patterns on my skin.

"The pain is receding." I flexed my fingers, wanting to know if that would impact the

tattoo, but it remained steady.

Ember's eyes darted between my face and the mark, her look anything but reassured. She exchanged a loaded glance with Ryker, whose jaw had tightened into a hard line. They were having a private conversation through their mate bond—I could tell by the way their expressions shifted in silent communication.

My heart dropped. I hated when people worried about me. There were so many other things that deserved their attention.

I forced my lips into what I hoped was a convincing smile. "Hey, I'm okay. Besides, we still have to finish this cake." I pulled my hand out of the water and dried it with a paper towel. "The icing won't make itself, and those strawberries need to soak in the syrup for at least thirty minutes before serving."

Ember's eyebrows shot up. "Are you serious right now? You've just been branded with fae magic, and you're worried about dessert?"

I shrugged, trying to project a nonchalance I didn't feel. My stomach was in knots, but that didn't mean everyone's needed to be. "What good will panicking do? The mark's already here. Might as well have cake while we figure it out."

Ryker's lips twitched, almost forming a smile despite the tension in his shoulders. He placed a hand on Ember's back and said, "She has a point. We need time to research this properly anyway. Finishing the cake will give us time to think clearly."

"Fine," Ember huffed, and turned to open the cabinet to get a clean mixing bowl for the icing. "But this conversation isn't over."

I bent down to pick up the larger pieces of broken glass from the floor. I couldn't register what the two of them were talking about as I threw the glass into the trash,

then carefully wiped up batter and the smaller shards. The entire time, Ryker tracked my movements.

The intensity of his gaze made me pause, so I walked past the island and into the walk-in pantry to grab the broom and dustpan. But as soon as I walked out, Ryker was watching me again. My skin crawled.

What? I began sweeping up the remaining glass.

You won't fool me, Briar. You're still scared, he linked to only me as he smiled at Ember. I can feel your emotions through the alpha link.

My shoulders slumped slightly. Please don't tell Ember how worried I actually am. She's finally starting to relax. She deserves a night without feeling worried or like I'm being threatened. I tried to seem unbothered as I discarded the last of the tiny glass fragments. Besides, this is just a weird tattoo. We've been through worse. I didn't have to mention what that meant. Both his childhood pack and ours had been slaughtered.

For now, I'll let it go. She's so happy baking and being with you. But after we eat, we tell her. I refuse to keep things from her.

Ember strolled across the room and opened the silver refrigerator to grab a block of cream cheese, seemingly oblivious to our silent exchange. "We need to finish the frosting. Briar, can you measure out the powdered sugar while I beat this?"

"On it." I stored the broom, grateful for the distraction. The mark on my hand pulsed with warmth as I came back and washed my hands before getting to work.

Briar, Ryker pushed.

Fine, after dinner. There was no stench of a lie, because I meant it. I just hadn't clarified when after dinner I would. I was hoping for never, but I was quite certain I wouldn't get away with that for long. Not with how much Ryker cared for my sister and, by extension, me.

He seemed satisfied as he focused on Ember, watching her do the other thing she loved most—baking.

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The rest of the evening passed in a blur of forced smiles and feigned normalcy. The cake turned out beautifully—three layers of red velvet with cream cheese icing and syrup-soaked strawberries. But I barely tasted a bite.

Unfortunately, our other pack mates, Kendric, Gage, and Xander, had decided to stay with King Harry, our wolf shifter ruler, and his daughter, Princess Liv, to protect them, which meant I got to eat with Briar and Ryker alone.

Great.

Throughout dinner, Ryker kept glancing at me, his eyes narrowing whenever I avoided eye contact. The butterfly mark pulsed beneath my skin, a gentle reminder of whatever magic had claimed me, so I kept my hand under the table as much as possible.

When Ryker took his last bite of cake, he leaned back and looked at my sister with adoration. He beamed. "I love being included in your family recipe. I'll admit it's a little sweet, but watching you eat it made it my favorite dessert ever."

My heart squeezed a little. I hoped that I would find a love like that one day—a fated mate—but my sister wasn't typical. She was gorgeous, strong, and fiercely loyal. I



paled in comparison to her. My hair was a lighter copper, my skin a little paler, and I had freckles, which wasn't typical of wolf shifters. The only thing I had that my sister didn't were deep jade-green eyes where hers were a soft, welcoming color.

"I'm glad you liked it." Ember smiled tightly. Then she glanced in my direction, searching for my hand.

That was my cue to get the hell out of here. The conversation was about to turn back to me.

I yawned loudly, not bothering to hold back. "I'm exhausted." Luckily, it wasn't a lie, because after eating a full meal I was struggling to keep my eyes open. I stood and collected the plates. "Mind if I turn in early?"

Ember frowned. "But we haven't talked about—"

"Tomorrow, please." I steepled my hands. "My brain can't process anything else tonight."

Ember's expression softened, lowering her palms to the table. "I get it. Fae magic—it takes a lot out of you." She reached for my hand, her fingers gentle against my wrist. "Just promise we'll talk first thing tomorrow."

Ryker's disapproving glare burned into me, his jaw tight with unspoken frustration. Before he could open his mouth to object, I pressed a quick kiss to my sister's cheek.

"Promise. Love you." I slipped past her with the plates, hurrying to the kitchen.

I rinsed the dishes with trembling hands as the mark pulsed with each beat of my racing heart. Not bothering to load them properly into the dishwasher, I abandoned them on the sink and fled upstairs, taking the steps two at a time.

In my room, I locked the door, and the exhaustion of the day sank into my bones. I quickly changed into my favorite pajama set, a tank top and flannel pants depicting Stitch sleeping, then crawled between my black sheets.

I snuggled deeper, willing sleep to take me away from the worries plaguing my mind, but my mark pulsed with an eerie fire-like glow as the butterfly flapped its wings.

After I didn't know how long, my eyelids finally grew heavy. Moonlight filtered through the dark purple curtains, casting eerie shadows across my room. Just as consciousness began to slip away, someone materialized over me.

The scent of lilac, roses, and wet soil filled the air. I sat up, ready to fight, when I realized who the man was. It was my Many-Greats-Grandfather, the fae. I'd seen him only once previously, and he'd done the same thing then—appeared in my room with no warning. “What is up with you and popping into family members' bedrooms uninvited?”

His long, dark auburn hair was wilder than the last time I'd seen him, and his golden-brown skin seemed a shade lighter. “As much as I wish our first words weren't curt, I need to take you somewhere now.” His liquid-gold eyes flicked toward the corner of the room, and my vision caught on one of his pointed ears.

“I'm not going anywhere without Ember.” There was no way I was going to leave. He might be family, but I didn't know him.

He waved a hand and created some type of portal. “We don't have time for this. You're being hunted. If they find out you're part fae, you'll die.” He grabbed my arm and tugged at me to go with him, and my wolf surged forward, lending me the strength to yank out of his grasp. He fell back into his own portal, his eyes wide in what look liked horror.

The portal vanished, leaving me alone on my bed. My heart pounded against my ribs as I stared at the empty space where my fae ancestor had disappeared.

Something was very wrong, and I needed help.

Ember! Ryker! I linked frantically, pushing all my fear into the mental connection. I need you!

I jumped to my feet and had just lunged toward the bedroom door when two massive figures materialized on either side of me. Their appearance was so sudden I had no time to react before their hands clamped around my upper arms like iron vises.

I couldn't see their faces because of their helmets, and they wore black body armor that covered them entirely. If that wasn't terrifying enough, huge sets of leathery black wings protruded from their backs.

"No," I screamed, thrashing against their grip, but this time it was useless. Two winged men are in my bedroom!

I heard Ember and Ryker running up the stairs. I had to buy time so the two of them could get here.

I tried to take in any sort of detail that would be telling. Through their helmet eyeholes, I caught glimpses of inhuman eyes—one pair midnight blue, the other a molten amber. My legs gave out.

"Let me go ," I snarled, digging my heels into the plush carpet as I tried to wrench myself free. "You have no right to take me anywhere!"

The one on the right with midnight-blue eyes tightened his grip. "We cannot release you. Fate herself has chosen you. The mark on your hand proves it."

"You should be honored," the amber-eyed one added, his voice melodic yet chilling. "Many would sacrifice everything for such an opportunity."

A strange tingling sensation began at my feet and spread upward through my body like thousands of tiny needles pricking my skin. The air around us shimmered, warping and bending, as if reality itself was melting away. I thrashed harder against their iron grip, my wolf howling in panic beneath my skin.

The walls of my bedroom began to fade, dissolving into white mist at the edges.

My door burst open with a resounding crack as Ryker's massive frame smashed through the wood. Ember rushed in behind him, her face contorted in horror as she took in the scene.

"Briar," my sister screamed, lunging forward.

The sound of her voice was the last thing I heard before everything disappeared in a blinding flash of white light.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm*

### Chapter Two

Vad

My jaw tightened as I entered my father's private library. I already knew this wouldn't be a pleasant conversation. Ever since my mother's death five hundred turns ago, this tension had become our norm. In his eyes, her death was my fault.

My father stood with his arms braced against the massive dark stone desk in the center of his private library. A window in the glass dome above us framed the almost-full moon like an unblinking eye. The air tasted faintly of magic—bitter, sharp, and old. A sickly-sweet tang that reminded me of what I'd witnessed in the northern cave, where the usually crimson water had turned a muddy pink for a long moment. A sure sign of my father's—and thus the kingdom's—weakening powers.

He needed to pass the crown to me as quickly as possible, which meant I had to select a queen. Something I did not want to do, and I'd been struggling to find an alternative.

My father's stare was locked on a cup of crimson water sitting in the middle of his desk. A high fae guard had found yet another disruption in our magic and brought a sample here for us to observe and hopefully find answers, but it had resumed its normal color upon arrival. Still, my father's once night-black hair seemed to become more silver each day, and even the patches on his leathery black wings were beginning to fade more, which confirmed we were in a precarious situation.

"We need to talk." I lifted my chin, my own folded wings tensing along my back.

"This cannot continue. The more frequently the water turns, the more at risk we are of our weakening magic being exposed to the realm."

"I wondered if you would be bold enough to speak with me about the matter." A frustrated hiss escaped his lips. He struck his fist against the desk, causing the tainted water to ripple.

"We need to determine an effective way of handling this matter." I'd seen the changing water with my own eyes. If the wrong person noticed, our authority as a kingdom could be challenged, and we could be overthrown. In the worst case, if the king lost his powers, we might all lose ours as well.

My father had once been a powerful fae warrior, renowned for his cunning and skill with shadow blades and choking glyphs. Lately, he'd been slipping, but only I and Father's personal guard knew the truth.

My father grumbled, dragging a hand through his coarse hair. Age had exacted a painful toll from him. His gait had weakened over the years, and his brow had grown heavier, the wiry silver hairs long and unruly. "You must do your duty and choose a bride. It does not matter whether you want to."

Love was a game for fools and poets. I was neither, and I resented every moment these damnable marriage selection ceremonies would require. Especially given the scope of the last disruption. It seemed to have been confined to one of the sacred spaces beneath the palace. I'd only chanced upon it while seeking restorative rest. But soon it would affect more and more of the kingdom. We were running out of time. Anyone who saw it would know, and then we would be even more vulnerable to attack.

Scoffing, I drew back. "I'm not speaking of my marriage." A sour taste filled my mouth. It was my duty, and I never shirked any sort of responsibility, but love had

killed my mother, and I never wanted to be in a position where someone expected such a foolish emotion from me.

I set my jaw and chose my next words with care. "I'm speaking of the faltering that led to the disruption of the magic woven throughout our realm. It was strong enough that the water changed color yet again."

He waved a hand, his expression twisting to show his annoyance. "You don't need to waste your time on the source of my magic's disruption. It's obvious."

That statement cut through me like a cursed blade, and my mouth nearly fell open before I composed myself. Had he actually admitted that he was flagging, without even trying to save face? I lifted my hands, trying to process this shock.

If he were himself, he would never have acknowledged that. No reigning shadow king would acknowledge his own weaknesses.

"If that's what you came to speak with me about, then you're more of a fool than I thought. There are other matters of far greater importance." He glared at me, bristling with unsteady rage. "The bridal candidates have been arriving all day. Shall I hazard a guess that you have not visited them even once?"

Restraining a sigh, I dropped my hands to my sides and stretched out my wings. The stone walls felt like they were closing in on me. "Why would I visit them? If we're to trust Fate, let us trust Fate." Not that I trusted Fate exactly—she'd allowed my mother to die, and now she had decided to allow my father's decline. At this rate, he might not live until my coronation. "Fate has always been the one who chooses—"

"Fate is a scaffing bitch," he spat.

My eyebrows arched. Insulting Fate would make her angry. Even in my darkest

moments, I wouldn't have spoken of her in that way.

His upper lip curled as he paced across the room, shuffling his feet over the thick crimson rug. "At least go and survey the candidates. You may find that you're drawn to one more than another."

"All that matters to me is that my bride is strong. I'm not marrying for love." I crossed my arms.

His mouth pinched and deep furrows cut into his brow. "This isn't a matter to be taken lightly."

If he wanted to be blunt, I'd happily return the favor. "Nor are the disruptions to your magic and strength. If you cannot survive—"

"This is about the rest of your life . While the council will assist in judging the candidates, you have the final say on your bride. Take this opportunity to consider the women. There are twenty-six candidates. And straighten your shoulders. I raised you better than that."

I straightened my stance. Fiery anger burned through me as my shadow magic coiled within. In the end, nothing would be good enough for him. Sometimes I wondered why I still bothered. "Fate and the council will choose the final one. Until then, I intend to be involved as little as possible and give my attention to situations that truly matter."

"Fate did not choose your mother. I did. And she was everything this kingdom needed, even though many disagreed with my choice." His voice rasped at the end, harshening with his breath. Moisture collected in the corners of his eyes, their brightness dimming as it often did when he started reminiscing.



I firmed my mouth. I did not want to hear anything about my mother. She was a good woman in many respects, but she'd been weak when it mattered most. She was the one who had taught me how dangerous love could be. How swiftly it could distract you from the simplicity of duty and tie you into knots that nothing could undo. "The—"

A soft rap sounded at the door. At my father's order, the door opened, and Elara, my only sibling, entered. She was slim, with delicate features that made her dark-blue eyes seem too large. She wore an elegant gown of dark gray, and her dark hair was braided. Her palm pressed flat against the door as she sought more strength from the shadows. "Forgive the intrusion, but I need a word with Vad."

My father waved her in without looking at her. "Take your time. My conversation is pointless with this one."

I restrained the urge to roll my eyes as I turned my focus to her. "What is it, Elara?"

She pressed her pink lips into a tight line as her attention darted between us. She took a few steps, then stopped at the golden fireplace right across from father. "All but the last bridal candidate are here. Her arrival should be imminent. The rest have gathered in the Ascension Hall. The council has suggested it would be wise for you to greet them." Her palm flattened against the wall now, her fingers tensing. Beneath her glamour, her lips took on the faintest shade of purple.

Feck. She was fading again. It hadn't been that long since her last treatment either.

I strode closer, letting my shadow cross hers. As it did, I flicked my hand and channeled a tendril of the shadow source toward her. "Fine. I will prepare to greet them."

Her breathing deepened, and that tinge of purple faded as she caught the energy.

Father's eyes narrowed. "Elara, continue to the Ascension Hall. Your brother will join you shortly."

She bowed her head and left. No sooner had the door closed than Father seized my upper arm, his fingers digging into my sleeve. It barely registered as more than a pinch, his grip weaker than ever before. "Stop coddling her. All you do is put her at risk. If someone saw you strengthening her, they would know without doubt something is wrong with her, and that would make her more vulnerable."

I glared at him. "They'll also know it if her legs buckle when she is in the Ascension Hall. Her condition is worsening. She needs more support. We need better answers. And I did not do it publicly. There's no one else here." No one with sense, at least.

Father simply shook his head and spun away. "Nothing can be done for her. If she's strong, she will survive. If she isn't..." The muscles in his jaw twitched, the emotions displayed on his face signifying a further lack of control. "You can't save everyone, Vad. And you're wasting time and energy on matters that, in the end, will result in nothing but heartache. Wasted attention. Wasted effort. Wasted power."

"I have neglected nothing. All my duties have received the necessary attention, and your condition and Elara's illness are matters of grave concern for this kingdom and for me. If our enemies—"

Another frustrated snarl escaped his withered lips.

There was nothing else to be gleaned from this discussion. He'd admitted more than I'd guessed he would, and the answer alarmed me all the more. We were running out of time, and he wanted me to focus on choosing a wife and maintaining appearances.

I marched out the door to find my younger sister still in the hall, examining the runes on a dark purple vase as if fascinated. She had one hand resting in the pooled

shadows from the great beam, likely drawing strength from it.

Elara tilted her head toward me when I closed the door. “I can tell you’re looking forward to this more than ever.” She was stronger than Father gave her credit for. More cunning as well, but maintaining a fierce demeanor when one was in constant pain took a toll on even the strongest. Few understood her full potential. Though if matters did not improve soon, not even she would realize it.

“Just as much as I always have,” I countered and offered her my arm.

She accepted, allowing me the honor of walking her into the hall. I kept my steps measured so she wouldn't have to strain herself to keep up.

On the other side of the black and gold stone hall, Silus and Thalen—my two closest friends—were deep in conversation, likely plotting something. Silus’s expression was somber as always, and Thalen spoke with a sneaky grin and graceful gestures. They had been my friends for as long as I could remember. Sometimes I envied them and their more relaxed demeanors, but being the prince came with particular costs.

Thalen sprang forward, arms outstretched. The red collar of his tunic made his skin seem pale as ivory and brought out the gold notes in his amber eyes. “Twenty-five, perhaps twenty-six fae brides, all ready to fight for your attention. I thought we might have to drag you from the shadows, but I see the lovely Elara has already done it for us.” He bowed theatrically at the waist, his wavy silver hair sliding over his face. He kissed Elara’s hand, then spun her in a graceful circle that made her charcoal skirt flare around her ankles. “I see that you’ll be enchanting all the rest of us with your beauty, Elara.” He said it easily, though I knew he harbored no attraction to her. She was like a sister to him, and, outside of my friends, she received little attention at all because she was seen as weak. That didn’t stop Thalen from playing his part. He cocked his head, eyes widening. “But...wait...is that an eyelash on your cheek? Silus, help her. This requires a delicate touch.”

Silus's expression sharpened. His focus shifted to Elara. Though he tended to favor more neutral colors, layering charcoal and black, today he was wearing a deep-blue cravat that brought out the red undertone of his dark skin. He inclined his head, his pupils fixed on Elara as Thalen cut in front of me. "We do have something exceptionally important to discuss," he said. "It's the most important qualification of all for this future bride of yours."

"Take it up with Fate. I have no say in the matter." I pressed Thalen back and looked to Silus, who had just cupped one finger beneath Elara's chin and tipped it up as he studiously examined her face. A soft rosiness spread over her cheeks.

"You could always let me choose for you," Thalen continued with a grin as he guided me along. "I vow that the Thalen stamp of approval would ensure you endless...well, if not happiness, entertainment. The fights alone could be magnificent! Just trust me."

"The last time I trusted you, seventeen shadow beasts tried to eat my face."

"You're the one who tried to conjure blood for the trap from skunk cabbage and obsidian."

"It was—" I stopped. No. I wasn't going to let him bait me into this argument again. Except...I paused for a breath. Shadow beasts had always caused me problems. "Let's get this over with." I turned back to Silus and Elara. He was still studying her face intently. "Are you two going to join us, or does this eyelash require a full procedure?"

Elara's face reddened as Thalen smirked.

Silus straightened, his expression a mask. "It was stuck." His attention cut to her as he held out his arm. "Permit me to escort you, Your Highness."

With a tentative smile, she looped her arm through his.

“Just hear me out,” Thalen continued. “All I’m saying is that whoever you marry should at least be entertaining. Is that too much to ask? Someone I can conspire with about ways to make your life more interesting. Someone who will come up with ideas of her own.”

His pestering was likely to continue, so I stopped listening and simply walked. Once we left the royal family's private quarters, we proceeded toward the Ascension Hall, shadows of the guards stationed along the corridor watching us silently. Their dark armor allowed them to practically disappear into those walls when they remained motionless. The heavy onyx doors of the Hall loomed ahead, the gold inlay etched with symbols of our lineage.

As we approached, the hum of voices could be heard through the thick doors. No doubt the bridal candidates were speculating on the details of the upcoming challenges. Most would die, not from necessity, but because the ruthlessness of the games always extended to the guest halls. Not that I'd seen them myself, but everyone had heard rumors of what these involved. Though some of the kingdoms invited other royals to observe, I'd never attended.

The two guards flanking the Ascension Hall doors opened them soundlessly, and cool air spilled over us. This entry point gave us access to the upper level of the chamber. Long elegant staircases cut down on either side into the main hall, but from up here we could watch the people below us, remote and untouched.

The Ascension Hall was vast and stark, its black stone walls slick as glass and run through with gold veins like lightning frozen in mid-strike. Tall columns rose on all sides, framing multiple sets of double doors on the lower level. The mosaic floor held the Shadow Kingdom's sigil, a somber reminder of why we were doing this and the importance of protecting our power and our kingdom. The lamps burned low with

amber-red flames, casting flickering light that moved like specters along the walls.

Countless ceremonies and executions had been held and announcements made in this room over the years. This wasn't a hall intended to welcome or celebrate. It was designed to initiate and begin the tests, heartless and cold as the stone from which it was carved.

Twenty-five fae women stood below. They didn't notice us as they spoke to one another. Like true fae, they were sizing one another up.

The sharp scent of blood caught my attention, a fae in gold with turquoise eyes now wielding a dagger with magma touch as she bared her teeth at an Aquen Fae in a purple gown.

Elara cut her eyes at me. "Aren't you going to do something?" she asked softly. "There's no reason—"

"Why would I intervene?" I watched as the purple-haired Aquen lashed at her attacker with water whips. The turquoise-eyed fae hissed as she struck back. Admirable ferocity, but poor follow-through in her striking hand. Her left side was completely open, and the water fae wasn't taking advantage of it. Neither would advance far. I doubted either would see the end of the week.

Elara's expression pinched. "To ensure that it is a fair competition without needless bloodshed."

"All that matters is that the final bride is the strongest."

My gaze drifted over the women below. I felt nothing but annoyance as I studied them in their fine silk gowns and elegantly styled hair. They were all so...typical.

A few were watching the quarrel between the two incompetents. Both women had drawn blood, but neither had sealed the deal. This confrontation could have been finished in less than fifteen seconds. But no. They lacked the wherewithal. Others spoke quietly to one another. Most remained silent.

A pale Sylvan Fae with lavender and white hair backed away from the fight, her lavender wings folded tight to her back. She bumped into a taller Sylvan Fae with white-blond hair. Disgust twisted the tall fae's face, her light-silver eyes flashing. With a flex of her fingers, she summoned an air blade and stabbed the other fae in the back. The slender fae gasped and fell forward, blood gushing from the wound. There must have been poison on the blade, or an enchantment to speed the death, because that fae was dead as soon as she hit the floor. Murmurs of surprise spread through the crowd. All backed away from her.

Elara barely restrained a gasp, that sharp intake of breath loud enough for only my friends and me to hear. I avoided looking at her, knowing I'd see distress and concern in her eyes. She was soft. I didn't hate that about her, though I suspected she thought I did. But Father was right that I couldn't coddle her or indulge such softness in public.

The white-blond fae lifted her chin and stared fixedly at me. The blade evaporated from her hand. Her stance was confident but poised, her manner bordering on brazen.

I knew her type.

If she was good enough, she'd make it to the end. In the meantime, there was no purpose in wasting time or attention on her.

Two of the guards came forward, lifted the body of the lavender-haired woman, and carried her away. Another magicked away the blood. Even the last traces of her scent disappeared, vanishing into the sharp, cold air of the chamber.

Scuffling sounded from outside the entrance.

An odd sensation tugged within my core. An awareness that lit every nerve on fire.  
My wings twitched against my back.

Feck. What—who was that?



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm*

### Chapter Three

#### Briar

The sensation of falling overtook me. My stomach lurched as if I'd been dropped from a great height. My heart pounded against my ribs, and I tried to yank my arms from the winged men's hold, but they were like stone statues. All the exhaustion I'd felt in bed had been replaced with pure adrenaline.

I had to get back to my sister, but how the fuck could I manage that when everything was blinding white around me except for Asshole and Dipshit?

I gritted my teeth, ignoring a strange, prickling sensation coursing through my body, and focused instead on the hot anger knotting in my chest.

My bare feet landed on marble with a stinging thwack that echoed around a massive room. I fell to my knees on a logo that looked like a cross between a wolf and a shadow with one creepy-ass crimson eye staring at me. Asshole and Dipshit let go, and I fell forward on my hands, one palm landing on the rim of a golden circle that went around the wolf. I growled and jumped to my feet, then spun to face the two twatwaffles, but froze when I took in the room.

Massive black stone walls streaked with gold stretched toward high ceilings. Amber-red flames in sconces lit up the area.

“What the fu—” I started but the words died the second I glanced around. There were at least thirty other people moving toward us, almost every single one a female. My

mouth dried. Every woman wore a gorgeous gown that screamed money, and a few had wings sprouting from their backs.

They were all beautiful—gorgeous and ethereal. Most seemed horrified, but a few looked angry.

I swallowed loudly. This had to be some sort of nightmare. Served me right for running out on Ember when she was worried. However, the pack links with her, Gage, Xander, and Kendric were faint but warm, and even the alpha pack link with Ryker was intact though not nearly as strong as usual. Being a rogue wolf and going crazy...well, crazier than I already was wouldn't happen.

Still, something didn't feel right. I glanced down, hoping like hell that I'd at least dressed myself up to their standards in this dream. No. I was still wearing my sleepyhead Stitch pajamas. I snorted. Of course. Even in my dreams, I was awkward.

A woman with hunter-green hair wrinkled her nose. "What sound did she just make?"

"Nothing I ever want to hear again." A tall fierce-looking woman grimaced. Her silver eyes matched her sleeveless shimmering gown, and white-feathered wings spread behind her back. Her presence screamed trouble .

I stiffened. Both my knees and pride ached, and inside me my wolf stirred restlessly and bared her teeth in warning. We weren't supposed to be here. The pounding in my ears increased until it was a painful drumming.

Every single person stared at me like I was some sort of zoo exhibit. Even the two men who'd abducted me had their freaky eyes fixed on me. Bastards.

I gave everyone a lazy smile and shrugged. "What?" I planted a hand on my hip, lifted my chin high, and took an exaggerated look around. "Isn't this a pajama party?"

“Pa...jama?” a woman with pink hair whispered. “Is that what the atrocious outfit she has on is called?”

A few of the women laughed, while others whispered behind their hands. A woman with dark-red hair seemed particularly horrified.

I took an instinctive step back only to realize these women had formed a circle around me and were closing in. My wolf snarled, feeling both threatened and not liking that I was so overwhelmed I hadn’t noticed until now. Some wolf shifter I was turning out to be.

Even more disturbing, the crimson eye of the shadow wolf logo seemed to watch me from below.

Turning slowly, I noticed a balcony jutting into the center of the room. Three men and a woman about my age stood on it, dressed elegantly in shades of black, gray, and gold, nearly blending into the shadows.

My stare stopped on a pair of haunting gray eyes that belonged to the most handsome man I’d ever seen. His long, loosely curled black hair hit the top of his black jacket. When he tilted his head and bit his full bottom lip, my breath caught.

My wolf stirred in response as something in my chest tugged at me, wanting to close the distance between us.

He leaned into the curve of the balcony and his brows furrowed, but he didn’t break eye contact.

The young woman placed a delicate hand on mysterious guy’s shoulder. A long black braid hung over her shoulder, seeming almost too heavy for her.

My blood heated, my wolf not liking the way she touched him.

The two other men flanked the mysterious guy. One had wavy silver hair similar to the bitch with feathery wings, and the other had black hair and dark skin.

“I think she might be broken.” One of the women behind me chuckled, bringing me back to the present.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I forced my attention away from him and focused on the more immediate threats around me. I grew dizzy, but I refused to let them see me panic. Taking a deep breath to calm my nerves, I surveyed the group to locate the biggest threats.

Did wings make one more threatening or not? I had no clue. They had to be fae, but if that was the case, then this might not be a nightmare after all.

Bile inched up my throat. If they were fae, then this had to be what my many-greats-grandfather had been trying to warn me about. There was no other way to explain the situation. For whatever reason, they had located me and brought me here. Thank Fate they hadn't seized Ember.

Several of the women covered their mouths as they giggled. A few seemed intrigued, their foreheads lined with curiosity as they took in the pajama-clad intruder among them. The rest took a few steps back as if they didn't want to be near me. A tall woman with an expression that looked like she'd stepped in shit came forward. Her pale blonde hair was loose around her shoulders, and her long silver gown caught the light of the amber-red flames. Behind her, white feathered wings spread aggressively like chickens.

"Did the guards take a peasant by mistake?" She tsk ed as if she had a bad taste in her

mouth. "Clearly, she doesn't belong here."

My wolf pressed inside my skin, wanting to spring at her, but I reined her back in. A lazy smile spread across my face, and I took a deep breath. No way in hell would they intimidate me. "Is this how the fae greet all their guests, or am I just special since I'm from Earth?"

My voice sounded stronger than I felt.

The women shot looks at one another, their expressions of astonishment quickly returning to sneers.

"I've never seen anything like it." The blonde fluttered her wings. "A human dressed as... What was it you called it again?"

I lifted my chin. "Pajamas."

"Disgraceful." She recoiled. "You chose to wear... that to meet the prince you are supposed to impress? How will you fight for his devotion when you show such blatant disrespect?"

The concern on some of their faces morphed into delight, like they were enjoying the show. A girl with pastel-blue hair whispered something to her friend. Their eyes sparkled like they knew something I didn't.

For some reason, my wolf ears weren't working as well here. "You're gonna hurt your necks if you keep staring like that." A faint gust of cool wind flew around me, lifting my hair.

"You don't deserve to be here." The blonde woman's chest heaved, and her wings cupped her sides.

I swallowed a lump as my pulse pounded. I was scared as hell, and they knew it. I had to try harder. "Don't worry too much about me. I don't even want to be here."

The woman drew back, shock flitting across her perfect face, then she narrowed her eyes and gave me a glare cold enough to make the rest of the room seem warm. "What did you say?"

"I don't want to be here," I repeated, louder. "Did you hear it this time, or do I need to speak louder for those in the back and on the balcony?"

Some of the others muttered behind their hands. "Did you hear her?"

"Unbelievable."

"It sounds like she's rejecting—"

The woman with wings straightened and pointed a long finger at me. "Kneel and apologize." Her voice was sharp enough to draw blood. "If you know what is good for you."

Was she out of her mind? Did she really think I'd cave just because she'd ordered me to? "What are you gonna do if I don't? I'm just a peasant, right? You should be thrilled. One less competitor for you." My face grew hot from anger and embarrassment, but I stood tall. "And here I thought I was the only one taking things seriously."

More whispers spread through the crowd, some amused, others uncertain.

"You will do it now, if you value your life." The winged woman had raised her voice to a commanding pitch.

I felt like a cornered rabbit, but I'd be damned if I let her know that. I crossed my arms. "And if I don't? Are you gonna make me?"

"You should be honored to stand among us." Her face flushed, somehow only adding to her beauty. "Even if only for mere minutes."

The mean one stalked toward me, her eyes alight with anger. I had no idea how far she'd go, but my wolf urged me to stay strong, refuse to back down.

"Why don't we let her live, Kaylen?" A woman with dark-violet hair tilted her head. "It'll be more fun for us."

"No," the feathered one snapped, the word resounding off the stone walls. "We won't have time for her once the initiation begins." She took another step. "She will kneel. And she will apologize."

Kaylen. That seemed fitting for a bitch. I raised my eyebrows. "I think you need to learn a lesson about humility."

Some gasped. Others laughed.

"You have no idea of what you speak. I will teach you respect," Kaylen sneered.

I took a step back, knocking into one of the guards behind me. My wolf demanded that I push through the cold tendrils of fear choking me. I needed to hit her where it hurt, which was clearly her appearance. "I bet I know more than you think. Besides, you should watch out—you'll get wrinkles if you keep sneering like that."

Her eyes darkened to a stormy silver, and a vile smile crept across her lips. She lifted her hands, moving her long fingers as if she were orchestrating some deadly dance.

The wind that had been blowing faintly around me picked up.

The bitch was using magic!

It lifted me off the ground as if I weighed nothing and slammed me into the far side of the hall. My back hit one of the huge black stone columns, and I gasped in pain as it knocked the breath out of me.

Everyone laughed, their delight clear, as a group of four women circled Kaylen.

I clutched my side as the wind whipped me into the air again, higher than I'd been before. My blood turned to ice, and my wolf squirmed, desperate for a fight. The urge to howl gnawed at my throat, but I swallowed it. I refused to give them any more pleasure than they already had.

I looked upwards and found his eyes on me as he observed, what appeared to be gigantic black leathery wings exploding from his back. When I flew above the people on the balcony's heads, his face grew more rigid, his jaw tighter.

The silver-haired fae next to him leaned in close and said something I couldn't make out. The mysterious man didn't take his eyes off me and clenched a fist against his side.

"Apologize to all of us now," Kaylen commanded from below, the dark-violet-haired girl grinning beside her. Three others stood behind them wearing blinding smiles, watching me.

I hated arrogant people who believed they could control everything and everyone. My pack and I had eliminated a woman who reminded me of Kaylen not long ago. "No."

The wind underneath me vanished, and I dropped like a sack of potatoes. My stomach



lurched as the floor rushed to meet me.

The crowd of women below blurred together as they pointed up at me, mocking. I couldn't hear their words over the rush of the wind in my ears, but I could imagine.

The wind lifted me once more and moved me about ten feet from the people on the balcony. The breath whooshed out of me, and nausea churned in my stomach.

The guards looked on in silence. Asshole and Dipshit were probably laughing beneath their helmets.

The young fae woman with the long dark braid seemed concerned, but her companions didn't bother to hide their smirks. She took a step closer, and we locked eyes as I hovered.

"I'm waiting," Kaylen called, sounding more impatient than before. "For your apology."

My ears roared with the force of the wind, but I managed to shout back. "I'll only apologize if you agree to take the stick out of your ass!"

Silence filled the hall. Kaylen's eyes blazed with white fire. With a vicious grin, she twisted her hand.

I plummeted faster than before.

I opened my mouth and screamed. My limbs numbed from cold and shock as the massive black and gold floor of the hall rushed toward me. I squeezed my eyes shut and braced for impact. I'm sorry, Ember. I should've talked to you instead of running to my room. I love you, I linked, hoping she could hear me.

Strong arms circled my waist out of nowhere. Smoke, leather, and spice filled my nose as tingles shot through me everywhere we touched.

Wings flapped, and my body lowered slowly. I opened my eyes to find that I was pressed against a solid, muscled chest. The hairs on the back of my neck lifted, and I looked up to find that the mysterious man had caught me.

The wings I thought I'd imagined were real. And they were huge and magnificent.

His warm breath hit my neck, sending chills down my body, and I pressed my cheek against him. Hard muscles flexed beneath his jacket.

He didn't speak.

Just held me tight as the air rushed past and everyone watched.

It wasn't a long way down, but once we landed, he still didn't release me.

His expression turned into a deep scowl.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm*

### Chapter Four

Vad

Strange sensations hummed through my body everywhere her body pressed against mine. Green eyes with flecks of black and gray were wide in terror, but there was a fire of determination behind them, and my heart faltered.

I needed to quit staring, but I couldn't look away. I was at the mercy of whatever spell she'd weaved over me.

Freckles spattered her upturned nose and rosy cheeks, and her wild, light-copper hair was tangled and disheveled. She smelled like cinnamon and ginger—better than any sweet I ever had—and her slender form fit perfectly in my arms. My blood surged and thundered in my ears, causing a bulge in my trousers. Heat licked through my chilled blood.

In all my life, I'd never been so aware of another's body, and here I was, transfixed by a woman in such ridiculous attire. Who the feck was this female, and what was happening to me?

Below us, the white-blond Sylvan Fae cleared her throat, forcing me into the present. Everyone had fallen silent and was watching the strange woman and me. The white-blond fae's nostrils flared, and her hands clenched as she glowered at me.

I steeled my expression to avoid showing even a hint of surprise. My leathery wings sliced through the air, slowing our descent until my feet brushed the marble floor.

My wings wanted to twitch in agitation, but I forced them to remain straight, despite my heart pounding against my ribs so hard I feared it might explode from my body.

What the feck had I done?

I'd stated seconds before that I wouldn't intervene, yet when this strange woman was in peril, my body had reacted before I'd even realized it.

Now I stood in the center of the Ascension Hall with all the candidates circling us, the weight of their silence landing hard upon me.

In my haste, I had just painted a larger target on her back. I tensed even more, hating what I'd done. Falling to her death would have been more merciful than what the white-blond fae would have in store for her.

The strange woman squirmed and pushed a palm against my chest, sending a shot of electricity through my body and into my heart. Her hair fluffed against my chin as she flopped back and wriggled. "Thanks for not letting me splatter like roadkill, but we're on the ground now, so you don't have to keep holding me."

My head snapped back a little before I caught myself. Fate had to be messing with me, because I wasn't invested in the ritual. Scowling, I released her legs and gently set her down.

As soon as she was standing, she backed away and tugged down her strange tunic with the bizarre blue creature sleeping on the front.

"You don't have wings," I said darkly, unable to think of anything better to say but feeling like I should speak. "That doesn't bode well for you."

"Why would I have wings?" Her face scrunched up, and she lifted her head in

defiance.

My heart clenched. Fae didn't usually have health issues, but the Shadow Kingdom's weakening magic had to be impacting me right now.

The white-blond fae stepped forward. "Silence. Do not disrespect the Prince of the Shadow Fae."

"I am more than capable of speaking for myself." I glared at her. Inwardly I shook off the strange sensation aroused in me by the copper-haired girl. "As I said before, I don't even care to know what any of you are called, let alone allow any of you to speak on my behalf."

Thalen leaned over the balcony railing, arms clasped behind his back. "I want to know one name. What's yours, little copper warrior?" he called in that mocking singsong tone of his.

The copper-haired girl clearly understood his intent and balled her fists. "It's Briar, you sparkling Temu Legolas."

I shook my head and furrowed my brows. I had no clue what a Temu or a Legolas was. She must have been speaking some sort of Earth language.

Shocked murmurs spread among the other women, while the white-blond fae pressed her hand to her throat.

Even more bewildering, Thalen just laughed and flashed his crooked smile. His voice echoed on the high ceiling. "I don't know what half those words meant, but Briar suits you, you scaffing little thornbush."

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, then shot him a glare he would

understand ordered him to be silent. He and this human couldn't be teasing each other right now. It was so inappropriate—which shouldn't be surprising from her.

Her nose wrinkled. "You're a—"

"This shouldn't be tolerated!" The white-blond fae cut between Briar and me. Her silver eyes blazed, and her muscles tensed, her wings bristling behind her.

I wanted to put my hands on her to move her out of the way. This entire situation was intolerable, and I needed to end it now.

I snapped my hand down and curled my fingers in, summoning my power. Cold tendrils of shadow magic pooled from the center of my chest, spread into my fingertips, and flowed into the room, silencing all of the bridal candidates.

The white-blond fae blanched and fell back a step.

Briar's eyes widened, and her hand flew to her throat. Her mouth moved, but no sound escaped her lips.

My heart twisted at her discomfort, but I pushed the sensation aside. My stance was clear, and not even Briar would change it. "I do not want to know your names, or have any of you speak on my behalf. I am not sure how I can make my commands any clearer. I do not care about any of you. The only one who matters is the one who wins. And even then, do not expect passion or love. We'll be fulfilling our duty to the realm."

Briar's nose wrinkled...and I wanted to reach out and comfort her.

No. That would mitigate what I'd just said. I refused to have feelings for anyone except for my father, Elara, Thalen, and Silus.

Gritting my teeth, I turned my back on Briar to face the balcony and the rest of the room. Dozens of eyes focused on me, some eager, others timid, others masked, all awaiting my next words. A startling urge to look back at her sparked within me, but I resisted. She had to learn the rules were the same for her as everyone.

"I offer nothing except what the law requires. Do not look to me for affection or compassion. And do not behave like scaffing idiots. There should be no more bloodshed among you." I fixed a glare on the white-haired fae. She drew back, then straightened her shoulders.

Good. She needed to realize she would never be special, so I continued with my eyes locked on her. "These trials will test your value and your worth. My council will evaluate you. But in the end, Fate will decide. For myself, I want none of you."

I braced my hands on my belt, wanting everyone to know I was not to be questioned or challenged further. "Tomorrow at the noon hour, you will enter the Ascension Hall once more. And you will then enter the first challenge. There are three challenges total. Fate will dictate who survives. The council will make their recommendation. And I will take the strongest as my wife."

Elara stepped forward on the black-floored balcony. Her long braid hung over her shoulder, catching the warm torchlight. "Your Highness, if you wish to join us for dinner, a place has been set for you." Her voice was soft but clear.

She was good at diplomacy. It was a gentle reminder that, according to tradition, I was to eat with the candidates. The seats were assigned, and the dinner would progress with two of the candidates coming to sit at my right and left for a set time. Then they would return to their assigned seats, and another two would be brought forth. The feast would continue until each candidate had had a chance to sit with me for a short conversation.

But I had no patience for that. I inclined my head toward Elara, ignoring the hopeful glances of the candidates around me. “Your hospitality is always appreciated, but I leave the candidates in your capable hands.”

The urge to look back at Briar intensified. Was she disappointed with my decision? Why did I even care? She was a wingless being in awful clothing, not even from this world. She’d probably perish before the second trial.

My boot scuffed the rim of the shadow beast’s circle as I paced over the sigil. “Make no mistake. These trials will test everything about you. Your very essence will be on trial. If you are foolhardy, you will die. These trials are merciless. And let me be clear.” I turned slowly, scanning the assembled crowd. “I will not mourn anyone's death.” Then my scrutiny fell on Briar, and my body betrayed me.

Her arms were folded tight across her chest, and her chin was still lifted, her eyes locking with mine.

That strange hum jolted through me, and something tugged in my chest. My mouth went dry, and my wings itched and pulsed. Stop. Feck. Look away, I chastised myself. Straightening my shoulders, I flexed my wings. “None of you matter.”

With that, I leaped into the air. My wings stretched wide to catch the cold currents, and after two breaths I reached the balcony. I avoided eye contact with my friends, especially Thalen. I could practically feel him grinning with smug delight, coming up with every possibility for tormenting me. Silus probably had an eyebrow arched, a silent but deserved chastisement.

Elara stepped to the edge of the balcony and leaped over the railing with easy grace. She kept her wings tight, hidden, and used her shadow magic to descend to the floor. Her arms were spread wide, her palms upturned in a gentle greeting. “Ladies, I am Princess Elara. Follow me.” The heavy onyx doors on the lower level swung open,



and the guards continued to stand at attention. They held their halberds with steady grips like shadowy statues. “I will show you to the guest hall. Your rooms have your names on the doors. Dinner will be served in the Guest Banquet Hall.”

She lifted a hand to the door and glanced back at Briar. That soft smile of hers inched a little higher as she looked up at me.

I sighed. Of course she liked that one. Maybe she saw a bit of her own fragility in Briar, despite Briar’s fiery responses. Elara would mostly avoid interfering, but she’d defend her favorites in private. Already she had crossed over to one of the smallest of the women, a trembling white-haired Sylvan Fae wearing rich-green clothing.

A flicker of guilt twinged inside me. Few of these women had asked for this. I certainly hadn’t, but my life wasn’t on the line. If Fate had simply chosen one woman and set her before me, I would have married her.

But this was the law.

I stole one more glance at Briar. How would she fare in the trials?

It didn’t matter, and I needed to remember that.

I strode out the doors at the back of the balcony, Thalen and Silus following behind. They at least had the good sense to remain silent as we progressed through the double doors and into the hall. The guards closed the doors behind us. I kept my shoulders squared and my pace steady until I reached the observatory at the end of the black and gold hall. My boots squeaked slightly on the polished marble floor, and I appreciated that the darkness of the walls mirrored my mood.

At least darkness was consistent. Sometimes I wished I could simply disappear into it. Scowling, I shoved the door to the observatory open. This was my retreat as much

as the private library was my father's. The glass dome ceiling gave an unparalleled view of the eastern night sky with the stars shining in all their glory. Not wanting to address my friends yet, I studied the wooden shelves lining the black marble walls, stocked with books, charts, parchment rolls, crystals, skulls, and everything else I might use while enjoying the cosmos.

Inhaling deeply to calm my nerves, I breathed in the scent of parchment and a hint of sandalwood. A faint whiff of peppermint clung to the books to keep pests that were immune to magic at bay. My hand grazed the gold frame of the telescope in the middle of the room, and I glanced at the crystals and lenses on the table surrounded by my notes and current projects.

Thalen chuckled, alerting me that my silence had already gone on too long.

I set my jaw and turned to face my friends, hoping like the scaffing void that I could tolerate their jests.

Making his way to the section of the room where two black couches were situated, Thalen smiled so widely I feared his face would freeze, making it clear he intended to stay. His feet ruffled the plush rug as he pivoted around the table suitable for serving food or propping up my feet while reading.

"You two don't have to join me," I said darkly. "I'd rather be alone."

Silus shut the heavy observatory door as Thalen plopped onto the couch. He leaned back, making himself comfortable. "Oh, did you not want to discuss that little...intervention that happened out there? Did it embarrass you how fast you fell from your high horse of principles to keep the brambly little copper-haired girl from turning into a smear on the marble? Not that I blame you. She's the most fascinating one of the bunch."

My breath caught, and I bristled. He shouldn't speak of Briar that way.

"She's also the weakest. Her scent is off." Silus tapped his nose as he headed over to Thalen and continued, "And she doesn't have wings. Nor does she seem to have any magical abilities, aside from a mouth that moves faster than her sense."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say she's the weakest. Mark my words, she wouldn't run her mouth like that if she didn't have something. I wonder what it is, since she's from...Earth." Thalen placed his feet on the table. "But let's look at the best part of all this. Our little wingless wonder was about to turn into a boneless blot, and then you, you big beautiful bastardly bellend, caught her in your arms and carried her to safety like a future queen. Are you really going to tell us that meant nothing?"

"That Sylvan Fae had already killed one candidate." My wings twitched, wanting to come out, but that would make this entire thing worse. "I couldn't let her think she could just assassinate all her competition. She was getting out of hand."

"Hmmm." Thalen gave a sage nod, stroking his chin. His eyes brightened, dancing with delight. "So you didn't save her because you liked her?"

"What possible reason could there be for me to like her?" I demanded. Heat rose within me, and my spine tightened. My wings flexed against my back, threatening even more to emerge.

Both Silus and Thalen burst out laughing.

Silus stilled and schooled his expression back into its familiar stoic mask. "Do you really think there has to be a reason? Is attraction always logical?"

"I've never found it to be." Thalen folded his arms behind his head with a lazy smile.

“I restored order to the proceedings, that’s all.” These idiots needed to drop this now, because I could feel my control slipping away like water through my fingers.

“You also let that white-haired ice-blood murder another helpless female without a word. When the purple and the blonde were fighting, you didn’t intervene either. You said that you don’t care who wins so long as she’s the strongest.” Thalen pursed his lips.

Having intelligent friends certainly came with downsides. I scowled. “I have my reasons, and I don’t recall needing to justify myself to either of you. Now go. There’s an excellent dinner you could be partaking in.”

Silus and Thalen exchanged looks. Thalen hopped up and marched to the door. “Black currant wine or dark spiced mead?”

“Black currant wine for me,” Silus said, tipping his head in Thalen’s direction.

Both looked at me. I glared in response.

“Black currant wine for you too then.” Thalen nodded. He opened the door and called out the order for dinner to be brought to the nearest servants.

Once the door was closed again, I pressed a hand to my temple. They weren’t wrong. I’d broken my own rules. The memory of Briar’s face as she fell, the way my body simply acted without thought, jolted through me. “You two should have dinner elsewhere.” Still, I sat on the couch. The soft leather sighed beneath my weight. My insides twisted.

“I suppose we could have dinner in the banquet hall. Silus and I could sit in the vacant seat and rotate through your candidates.” Thalen winked.

Silus scoffed. "I'd rather die by a thousand cuts."

"Very well. I'll rotate. We'll find you one nice cozy seat. I know exactly which one you'd prefer." Thalen waggled his brows.

"I've never pretended to enjoy rotations or social events," Silus said. "Unlike some, I never claimed to trust Fate."

Thalen placed a hand on his chest with a flourish. "You're so right. Always the honest one, Silus. Like you, I would never interfere with Fate...unless it was entertaining. Or involved getting even with one of my enemies. Or could spite someone who annoyed me."

"By your definition, all of that would be entertaining." Silus rolled his eyes.

"So it would! Really, spite can make anything entertaining. Don't you agree, Vad?"

"Go jump in the void," I growled.

"All right, but answer me this." Thalen placed a hand on my shoulder, his demeanor startlingly serious. "If I do, and I fall...will you catch me?"

"Don't make me use the same spell I cast on the candidates." I rolled my shoulders, trying to loosen the tension in them. "There've been so many times that I wanted to, and if you don't shut up, I'll actually go through with it."

"Please do." Silus steepled his hands. "Start with Thalen."

"Feck both of you." Thalen glowered.

"We should give Vad some grace. He has a bridal competition to manage. Not that he

cares about the outcome enough to intervene—oh...wait..."

For what felt like the next hour, both tormented me ceaselessly. Mostly Thalen. But Silus encouraged him. Few things had delighted them this much since I'd face-planted on the ice when I'd failed to shadow port out of the sliding labyrinth.

At last, the servants brought dinner. Though it was not the full feast that had been prepared for the contestants, it was the best parts: crispy roasted duck with plum sauce, purple carrots glazed with butter and ginger, mashed turnips baked with brown sugar, black sesame tahini, candied orange slices, black cherry pistachio salad, roast trout wrapped in prosciutto and stuffed with rosemary and lemons, and blackberry cloud trifle.

The black currant wine was an excellent vintage, tart, dry, and earthy. I savored each sip. And the food was good enough it occupied Thalen's and Silus's focus. Perhaps the rest of the evening could pass without—

A knock sounded on the observatory door, and it pressed open at once. Elara poked her head in. "Vad, I'm sorry. Some of the fae are threatening Briar—"

I jumped to my feet and marched out the door.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm*

### Chapter Five

#### Briar

My hands were still shaking from my encounter with Vad, but I pressed them hard against my sides so no one would notice.

In less than ten minutes, my entire world had changed both literally and figuratively. I loved a good fantasy story, but that didn't mean I wanted to actually live one.

Elara led us out of the massive room through some gigantic dark wooden doors. Air whooshed past us as they opened despite her not touching them. Heels clicked over the marble floor, and I waited to follow at the rear of the group, where I was less likely to get stabbed in the back.

I wouldn't put it past these fae versions of mean girls.

Kaylen smirked as Elara walked past her, and a short wispy-haired blonde woman whimpered. A bloodthirsty grin spread across Kaylen's face, and the blue-haired woman and three others followed suit. The mean girl club whispered that she'd be one of the first to die, and of course, they cut their eyes to me like they'd marked the two first deaths, making it hard to swallow.

My stomach twisted in knots as I looked at the mark on my hand. I could still feel the butterfly moving under my skin. Had Fate brought me here to die after everything my pack and I had gone through on Earth? Was she showing me that Vad was my only chance at survival?

As if landing in a place I never wanted or intended to visit wasn't enough, I now had warring emotions brewing inside me, and I hated it. One part of me wanted to get the hell out of here and go back home to my sister and pack, while the other part wanted to fight for Vaddy's affection, because something inside me wanted him.

I forced myself to follow, surveying my surroundings as we went. Kaylen and her squad glided across the floor, their feet not making a sound as their wings fluttered. A few others also flew toward the front of the line on colorful wings.

Some of them caught my eye and then exchanged looks of amused disbelief with each other. One laughed as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

It was like watching a pack of wild dogs turn on each other in the middle of a hunt. Only I was the prey, and they weren't fighting...yet. My wolf snarled. I was a fucking wolf shifter. I was not supposed to be prey.

"You sure you're in the right place?" The tall fae with the wavy midnight-blue hair paused and waited for me. She stared me down, her deep-pink eyes narrowed in a mix of curiosity and disgust. She had a similar smugness to the men who'd brought me here, but it was meaner and less polished. She might be the fae equivalent of a hitman. "Or did you piss off Fate?"

If I acted scared, they'd only escalate. I tried to stand tall, though my shoulders tried to sag. "Most likely the latter." Not wanting to look at her, I took in the gigantic dark walls and the massive hallway that seemed to go on for miles. My wolf eyes adjusted, and I could see all the way to the other end of the hallway, dimly lit by lanterns. Ornate gold-and-black stained glass towered over a double door. Even without a ton of light glowing through the glass, it was still gorgeous.

No one said anything as we soaked in the view. When this was all over, one of these women would be able to call it home.



My heart squeezed uncomfortably, knowing that it wouldn't be me standing next to Vad at the end.

"To the left here," Elara paused at an intersecting hallway, "is where you'll take your rest. You each have your own room, and your name is on the door." She then pointed to the right. "And this will lead you to the dining room."

She then turned to the right, leading us to what had to be supper.

The farther I went into the palace, the more my skin crawled. I'd never been in a place like this; even the royal wolf shifter palace back home was nowhere close to this enormous, and I hadn't ever made it through the entire place.

My wolf shrank back inside me, uncomfortable. The magic here felt different, like a faint burn, and she wasn't happy.

Tall, dark doors opened before Elara reached them, and two guards wearing the same armor as my kidnappers stepped to the sides to usher us through. A chill ran down my spine as I hurried past them into another stunning room, this one with three huge chandeliers lit by candles.

"Where are we supposed to sit?" the short blonde woman whispered to a woman with white hair that had a soft iridescent sheen.

The white-haired woman pointed to a small note that lay on top of a plate. "They have cards with our names on them. Here's yours." The name Aelir was written in shadowy letters.

"Oh." Aelir placed a hand on her chest. "Of course they'd do that."

The pink-eyed fae who had taunted me laughed and bumped into Aelir as she said,

“Enjoy your evening, since you’re still alive.” She moved two seats down in front of the name Ceana .

I wanted to say something but bit my tongue. I was already enough of a target, and I didn’t have a death wish.

Everyone began searching for their names, and I found mine against the left wall between Aelir and Ceana. I took my seat as the other women clattered around.

The table had to be at least thirty feet long, and it was covered with more food than I’d seen in my life. All sorts of colors blurred together, and a rich, sweet smell exploded in my nose. There were candied berries, exotic pastries, and fluffy cakes piled high on gleaming silver trays. The savory aroma of roasted meats mingled with unfamiliar spices. My mouth watered as I took it all in, becoming hungry once more.

Everything was plush and fancy. Deep purple chairs matched the velvet drapes. Dark stone walls that felt even colder than they looked. Shadows clung to the edges of the room, and gold veins ran through the walls like cracks, but they weren’t the kind you could use to escape.

No sign of a way to get home.

This place was killing me. I hated it and wanted it all at once.

I could see another name card to the left of Aelir: Rhielle .

Ceana flicked me a bright-pink glare, then tilted her head toward a woman with honey-blond hair across the table. “Deallan. How...nice to see you.”

More laughter from the women, and Deallan said, “At least these two won’t last long.”

"I'll see to that," Ceana replied, staring at me like I was a squashed bug, and she hadn't yet decided whether to scrape me off the bottom of her shoe or crush me further.

Thankfully, Kaylen was a few seats away, though still close enough to taunt me. She and her neighbors started murmuring and giggling as I tried to get comfortable.

I didn't need to hear the words to know what they were saying.

I sat stiffly, unsure if I was more likely to be attacked by food, magic, Vad, or the girls on either side of me. This place and these people were foreign to me, and I didn't know what to expect.

The room fell into silence as the women focused on the meal, trying to out-queen each other with every dainty bite. Tension lingered in the air, and I wasn't sure I could do this.

I picked at the end of a pastry, something that looked like a fancy chocolate croissant with fresh berries baked in. Was it better to go out early or to survive? Maybe I should just take a bite and see if it was poisoned. Ember would've loved this.

I had to get through it.

To the left was some sort of sparkling blue beverage. I took a sip, hoping it was safe and not magic in a bottle. It tasted like honeyed peaches.

Everything was a damn contradiction, even the drinks.

A voice from farther down the table drifted toward me. "Think of the honor," a woman with pale-blue hair said to another. "I would love to be the one by his side."

I put down the glass and focused on her conversation.

"Enjoy it while you can," another said, her gaze fixed on me.

Even as I took another sip of the peach-honey drink, it didn't help to numb the anxiety tensing my entire body.

Aelir's fragile features contorted, and my chest tightened as her pale shoulders began to shake.

Instinct took over, and I touched her back, steadying her. "Are you okay?" With how suddenly her reaction had taken over, I had to have missed something.

She shook her head, and the glimmer of a tear escaped her lashes. She drew a sharp breath. "Please don't touch me. You're making it worse."

Recoiling, I bent my fingers into my palm and placed my hand in my lap. I had to remember the rules were different here.

"I just can't do this." Her voice was barely a whisper, and her cheeks flushed.

"If it helps, I'm pretty sure I'll be the first target." I tried to force a smile though I suspected I looked more constipated than reassuring. "We just have to make it through."

"I'm scared," she admitted. Her hands trembled in her lap, and she stared at her plate like it held all the answers.

Out of all these people, Aelir seemed to actually have something in her heart besides hate and violence. I was sorry that she was stuck here like me, and I wanted to fix it, to protect her the way Ember had tried to protect me. "You're braver than you

realize.” My jaw tightened, and I glanced around the room. “Why can’t you refuse to participate?”

"You know why." Her nose wrinkled, and she glanced at me with hurt in her eyes. "No one can refuse a summons from Fate. It's the law, and punishable by death. But if you don't die, you'll be rewarded even if you aren't selected as queen."

"Is the little airhead afraid?" Ceana taunted. "She must be speaking with that weird human girl."

Aelir shrank at the sound of Ceana's taunt, but I tried not to let it get to me. I'd already been through so much.

"Seems to be." Deallan laughed, harsh and mean.

My heartbeat quickened, my wolf sensing danger. This was a game to them. Freak out the scared ones and make them easier to slaughter.

I refused to play into it.

"Neither of those girls look like they'll last long." Ceana shrugged, her dark-blue hair cascading over her shoulders.

"Weaklings never do." Deallan's dark curls framed her sly smile. Her pale eyes dipped down, and she pretended to flick a speck of imaginary dust from the honey-amber strap of her dress. "How's the big bad warrior holding up?"

Aelir squeezed my hand, but it was more out of fear than for support.

"Leave them alone." Rhielle shook her head, her pink hair glimmering in the candlelight. "The trials will test them enough. Nothing says any of us have to die, but

bloodthirsty assholes like you will make it worse for everyone else."

My chest expanded with hope.

"She doesn't have to die." Ceana flipped her wrist. "But she will."

Anger flashed in Kaylen's silver eyes as she leaned forward and placed her elbows on the table while staring Rhielle down. "No wings. Are you sure you belong here?"

The group snickered again, but now I'd become even more concerned. If this group wasn't as confident as they wanted to seem, that would make them more desperate and unhinged. The more we allowed them to humiliate us, the more they'd continue to be bullies, because that way they appeared to be in control. Staying silent and hiding wouldn't improve our chances at all.

At least I'd die with my head held high. "Shut up. Why don't you wait until the contest begins and write down who you actually manage to kill? I suspect it'll be a lower count than what you're proclaiming now."

All heads snapped toward me.

"What?" Deallan stood, glaring at me. "I dare you to repeat what you just said."

And give them the satisfaction of me following their commands? Hell no. Instead, I went for a different tactic. "You need to sit down. You're making your desperation even more obvious."

"You don't know a fucking thing about us." Ceana's tone held an ugly edge. "Go back to hiding with the rest of the pathetic, wingless thornbrushes."

I picked up my glass and took a sip, hiding my smile.

Footsteps pounded against the floor, and Elara stood in front of us. "You are gathered here for the prince. Not for a bloodbath." She rolled her shoulders back, looking fragile and elegant. "The prince said there is to be no more fighting before the trials begin."

"And who's going to stop us?" Deallan arched an eyebrow.

"The prince expects his word to be obeyed. The rituals will be enough of a challenge. They start at noon tomorrow. Save your strength for then." Elara took the time to look at each one of us. "Enjoy the meal. You'll need it."

"Says the princess who will never rule." Kaylen rolled her eyes. "We needn't listen to her."

Elara frowned but pretended not to have heard what was said as she walked out the doors.

Not wanting the mean girls to know they bothered me, I took another bite of the pastry on my plate. It tasted better than it had a minute ago, but the dread in the room made it hard to swallow.

Once the door shut with a bang, Kaylen's eyes glinted with malice. "Elara thinks she's better than she is, but she's nothing but a fragile princess who has to do everything for herself because she's too pathetic to ask for help, and even if she did ask, no one would grant it. Her father won't be seen with her. Even her brother only tolerates her." She glanced at me and asked, "How long before you're just as pitiful?"

"You'd better watch out." I leaned back, trying to look unbothered despite my stomach gurgling. "Who's to say you won't be the one winding up in a worse spot than any of us?"

"Buffoon. You don't know anything about our world, do you?" Kaylen grimaced. "It's best if you try to appease us. You have no clue what the trials are even like, do you?"

She paused, letting her words sink in.

I hated that she had me there. I would probably die tomorrow, but I wouldn't just lie down and let them take my life. That was clearly what they expected. "And how would I know that?"

"By begging." Kaylen's eyes narrowed. "Or dying. We're not picky."

"Not happening." I shook my head. "You'll get what's coming to you."

Ceana tilted back her head. "Oh?"

Immediately, the best way to get revenge popped into my head. Kaylen wanted to look picture-perfect and distinguished. There was something I could do to end all that tonight.

I dug my fingers into some dark blackberry cream. The mixture of warm custard made me want to taste it. I suspected it was delicious, and I hated to waste it. But I had a mission to complete.

I took a handful and launched it at Kaylen.

Her jaw dropped as it splattered across her dress, staining the silver fabric dark purple. The other girls froze, too stunned to react, and I saw the fury building in her eyes.

"You'll regret that," she gritted out.



This time I didn't have to force my smile. "You should see the look on your face. It's priceless."

The other girls were still frozen in shock. A fae who I hadn't heard speak hid a smile behind her hand.

"Your death will be—" Kaylen started.

But I picked up another dessert with dark purple syrup that dripped through my fingers and flung it at her.

She ducked this time, and it hit the red-headed woman beside her.

Aelir snatched a cream-filled roll from the center of the table and launched it at the mean girls. It hit the table in front of them and made the cream and purple splatter over all three of them.

Then the entire banquet hall broke into laughter. Not the vicious, cruel laughter I'd heard since I got here, but real laughter.

Including mine.

"What in the—" Deallan started to say.

Before she could finish, Aelir grabbed another dessert, this time a cupcake covered in sparkly gold frosting. She didn't hesitate and tossed it at Deallan. It hit Deallan's shoulder, the frosting coating her honey-brown skin.

Not wanting Aelir to be the only one to have fun, I launched a fluffy cake at Deallan and caught her on the side of her head. She looked murderous, and her hand shot to a plate in front of her. She grabbed what looked like a handful of sweet-glazed chicken

and aimed at me. I ducked, and it hit Rhielle.

"Feck!" Rhielle shouted and giggled. She reached for a glass pitcher filled with the dark blue juice I'd had a taste of earlier and chucked the whole thing in my direction.

The juice splashed over my head, soaking me. I had no time to react before she grabbed another dessert, aiming at Kaylen and the other girls.

It didn't take long for the entire table to erupt. Aelir stuck close to my side and reached for a handful of what looked like whipped cream and threw it across the table at Deallan. It missed and hit a fae whose name I thought might be Myantha, and surprise shone in her eyes as the soft white frosting dripped down her golden hair.

I dodged a pie that sailed from Kaylen's direction, and I snatched a plate of roasted meats and vegetables. The plate hit the table and shattered, sending chunks of everything in Kaylen's direction. She was even more furious than before, which was the entire point.

More food flew through the air, and even though this was childish, it made a point. Everyone would fight.

My hand was buried in a dish of something creamy and bright green when the doors slammed open, and the room fell silent.

Vad stood in the doorway, his gray eyes fixed on me.

I froze. He was even taller and more commanding than I remembered. Everyone stopped as he crossed his arms and stared me down.

The food fight died, and I could feel the eyes of every girl in the room turn my way. Aelir shifted closer to me, and even Rhielle seemed unsure. But I was more hesitant

than any of them.

"Having fun?" Vad's face was a void.

The words were cold and meant to put me in my place, but they didn't have the desired effect. I looked him dead in the eye and didn't flinch. "Yes," I said.

He raised a brow, and I saw disbelief in his expression. Maybe I was imagining it. Maybe I wasn't.

Aelir took my hand in a sticky mess of purple and white frosting, layers of delicate dessert, and raw emotion, a symbol of the mess we'd made and the one I had to clean up if I was going to make it.

"Join us," I said, just as defiant as I'd been since they'd dragged me here.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm*

### Chapter Six

Vad

I braced my hands against my belt and blinked several times as I took in the chaos that was the guest banquet hall. I struggled to understand what I was seeing, especially through the sweet and tart scents assaulting my nostrils.

This had to be a hallucination. No one would be this...uncouth.

But no. Each time I opened my eyes, I saw the exact same catastrophe in front of me.

What in the scaffolding void had happened here? Not one of the contestants had escaped the carnage of creams, jams, sauces, and mash. A few even had pastries clinging to their clothes or in their hair. One honey-brown-haired woman held a chocolate croissant to her lips as if she was ready to take a bite.

Some of the weight that had been pressing on my shoulders lessened. At least it wasn't blood smeared across the walls with limbs of Briar's body scattered across the seats and table. Kaylen would have happily gutted her like the river trout served at dinner.

Had Briar turned the intended attack into a—a food fight? The very thought was preposterous but at the same time...clever.

Briar stood in the center of the guest dining hall, staring right at me. Her hands were piled with blackberry cloud trifle, ready to fling.

My chest tugged at the sight.

Her light copper hair was matted with night cordial, blackberry cloud trifle, and some sort of sticky white powdered confection that was half dissolving on her neck in all shades of blue and purple. Her strange garb had been soaked and stained as well, little blue droplets pattering from the top's hemline onto the plush purple rug below.

Most of the other women hadn't fared much better, but many had the decency to at least look ashamed—as they should! But not Briar. If anything, she stood taller.

This was not conduct becoming of women in their position. Yet the sheer ludicrousness of it all—Briar standing there, knowing they wanted to kill her, and her weapon of choice had been...pastries and trifles?

I shifted my weight, forcing my features to tighten. She had to understand actions like these wouldn't be tolerated. For the love of Fate, were manners and decorum not the same on Earth? How did those barbarians live?

A faint tremor passed over her expression, but she didn't turn away. She didn't even have the sense to blush or mumble an apology, or attempt a bow or curtsy.

“Having fun?” I demanded, taking in every detail. This was ridiculous. And...funny. A smile fought to curve my lips, but I pressed them together firmly.

I needed this handled, and to get away from her. My legs yearned to close the distance between us. I needed her to heed my warning, and even better, offer an apology—

“Yes.” The white-haired Sylvan Fae beside her reached out, and they joined hands. More fluffy cream and sugar dripped from their arms.

Heat coiled in me. My spine tightened, and my wings itched. A part of me wanted to lick some of the food from the corner of her mouth and grin.

Feck. The thought was so tempting. Pressure built in my chest, and a laugh lodged in my throat.

No. I couldn't laugh. These weren't the actions of a queen, and I feared laughter would encourage her to continue with her antics.

Eyes firmly on mine, she lifted her chin in challenge. "Join us."

She was feisty, and everything a queen shouldn't be. Yet...also endearing.

I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth, willing the laughter down. I couldn't afford to not look kingly.

Thalen and Silus came in as well, their footsteps heavy on the marble floor.

Thalen's mouth opened as he took in the culinary carnage. His gaze fell on Briar, and he grinned. "I knew we shouldn't have skipped dinner. Looks like the blueberry briar patch is proving quite interesting!"

Silus folded his arms, surveying the feasting hall. "Blackberry, not blueberry, my friend. Details matter."

Elara's soft footsteps announced her arrival, followed by a short gasp of amusement that she masked with a sharp cough.

"So they do," Thalen said. "And blackberry is better, because blackberry bushes have thorns, same as someone here."

I gritted my teeth and turned to look at the three of them. Silus met my ire with stoic calm, while Thalen made no attempt to hide his mirth, his amber eyes dancing. Elara had the decency to flush and pretend her cough was real. She cleared her throat as delicately as she could and then straightened her posture, hands folded before her.

That warning glare gave me time to gather my own composure. The worst thing I could do was chuckle. And Briar seemed void-bent on ensuring nothing would be easy with her. She was still staring at me with those fierce eyes, her shoulders back as if daring me to join in the fun.

It would have been so easy to pick up a handful of that trifle or the mashed turnips coated in brown sugar and hurl it at her, the way I once had thrown snowballs and salt water sponges at Thalen and Silus.

Those days were long gone, and I couldn't afford to let my guard slip even for a moment. I was a prince on the verge of becoming king. My kingdom was at stake, my family at risk of falling apart more than they already had.

I straightened and scanned the entire gathering with a glare. If I looked at Briar any longer, I might not be able to hide my reactions. "This is a disgrace. Every last one of you should be embarrassed by your deplorable conduct."

Kaylen's wings fluttered, her hair caked with pastries and cream. Her silver gown had picked up almost every shade imaginable, ruined beyond all non-magical repair. A snarl twisted her face. "That little wretch is the only one responsible for this!" She pointed a long finger in Briar's direction. The two fae on either side of her nodded. "That abomination is making a mockery of everything!"

I turned to fully face Kaylen, shoulders squared. My blood chilled with the rage that surged through my veins. What kind of coward was she, to pretend that she had no role in this? "Briar is the only one responsible for this? Did she force you to

participate with her magic? Did she make you pick up the food and throw it?” Disgust curled my lips as I stared Kaylen down. “I did not realize she was so much more powerful than you. You must be quite ashamed.”

All color drained from her face. Her voice took on a sickeningly nasal tone, like that of a child unwilling to accept any share of the blame. “No, Your Highness. You ordered that there be no more bloodshed tonight—”

“And those were your only options? To kill her or engage in a reckless and wasteful food fight?” My brow furrowed, my anger deepening. Something about this woman grated on my very soul.

Kaylen drew back half a step. Her lips moved, but no sounds came out.

"Everyone out," I ordered. As Briar started to leave, I shot a glare in her direction and jabbed my finger at her. "You. Stay."

Most of the contestants immediately moved toward the door, heads down or eyes averted, eager to depart. Elara retreated back to the doorway, nodding and speaking softly to them as they passed. She'd brushed against one of the chairs and gotten a smear of dark-purple and white trifle on her dark-gray skirt.

I brought my attention back in time to see a purple-haired fae with bright pink eyes whisper to Briar, “You’ll regret this.”

Briar scrunched her nose. “The only thing I regret is that I didn’t get to push your face into the middle of that pudding.”

Damn her. She had spirit, but it was going to get her killed. There was nothing save murder in the purple-haired fae’s eyes. But that didn’t seem to faze Briar.



The white-haired Sylvan Fae in the green dress now covered in pastries and night cordial lingered a half breath longer, her wide eyes seeming to search for confirmation Briar would be all right.

I glared at them both.

The white-haired fae cringed and darted toward the door, where Elara waited to usher her out. Elara put one hand on the small fae's arm and followed her over the onyx threshold into the dark hall.

Silence descended upon the room, broken only by the soft plopping of sugary frosting and fluffy trifle sliding down the wall and hitting the floor.

I tightened my jaw, trying to maintain my composure. How did I start this conversation? What could I even say to her about her behavior? Still, I had to say something. She had no idea what she was up against.

My insides clenched as I stared into her eyes, and the heat returned in my blood. The tug in my chest intensified, urging me closer, something unknown drawing us together.

I could have her if I wanted. Yes, the Shadow Fae Council would be annoyed, and I'd have to admit my father was right. But if I—

No.

What am I thinking?

I forced myself to cut those thoughts off at the root. It wasn't about what I wanted. I had to have the strongest bride. I didn't care about the outcome aside from that. I couldn't.

Fate help me. Why was I so drawn to this one?

Suddenly I heard the sound of moving liquid. I turned to see both Silus and Thalen sitting at the table, Thalen pouring night cordial into golden goblets.

I'd been so focused on Briar I'd failed to notice that Thalen and Silus were still here. Thalen propped his feet on one of the trifle-stained seats while Silus had his arms folded on the table, his elbow treacherously close to a tilted bowl of strawberry jam.

"I said everyone out," I growled.

Thalen blinked innocently at me. "She's still here. Besides, I want to know what chaotic plan the copper thornbush has next...because Silus and I want to help."

"Nope." Silus accepted the goblet and took a drink. "I don't want to help, but I will watch."

I pointed my finger at the door. They at least had the good sense to immediately rise. Thalen picked up one of the only trays of powdered confections that had survived the fight and winked. I restrained a growl.

After the door shut again, I turned my full attention to Briar, waiting for her to end the silence or show some sign of discomfort or remorse.

Her fingers curled into her palms, and she shifted her weight a little.

Good. She had some sense.

"Explain yourself. What did you hope to gain from all this?" I braced my hands against my belt, resisting the urge to reach out and wipe the cream from her cheek. "Why would you insult my hospitality and this competition by wasting our food and

drink?”

“Because those bitches deserved it. They were acting like their shit don’t stink.” She folded her arms, saying this as if it were the most natural observation in the world. Not even an ounce of contrition underscored her words.

My scowl deepened. I canted my head, uncertain whether I was more shocked at the explanation or the topic. What did it even have to do with anything? “Their...shit doesn’t stink? This was the discussion at dinner? Did you choose this topic?”

Her eyebrow quirked. “What? You saying yours doesn’t either?” A hint of a smile pulled at those full lips. Was she mocking me or teasing me?

I glared harder, even as my mind spun. What was wrong with this woman? “This is not an appropriate topic of conversation.”

Her lips pursed, and color flushed her face, highlighting her cheekbones beneath the smears of confections. I could smell sugar and syrup on her skin, mingling with ginger and cinnamon. She swallowed hard. “I’m guessing you don’t have that saying?”

My head jerked back. How was I supposed to respond to that?

She laughed. "It's what we say on Earth when someone thinks they're too good for everyone else." She hesitated. "You really don't have that saying, do you?"

I shook my head. “Why would we have a saying like that? There’s no need for such a discussion.”

“I mean, it’s...it’s a thing we say. Like...you know when someone says people don't sweat, they glow?"

My brows knit together. She was even more ridiculous than I'd thought. "No. You don't sweat?"

She laughed, her hand coming up to cover her mouth.

Feck. My stomach twisted, and heat surged through my veins.

I resisted the urge to take her hand and pull her toward me, and fought the desire to curl my hand around her cheek. Damn it. She really was adorable, even covered in food and wearing ridiculous blue creatures. What spell had she cast on me? Some part of me longed to join in the laughter. To admit that, yes, this was fecking hilarious. Even without knowing precisely what Kaylen and the others had said or done, I had no doubt they'd deserved this.

And she'd deescalated what could have turned into a brutal and deadly fight by...hurling insults and pastries.

How was she drawing me in like this? It had to be magic, didn't it? "It was disrespectful," I said again, solemnity steeling my tone. "This is a serious matter. These tests are not a joke. You could die."

That eyebrow went higher, and she set her jaw. "I thought you weren't going to intervene. You said you don't care whether any of us live or die." Her voice held an edge, and she folded her arms over her chest. "Why do you care if I act improperly? You don't want any of us ." She hesitated, then shrugged her shoulders. Sadness flashed through those beautiful eyes, but she steeled herself as if drawing upon some inner strength. "I'm going to die anyway. At least I can have a little fun before facing death again."

Her words struck me like a blow to my gut, and I wanted to know who had dared to harm her.

There was one thing I had to do.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm*

### Chapter Seven

#### Briar

My head spun, and I wanted to clamp my hands over my mouth. As soon as I'd admitted I was going to die, Vad's expression had twisted in disgust. His irises were the color of a storm rolling in. He probably was upset that I'd pretty much spat in his face when he was trying to help me survive.

His chest heaved, and without another word he spun on his heels and marched out the doors, leaving me alone.

Unshed tears burned in my eyes and blurred my vision, and my heart squeezed tight within my chest. Fate, I missed Ember. She'd know what to do, and here I stood, fucking clueless. I dug my fingers into my sticky hair, yanking on the ends. Even the pain didn't ground me. I could still feel the weight of his silence on my shoulders, like a burden I couldn't shrug off.

No matter what I did, nothing was right. I couldn't win. Not here, not with my life, not in any way. I plunked into one of the chairs, not caring that my ass landed right in the middle of blackberry fluff. I picked up a goblet of the sweet, dark-blue drink I'd liked at dinner.

Aside from my sister, I'd lost my entire pack in one night and then been separated from her and held in captivity. It had been one thing after another, and just when things had been settling down and I had a new pack with my sister, boom. Dipshit and Asshole came and dragged me into this weird, dangerous land.

And now...I might have lost my entire family, so why did any of this matter? My hand squeezed the goblet tight, the drink sloshing at the rim. I dragged the back of my hand over my eyes and tossed my sticky hair behind my shoulders.

That wretched mark on my hand—the one that flared every time I thought of my family— was going to put me in danger until I finally did die.

No wonder he'd left. He'd realized his advice was pointless, and I had to agree.

I glanced at my hand. The blob of trifle on the back rippled in sync with the wings of my butterfly tattoo. Another reminder Fate hated me and had decided I wasn't worthy. The faint burning sensation made me feel even stranger than I had before...like a dead woman walking. Hopefully being dead would hurt less.

My throat closed, and my stomach churned.

I shifted in the seat, feeling the berry mush cling to me, the sugary dessert slick against my skin. I sat back and continued to spiral.

As if missing Ember wasn't enough, why did I feel this weird pull toward Vaddy? He was sexy yeah, but he was a complete ass. This was so stupid . Everything seemed stacked against me, and it had been ever since I got here. Or before that. Maybe for my entire life.

I ran a finger along the rim of the glass, and then took a deep breath, trying to relax. None of it helped, so I took a long drink and then another.

The door clicked open, and Thalen swaggered back in. His boots made no sound as he came closer. He then motioned with his hand, and the mess in the seat next to me disappeared.

I stared in disbelief as he dropped into the chair. He poured the dark liquid into a clean goblet and turned toward me. When he grinned, it reached his eyes, making them seem like liquid gold.

Damn, that smile could melt an iceberg. He was truly attractive, and way friendlier than any of the others.

"Two things." He lifted one finger. "Kaylen's shit does stink." Then he raised another. "What is a Temu Legolas?"

Laughter exploded before I could stop it, and I fell backward, my body hitting another patch of glop. Of all the things I'd expected him to say, that wasn't it.

He sat there studying me, head tilted, the picture of composure.

After a long, wonderful moment, I found enough composure to answer him. "I'll just call you Sparkles."

He snickered and adjusted his dark tunic. "It fits, doesn't it? And I have finally decided what I'll call you."

I liked this game. "Let's hear it."

"The Queen of Chaos." He held his hands in front of him like it was some sort of headline. "Chaos for short. Copper Chaos, if I'm feeling fiesty."

I giggled, unable to stop. My cheeks ached with it. "That explains why everyone gets so worked up over me. Better than Briar Rose or Princess."

"Rose suits you too." He folded his arms behind his head. "You'll need to come up for a nickname for Prince Vad, because calling him anything but his name doesn't



feel right to me."

My heart dropped. Vad might be a prince, but he wasn't the prince for me. I suspected I'd always be alone, so dying in the next couple days might be a blessing. "You have to help me with something." I leaned toward him, now trying to fight off tears. I needed to stop thinking about Vaddy. "How does a prince have no clue what 'someone's shit don't stink' means, but knows 'a stick up your ass'?"

"None of us had heard that one before." Thalen shrugged. "Because shit stinks, so of course no one needs to say it doesn't." He winked and crossed his legs. "An entire lifetime of being told how important and powerful we are allows us to know not to say uncouth things. It's the first and last thing most fae learn."

"That sounds similar to Earth, where certain supernatural beings want as much power as possible. They want to kill and beat the others down, and sometimes, I can't help but wonder if dying would just be easier than trying to survive here." I'd never said that out loud before. Ember worried about me enough that I didn't want to add to her burden, but saying the words made them feel so much more real. I'd been attacked, kidnapped, and near death so many times—maybe the sand in the hourglass was running out.

My heart sank. At least Ember wasn't here to try and protect me only to wind up dying herself. She had a fated mate and a new pack that relied on her. Still, I wanted to at least tell her I loved her again.

He nodded and huffed. "It's the same in Nytheria, but the fae refuse to admit vulnerability. It's a sign of weakness."

"Well, I'll most likely die tomorrow, so I figure there's no reason for false bravery. Whether you call a vampire by their name or a bloodsucker, it means the same thing," I shot back, raising a brow.

"Your analogies make me smile." He clapped his hands and then rubbed them together. "So, are you and Sparkles"—he pointed at himself as if it weren't obvious—"going to have a little fun before this is all over?"

I gasped and placed a hand on my chest. "You'll just have to wait and see. I have a feeling it will be chaotic."

"Can't be any other way with you." He lifted his glass in a salute. "Here's to the Copper Queen of Chaos."

I snorted, just as the doors open again and Elara reentered the room.

Her dark-blue eyes fixed on Thalen, and she scowled. "I don't need to explain to you why this is inappropriate." The authority in her voice made the air shiver despite the soft volume.

"She needs a friend." Thalen stood. "Then again, do I really need to say that? Something brought you back. Unless it was my luminous presence?"

I half expected Thalen to put up a fight, but instead, he winked, bowed, and walked toward the door. At the last second, he turned and snagged a pitcher of dark liquid.

"Good night, Chaos," he sing-songed, and then slipped into the hallway.

Elara turned her attention to me. I felt an unexpected flutter of nerves as her gaze settled on my messy, food-covered self. She was so proper and delicate, and I was an honest-to-goodness mess. What was she even doing here? Had Vad sent her to punish me?

"It would be wise for you to show more discretion, get cleaned up, and take your rest." She spoke in her usual firm tone as she glanced around the room, then back to

me. "Clothing has been provided for you in your room."

I blinked and bit my bottom lip, unsure what to say. Her presence was so different from Thalen's, and even more from Vad's.

"You don't have to explain anything to me. I get it. I messed up." I brushed my bare foot along the wooden floor.

She placed her hand on a small clean spot on my shoulder. "Our ways aren't your ways, and I know this is hard." She gestured around the dark hall. Her voice held the same gentle note of patience as before.

It reminded me of Ember, who'd always been so understanding, even when I was... A sob built in my chest. No. I couldn't think of my sister right now. I just needed to get back home.

"Tomorrow will be easier if you get your rest." She nodded toward the door.

It wasn't a threat. It was concern and advice, and better than what any of the others had offered.

"I'm s—" I started.

"Never apologize to or thank a fae, especially when the fault isn't yours." She pressed her lips together and dropped her hand.

She was being kind, and my heart cracked a little more. But she was right. I couldn't let my guard down. I was already weak enough.

"It is also important for you to pay attention to the tells, so I'll quickly go over the basic ones." She looped an arm in mine and led me out the door as she continued.

“When Sylvan and Aquen fae are spellcasting, the temperature drops. For Ignis and Terran Fae, the temperature rises. Most fae sense the change a few seconds before someone uses power—it will give you at least a short warning.”

I hung on her every word.

"For Shadow and Neutral Fae, the temperature stays the same, so it's trickier to predict them." Her face set into what had to be determination. She wasn't messing with me. She was truly trying to help. "The wind blade Kaylen summons is nontraditional. It's unusually sharp and dangerous, a combination of crystal and wind that carries deadly poison."

As we walked down the quiet hallway, I stumbled. "Why are you telling me this?" My voice was barely above a whisper.

Her expression softened, and she spoke with the same authority and grace that had made Thalen leave. "While I trust Fate to make the right choice for my brother's wife, I also believe in being proactive. I do not want to see cruelty rewarded."

"I doubt Vad would like you helping me," The words left my mouth before I could think better of it.

She smiled, her lips pulling a little higher on the left. "My brother would not be pleased if he knew I'd shared this, but as someone who is considered weak, I know what it's like to be underestimated. Use that to your advantage. You are stronger than you know."

We walked to a door that had my name carved into a wood panel.

She opened it for me but caught my arm before I entered. "Guard your room. Never assume you're safe. That will help you survive." Then she walked away, leaving me

alone in the hallway.

My heart raced, and I rushed in and slammed the door shut, placing my back against it as I took in the room.

My eyes widened and my jaw dropped. It was easily twice as big as my room back home.

The large space was lit by glimmering crystals that hung like chandeliers. The massive bed was covered in black sheets with golden-satin pillows and a wooden headboard.

Black?

Had they known my sheets were that color back home?

Even the walls were black, and speckled with gold butterflies. A copper wolf mask with trailing chains hung by the bed. In between the bed and the mask was a carved ebony nightstand.

I spotted a large basin in the corner. I'd spent more nights alone, exhausted from the day's adventures, unable to scrub the stains from my skin. I thought I'd have to have one more, but this time was different. There were dark linens set out, and clothing folded on to the side of the basin so neatly that it almost felt wrong to touch it. This entire situation seemed eerie.

I stumbled to the basin and moved the clothes.

Crimson water filled the massive tub, spilling warmth and the scent of juniper and spice. Steam rose around me, relaxing muscles I hadn't realized were tense. I shed the confection-caked Stitch pajamas and took in a shaky breath as I sat in something that

resembled blood. Thankfully, the water wasn't thick like blood, and it smelled of sugar. I leaned back, allowing the water to wash over me and make my skin tingle. As soon as the syrupy stains were gone from my body, my mind returned to everything Elara had said, the knowledge she'd given me. Then it drifted back to her brother and how, when he'd left, it had felt like he'd given up on me.

I submerged myself in the water, trying to wash my worries away. I didn't know what to make of any of this. What had he been thinking? What were any of them thinking? How was Ember reacting back at home?

I should never have been brought here. Should never have been noticed by Fate, or anyone else.

I rested in the huge tub a long time, the water cooling until I finally felt like my head was above it again. I climbed out and dressed in a black silk nightgown, then went to the bed. Before I did, my gaze landed on the door. I couldn't fall asleep without added protection.

The nightstand.

I tried to move it, but it weighed far more than I expected. Calling on my wolf strength, I pushed it over, the scuffing sound of wood on stone echoing in the room. My muscles strained and cramped as I shoved it right in front of the door before turning around and falling into the oversize bed.

I curled up beneath the sheets, letting them cling to my still-damp skin, and hoped exhaustion would take hold. The shadows cast by the crystal's light seemed to move and mock me.

A sob broke free, and tears poured down my face, soaking the pillowcase underneath me. I'd felt this alone only once before, and this time Ember wasn't able to save me.

My chest tightened...and eventually sleep overtook me.

\* \* \*

Something sweet and savory hit my nose. Consciousness tugged at me...then the sound of the nightstand groaning against the floor had my eyes flying open. Someone was trying to open my door.

I jumped out of bed, ready to attack, as three fae ladies squeezed through the small slit in the doorway. All three wore floor-length gray gowns with simple white aprons, and their hair was swept up and pinned back from their faces.

“What the hell,” I yelped, jumping back into bed and holding the covers to my chest. I scanned them for weapons and stayed alert for any temperature changes in the room, but nothing seemed amiss.

One of the fae smiled and gestured to a tray piled high with breakfast that another held in her hands. Dark breads, thick spreads, and fruits more vibrant than any I'd ever seen were arranged in a tower that seemed as absurd as everything else in this world. “We brought you breakfast, and we’re here to help you dress for the first trial.”

My heart dropped, and I pushed my hair from my face. They probably had us eating in our rooms because of what happened last night in the dining room. That was more than okay with me.

The fae piled up a plate and handed it to me. I chose a thick slice of what smelled like banana bread, spread a thick layer of rich creamy butter with a hint of brown sugar and cinnamon on top, and took a bite. Hints of banana and pumpkin with molasses and sugar filled my mouth. The flavors danced on my tongue, making even my wolf salivate, and I watched the other two fae move the nightstand to the side and open the

door wider.

The shortest fae brought over a leather tunic, pants, and black boots that were simple but elegant. “Here you are, miss.” She placed the clothes on my bed. “Please change and let us know when you’re ready for us to come back in.”

The three ladies darted out of the room as I took my last bite and stood.

As I dressed, my heart tightened at a small blank sunk-in detail framed on the chest area of the tunic. A place where a medallion could go. Perhaps the winner would receive something to put there.

The entire outfit was fitted, including black boots, and allowed me to move easily. And more important, I loved the colors—black and blue with copper accents. They made the clothing feel like mine, even though the outfit was fancier than anything I'd ever owned.

Before I could call for them, the three fae returned and raced to style my hair while patting my face all over, leaving a faint coldness behind. They were almost as persistent as Elara and wouldn't take no for an answer.

When they finished, I looked in the mirror and froze. I looked like one of them. Well, as close as I'd ever get. I had makeup on—how was that possible? I touched my face, feeling the coolness covering my skin, and my tattoo fluttered slightly faster. Before I could investigate more, Elara appeared in the doorway.

She scanned me, then sighed. "It's time."

The two of us stepped into the hallway, and chills ran up my spine. It was darker and cooler out here, but I sensed a strange, burning magic in the air. It nipped at my skin, a warning that I wasn't supposed to be here.



But my steps didn't falter. Neither did Elara's.

Her short frame moved with graceful determination, her long hair plaited and neat. I hurried to keep up with her, our footsteps echoing along the marble floors as the stained-glass windows cast light that seemed too distant to reach us. My pulse quickened with each step. I shouldn't be here . But maybe...maybe this time would be different.

Eerie shadows swelled around us as we walked farther down the dim corridor, and I shivered. Elara was so calm and composed, her movements serene. It was as if none of this affected her at all. But me? I felt every strange chill and stray gleam of light, every instinct telling me that I didn't belong and needed to get back home.

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to shake the feeling off and convince myself that Elara wouldn't have helped me if I didn't have a chance.

As moments passed, the sound of my footsteps grew louder, echoing back to me like a constant reminder that I was walking towards my death. We passed more windows, the light slanting in to stain the marble floor with flickering patterns of black and gold. It looked like spilled blood, and my stomach churned, my pulse a drumbeat, fast and unsteady.

As we neared the end, my breath grew shallow and my heart drummed even harder, like the drummer boy before the fighters attacked.

We reached the massive doors and my throat tightened. This could be the last time I saw these halls. My wolf snarled, disliking me giving up. But I couldn't brush away the sense of impending doom that pressed against my body, causing my knees to weaken.

Then Elara opened the doors...and I stumbled back.

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*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm*

### Chapter Eight

#### Briar

Something sparked my tattoo, causing it to warm and flutter its wings faster. Even more alarming, all the women stood in the center of the logo in the hall I'd arrived in, staring at the balcony above Elara's and my heads.

With how quiet the ladies were—even Kaylen—a chill ran down my back. For these women to stand at attention, the trial must have already started.

Elara seemed unaffected as she stepped into the vast chamber. Her long braid trailed behind her like a shadowy banner. I swallowed the bile rising in my throat and forced myself to move forward, not wanting to be left behind... again.

My wolf inched forward, growling as if she could sense something was off in this room too. We searched for threats on the outskirts of the room, and most definitely kept an eye on Bitch Kaylen and her punkass minions.

I moved to the outer ring of the logo where I could watch for someone attempting to stab me in the back. Then I felt a tug and looked up at the balcony.

My heart stopped beating the moment I saw him again. He wore an all-black royal-looking outfit, this time with a golden belt and golden cuffs on his shoulders. His eyes appeared black as they met mine, and his chest heaved at the same time.

Great. Now I wanted to vomit just from him looking at me. My heart felt as if it were

going to shatter, but I straightened my spine. How he felt about me wasn't relevant. I needed to survive long enough to find a way home. He didn't matter.

“Is that the woman who's been making a mockery of this trial?” A man with salt-and-pepper hair stood beside Vaddy, a dark golden crown atop his head. He stared down his nose at me and grimaced.

Kaylen chuckled loud enough for me to hear, and the urge to pull her hair took over. I flinched, realizing I wanted to have an actual girl-fight instead of ripping her throat out. What the hell was wrong with me?

“My king.” Elara bowed her head before glancing over her shoulder at me. Then dark tendrils of magic floated her onto the balcony. “She was not the only one in last night's...altercation. She has come from Earth. Should we not give her time to acclimate to life here? To our ways and customs? In her land, it would seem this was an act of frivolity.” She took the spot in between the king and Silus.

“I am told she was the instigator, and got all the others involved as well.” The king placed his hands on his golden belt. “I am simply—”

“Your Majesty.” Vad's deep voice vibrated through my body. “Perhaps we should address this after the trial. I already addressed the embarrassing display with the ladies last night.”

The king nodded, though the scowl on his face somehow deepened.

On the other side of Vad, Thalen grinned and raised his middle finger at me.

What the hell? He was flipping me off in front of everyone? Maybe the time he'd spent with me last night was just for shits and giggles. Probably he, Silus, and Vaddy had had an entire night of making fun of me.

Why should I expect anything different? This was my own personal hell before I died anyway.

A flutter of long white hair caught my eye, and Aelir appeared at my side, her emerald-green eyes glistening. “I can’t do this,” she whispered. “I can’t. They hate us.”

Reassuring words lodged in my throat, preventing me from saying them. I didn’t know if anyone could smell the stench of lies here like supernaturals could on Earth, but I didn’t want to take the chance or give false hope.

“Now let the ceremony begin.” The king puffed out his chest as men in robes walked in front of the five of them, blocking them from our view.

Oxygen couldn’t fill my lungs, because once again, I had to be living in another nightmare—all seven of the new arrivals looked like reapers.

They were like statues, as cold and still as the rest of the room. Four wore dark gray robes, and three had lighter gray attire and stood between each of the darker ones. Their presence cast a more chilling shadow across the already stark space.

One of the dark gray hooded figures stepped to the edge of the balcony. Only his thin, wrinkled hands were visible beneath the long sleeves, while his face remained hidden under the shadow of his hood. “I am Vyraetos, Ascender of the Shadow Kingdom and head of the Shadow Council.” His voice echoed through the chamber like the tolling of a distant bell. “Today marks the first trial of the bridal challenge. Fate has decreed this will be the test of ruthlessness.”

A few soft gasps echoed around the hall, and for some reason, it made me want to laugh. I didn’t understand how they could be surprised by that. Elara had informed us last night at dinner.

“Not all of you will advance.” The hooded figure flicked his wrists, and a sheet of paper appeared with shadow script on it. “Liaran, Helra, Tiriell, and Yaren have already died and have been eliminated from future trials.”

Knots formed in my stomach. What had happened to the four of them, before even the first trial?

Vyraetos raised a hand, silencing all whispers. "The rest of you will be taken to the Hall of Ruthlessness."

Blood pounded loudly in my ears. That sounded like a place where Kaylen would win, hands down. I couldn't kill in cold blood people who hadn't done anything to me. That wasn't how either of my packs had operated, and I refused to become someone who thrived on violence.

“Pass out the medallions,” Vyraetos commanded loudly. “These medallions represent your magical strength and your kingdom affiliation.”

The doors to the Ascension Hall burst open and servants swarmed in, wearing deep-blue tunics that stood out brightly against the dark floors and walls.

Some of the weight lifted as I paid attention to what the other contestants were wearing. Four others had cooper accents similar to mine, while others wore blue, red, brown, gold, and black.

Servants flitted between us, passing out small clear medallions that shimmered like glass. A man with light gray hair appeared in front of Aelir and me and handed us ours.

Aelir took one with trembling hands, the colors of the medallion reflecting amber flames like a mirror. Then mine was thrust into my palm.

It dropped a few inches before I held on to it firmly. It felt way too heavy for something so small. A bright pink light flared nearby, and I jerked my head up to find Aelir's medallion had lit up. A golden eagle blazed on the medallion, its wings spread wide.

Was she actually going to make it? My heart stuttered with relief, then panic crashed in again.

Why had hers changed and not mine?

Purple and teal sparked around me, pulling my attention from Aelir to look at the others. Each of the other medallions featured some sort of animal outlined with purple, teal, or pink.

Aelir stared at hers, then looked up and met my eyes. Her expression was a mixture of terror and determination, as if she was steeling herself for whatever would come.

My pulse raced in my throat and the cold air pressed against my lungs. My grip tightened around my unchanging medallion, and I forced my panic back.

Yet no color or animal appeared.

One of the other girls let out a low cry as her medallion turned teal with the image of a bear outlined in brown.

My medallion still did nothing . I didn't even count.

I was always overlooked, and now I knew why. My role had always been to support my alpha and pack mates. And now, here I was, alone with nothing to keep me alive. Maybe I should just lie down and give up.

Ember's voice rang in my head. Get up and show them what I see in you, Briar. Your alpha is also your father, and we don't come from a weak line. Your wolf and I will always have your back. Never doubt that.

She'd said that to me when I was sixteen and hadn't known how to handle going to school with humans. Knowing she'd taken the time to walk me through it had pushed me to be stronger. But here, I was alone.

A lump grew in my throat, so large that I couldn't swallow.

"What do you plan to do?" Aelir asked, bringing me back to the present.

My heart twisted with a different resolve. Aelir was looking for guidance from me, and I couldn't let her down. So what if my medallion didn't do a damn thing? I'd prove whatever fueled it wrong and help someone in the process. Even if I died, I wouldn't let them have the satisfaction of seeing me lose myself. I wasn't going to die with my tail between my legs, and I wasn't going to let them see me break.

One of the servants near me handed a medallion to a tall, striking fae with vivid pink hair. Her fingers closed around it, and it lit up purple. A black wolf etched across the center.

Rhielle.

Her eyes met mine with fierce defiance. The brief nod of acknowledgement was not calm and composed. Her look said I have more important threats to focus on .

My gaze swept across the others. Nearly every girl clutched a glowing medallion with an animal. Each lit medallion felt like a blow. One girl was teal with an eagle. Another purple with a serpent.

And then I noticed something else, my hand clenching.

I wasn't alone in the darkness.

Four other girls had the same clear medallions, empty of light, although each of theirs had an animal etched on it. A hint of shock marred their features as they looked around, frightened, though they tried to hide it.

Vyraetos's voice echoed through the hall, drowning out every thought and breath I had. "The light glowing from your medallion represents the strength of your magic. Purple identifies the candidates with the strongest power, while teal represents moderate. Pink is for the weakest candidates, and the unlit ones are the individuals who have unknown power. The unknowns have had their strength and magic masked, so no one here can see it. Aligning with someone of unknown power may be wise or foolish. You decide."

My magic was...masked? I turned to Aelir, but the man continued.

"Most of you will not survive long during this trial. Creatures will be constantly attacking you, and they will only get worse.

"The hall contains five circular platforms that you can use for shelter, and before the worst of the trial begins, shields will emerge and cover each platform. The strength of each shield will depend on your base magical power, which will be the average power of all those within your circle. You will also be able to gather crystals located throughout the hall, to further charge the shield and protect your platform. Even the weakest can survive if you find enough crystals and bring them to the center of your circle to strengthen the shield. Each time you add a crystal, the light of the shield will indicate how much stronger the shield is. Everyone must gather at least one crystal for the shield to protect you. Otherwise, the shield will expel you from the platform.



“You will have an undisclosed amount of time to prepare and gather crystals. Use your time wisely, and be careful of your wings. When the first gong rings, you’ll have one minute to return to your platform before the shields go up and the worst of the attacks begin. A second, softer gong will ring at the thirty-second mark.”

Great. I had unknown power, which probably meant I had none, and no one would want to be on a platform with me.

The walls seemed to close in on me as I realized how much of a disadvantage I was at.

Vyraetos waved a hand. “Even those occupying fully charged platforms will have to fight for their lives. If you leave the shield after it’s up, its protection will not extend past the platform, so you’ll be unprotected until you return. If the shield weakens too much, then it will collapse, and you will die if you cannot reach and be accepted by a different platform before the beasts destroy you.

“There is also no certainty as to how long each shield will hold. The stronger your circle, the longer you will endure. If you need to change platforms, be aware that you will need to bring a crystal with you. It’s best not to be caught outside once the shields go up. This trial will go on for an undisclosed time, and your goal is to survive.”

The room seemed to spin, and I felt like I had drunk too much wolfsbane. My wolf growled in anger beneath the panic, and I clung to that with everything I had.

I would not be the first to break.

Aelir’s trembling hand reached for mine. She was as pale as a ghost, her eyes wide with fear. “This is the end.”

I shook my head, trying to keep my voice steady. “No. We can do this. I promise to look after you.” I swallowed hard. “You can stay on the platform, and I’ll get the crystals.”

“You’ll be killed.” Her voice was barely a thready rasp above silence. She stared at the unlit medallion in my hand.

“You have your medallion. I’ll be okay.” I prayed to Fate that I could be as brave as I pretended.

Vyraetos raised his hand yet again, his voice booming. “You will enter the hall in groups of four. They have been selected at random by lottery.” He picked up a slip of parchment and looked at the other figures behind him. “Have the groups been properly randomized?”

“Yes,” came a softer voice, and the scent of sulfur infused the air. My stomach turned at the smell of a lie, but I didn’t know who it came from.

“Kaylen. Malron. Sasha. Calla Lily.” Vyraetos called. “You four will be the first to enter.”

Kaylen moved with purpose, the gleam of satisfaction in her eye. Her hair and wings shone silver against the dark leather she wore, her sleeves golden. She was first in everything. Did that mean she was the strongest?

She and the other girls stepped to the center of the shadowy wolf on the floor. The animal’s eyes blazed crimson, and then darkness swirled around them, devouring their bodies in the blink of an eye. I gasped, gripping my medallion so hard that the edge bit into my skin. No heat. No chill. No warning. Only the bitter scent of metal and stone left behind as they vanished.

My pulse raced, but there was no turning back now. I had no way home, and I suspected if I did find a way, Dipshit and Asshole would be close behind, blinding me stark white and bringing me back here. Besides, they all thought I was weak—I couldn't let them think I was a coward.

“Briar. Deallan. Ceana. Siray.”

My knees went weak, and my throat closed off. I forced myself to breathe, though a part of me wanted to turn and run away. Still, I held my head high. These bastards wouldn't get to enjoy me dying without a fight.

Siray looked like a sleek panther, her eyes bright with fire. She hadn't said a word at dinner, but I remembered her laughter. Her dress last night had been designed in deep reds and golds, coordinating with her confident glare. She hadn't spoken much, which meant she was likely more deadly than Kaylen. I took in the dragon-like animal on her medallion along with the purple glowing behind it.

Ceana and Deallan had been more direct with their cruelty.

Deallan grinned wickedly. Her bright pink eyes fixed on me with burning hatred. A brown bear decorated her medallion, highlighted by purple. “Told you you'd regret this,” she hissed.

“Looks like we get the honor of killing her. I want to be the first one to attack.” Ceana's voice chimed in, sing-song and cruel. A golden eagle adorned her chest with the same damn purple light.

The mean girls were some of the most powerful here. Figured. I set my jaw and placed my medallion in my top's hollow, flat spot above my breasts, trying to appear unbothered despite the chilling of my blood. They wanted to see me crumble, and I wanted to see them burn. “We'll see who regrets what.”

“Do you want to be in my circle?” Siray asked the other two, her words precise and measured. “I don’t want any dead weight. But maybe we should let her get a few crystals first. At least then we can be amused.”

All three of them laughed, and the sound rang in my ears as they moved into the circle.

Still, they weren’t done. “Would you like to join us?” Ceana placed a hand over her heart, but the edges of her lips tipped upward. “It may be the only offer you get.”

Aelir’s hand slipped away from mine as I took a step forward. My heart pounded as I approached the dark logo with the wolf leering up at me. Of course they’d pair me with these awful ladies. Still, I did what I suspected Ember would do. I smiled back. “Gonna have to pass.”

“Are you seriously rejecting us? ” Deallan’s head tilted back as the shadow surged around us. “That’s insulting.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard worse.” I tilted my head and saluted her.

Her eyes widened, but before she could move, the shadow swallowed us whole.

I screamed as the floor disappeared from underneath me.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm*

### Chapter Nine

#### Briar

I reached and kicked, searching desperately for something to cling to, but I found nothing as the shadows blinded me with darkness and cold. My heart lurched into my throat.

Was this purgatory? With my luck, that seemed fitting for what would happen to my soul after I died. I'd be stuck in some sort of cursed fae abyss, wishing like hell I could get back to Ember.

My feet hit a hard surface, pitching me forward. I fell onto my hands and knees, small rocks cutting into my skin. Irony wasn't lost on me that the position was similar to last night, when I'd been dropped into the fae realm.

I struggled to find my balance as the shadows slipped away, revealing an even darker area than where we'd left. I lifted my head, allowing my wolf to surge forward to help acclimate to the world around me.

The other girls hit the ground around me, not prepared for the landing either. All of us lay haphazardly on the ground.

Under normal circumstances, I might have gloated but not now. Not with the air infused with the smell of algae, bile, and venom, bitterly heavy on my tongue.

Surveying the arena, I found stone walls surrounding us on all sides with water

dripping down them as if they bled. The ceiling arched impossibly high, lit by eerie, golden crystals suspended as if by nothing.

I froze, unable to process what was right up above me. The light did not fill the arena completely, and dozens of enormous creatures with barbed tails and manelike fur hung upside down. They had bat-like wings that cocooned them in sleep.

Massive carved circles dominated the floor, each large enough to fit several fae on its surface. Those must be the platforms. Fear clawed my heart. This trial was worse than anything I could imagine, and it was just beginning.

Where the golden crystals hung suspended in midair, a strange, mystical-looking giraffe-size eagle flew back and forth over the circles with slow but flowing movements.

The hairs on my arms rose and prickled.

“Time is running out,” Ceana whispered. “We’ve got to get to a platform now.”

Her words snapped my attention back to the ground. All of them jumped to their feet and raced toward the platforms.

I had to get the fuck out of here, yet I couldn’t move. What if my breathing stirred the creatures above me? My wolf snarled, forcing me to my feet. She was frustrated, and I couldn’t blame her. I had no cover, and the other ladies were making loud noises, so remaining out in the open with limited time wasn’t smart.

Water gushed behind me, and I spun around and saw a sea serpent emerging from black water, crimson ripples waving around it before it sank back down again. It was blue, and some of its magic wavered like light reflecting on water, turning those ripples a deep violet. It was huge.

I stumbled back a few feet, and a huff came from my right. I pivoted and faced a shadow-like wolf that reminded me of the emblem in the Ascension Hall. Its eerie crimson eyes stared at me through dark clouds that blended with its fur, and its burning-metal scent drifted to me in the coldness radiating from the area.

It was magnificent. I'd never seen anything like it before, and my wolf panted in approval.

A snort sounded from the platforms, and I tore my gaze away from the shadow wolf. I had no time to waste if I wanted a chance of surviving.

I ran toward a circular platform, my boots not making a noise on the dark stone ground. I glanced around, noting that four of the platforms were already taken. Kaylen and her posse were pointing and arguing on where to go, so I used the opportunity to run to the right, near a bear-like brown magical creature with a vibrant forest around it.

I swallowed hard, torn on whether it was worse to be closer to Kaylen and Ceana's group and hover near the platforms or stay by the bear. Then I shook my head at the foolish thought. Of course the bear was the right choice. It had principles.

Racing toward the bear, I tapped into my wolf magic to run faster, not wanting to catch any of the faes' attention. As I ran past, the bear tilted its head at me, and the scent of pine, hawthorn, and loam hit my nose.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose, but I managed to pass the bear without issue and land on a concrete circle with no problem. That was, until the platform flashed pink before going out again.

Fuck. Of course I was weak. The platform didn't even acknowledge that I had any magic. No one would join me, but at least I'd die on my own terms.

My stomach gurgled and churned, informing me there was no point in lying to myself. Even if I went out on my terms, I would rather live and have a full life.

Something clanked against the ground, and I turned and found that the bear had its claws in a hawthorn tree...and apparently a golden crystal had dropped and rolled toward me.

I jumped a few feet off the platform and snatched it up, the weight feeling wrong in my hands as I ran back into the circle. The moment I stepped onto the edge of it, the space around me exploded with a faint pink light.

“Hey, she got a platform,” Deallan called out and scowled.

“The shield won’t stay. Don’t worry. We’ll get to watch her die.” Kaylen waved a hand, not bothering to look at me.

The insult hit right in the gut, but I ignored it. She wanted me to react, but I didn’t have time for that. I needed to survive this trial and figure out how to get my ass back to Earth where I belonged.

An amber light flickered, and I glanced over and found an enormous dragon looming in a corner opposite me. Magma and black stones surrounded it, and twisting shadows made it look alive.

Something tugged at me, and I noticed something even more unnerving.

A secluded platform.

Not for us. Not to help us. But from which to observe.

A sour taste filled my mouth. What sort of people enjoyed watching people struggle



and die?

A tall figure stood on that platform, staring down at us with a guarded expression as four others joined him.

My heart twisted, and I might as well have been punched in the gut.

Vad.

Of course the prize would be watching.

Elara stood beside him, her delicate hands gripping the railing. She looked withdrawn, her mouth tight and her eyes strained.

The king was also there, his dark-blue eyes matching Elara's, standing tall like he had something to prove. Thalen and Silus flanked their sides.

They weren't going to help us. This was a game to them. Something to entertain them and help Vad pick a wife from it all.

The softness I'd held for Thalen and Elara vanished. They enjoyed death and agony as much as the prince himself. I hoped one of the animals attacked them too, so they wouldn't feel so safe or confident. Bastards.

Hot anger flooded my veins, but using it to wish awful thoughts at them wouldn't help me. I needed to use it to focus.

Shaking my head, I snapped my attention back to the chamber and everything in it. I needed to get enough crystals to have the strongest possible protection. That was the only way any of us would survive.

More fae appeared and passed by the animals as if they were nothing. Aelir's white hair flashed like a beacon as she tried to get on multiple platforms, but Siray and the others wouldn't let her join.

When she looked at my spot, her face twisted in panic and she ran toward me. "I don't know how I'm going to survive. No one will let me on a platform. They've all been taken."

"Get on mine." I held out my hand to her, wanting her to know I meant it. I felt bad, basically inviting her to her death, but she had a better chance with me than with no circle at all. "We'll protect each other and survive this."

Her hand gripped mine, so small and cold I thought she'd shatter. She joined me, glancing around the arena. "Every kingdom's magical beast is here. It does seem fitting."

Ahh... so that was what the animals on the medallions signified. What kingdom they came from. If I survived, I'd need to learn more about that. But first, we had to get through this.

"If we stay on the platform, we'll be fine. We just need a lot more crystals. That's all." I tried to believe in my own words as much as she seemed to. My gaze caught on more fae racing to the circles, trying to find a place.

"Send the pink ones away." Deallan laughed cruelly in between the two platforms closest to where we'd landed. She tossed her hair, the golden brown curls wild, and glanced at me. Her voice rang out, taunting and mean. "Looks like your team is as weak as you are."

She leaped onto her circle across from us and near the shadow wolves, where Yuki and Malron already stood inserting a crystal. Their platform lit up a vivid green.

Deallan sneered in my direction and crossed her arms in challenge.

A dark-haired fae hurried toward the platforms, the pink light in her medallion shining bright for all to see. Her hands trembled and she bit her lip. Her attention landed on Siray, and she took a step toward her.

“Go ahead,” Siray spat. “Try to join us. I’d love to kill you.”

The honey-gold-haired fae hesitated, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she stopped a few paces away.

My hands balled into fists and my human nails dug into my palms, breaking the skin and stinging. I would not let this happen. I wouldn’t let them crush me or anyone else. I would be like my sister, and not like these awful beings.

“Here!” I waved a hand desperate to get her attention. “Aelir! Get her!”

Dropping her hand from mine, Aelir scrambled to the edge of the circle, the trembling of her limbs matched by the shake in her voice. “Myantha, come join us!”

Myantha’s eyes were dark and afraid as she hurried to our platform. “You sure?”

“I can’t swear we’ll live, but at least we’ll have a chance if we work together.” I gestured to the open circle, showing we had plenty of room.

She bit her bottom lip and narrowed her eyes. “But you don’t even know me.”

I wanted to laugh, to cry, to scream at how ridiculous all of this was. I doubted the contestants would acting like this only in the trial. It might be bringing out more of that side in them, but the maliciousness was already in them. “You’re still a person and deserve to live. I’m all about teamwork and surviving together.”

A harsh voice came from behind us. "Trying to die?"

I spun around to find Rhielle standing there, her bold pink hair wild. A few smaller bears had joined the large one.

"No, I'm trying to form a pack of people who won't turn on each other." I placed a hand on my hip, hoping she'd think I wasn't doubting every life choice I'd made until now. Even if I was. "Are you in?"

"A pack?" Aelir scratched her ear.

Of course they wouldn't know what a pack was. I sighed. We didn't have time to waste, but they needed to understand the concept. "Think of it as a family that protects each other as much as they do themselves." It was more than that, but I suspected the concept would take more time for them to understand. There was no doubt I'd give my life for Ember's if the situation ever called for it.

"If I remember right, you were going to shove my face into that pudding last night." Sarcasm laced each of Rhielle's words. "Now you're determined to throw your life away instead?"

The ground shook, and more serpents, wolves, eagles, and dragons arrived, all half size of the originals. The new arrivals made me flinch, but that didn't alter my strategy. "I'm not throwing anything away. I want to build relationships that make us all stronger by working together."

"You aren't worried about being weak." She crossed her arms and rolled her shoulders back. Her disc still glowed purple, highlighting the shadowy wolf etched in its surface and a reminder of her power.

"I don't want to die." I forced the words past my lips. "But I won't abandon people

just because their magic doesn't seem powerful. Strength comes from more than one source, and just because they don't wield strong magic doesn't mean they don't have something to contribute."

After a moment, she stepped toward the edge of the circle and grinned. "Well, if the odds are stacked against us, I'd rather go out with that then." She then turned her left hand over, revealing one of the smaller crystals nestled in her palm. Stooping down, she put the crystal into the platform. It slipped into place with a soft shoop. The light flared pink, but brighter than before.

Aelir and Myantha hit the back of their hands together like a backwards high five.

More girls arrived, and my heart tightened. Two in particular appeared insecure and unsure of where to go, rubbing their arms and treading with hesitant steps.

"Velessa. Thalira. Come join us." Aelir waved them over, sounding like some of her fear had subsided. "We're open to anyone who needs a place to go."

They dashed over but stopped short a few feet away from the platform.

A few fae flew over my head, going for the crystals above us. Guard eagles darted, fighting them off, but I didn't have time to watch and turned back to Velessa and Thalira.

I placed a hand on my waist. "Are you in? Because we need a plan with everyone on board."

They exchanged a look, and then Thalira nodded. "Yes."

Both women stepped onto the circle, and the light brightened to soft teal, but it still wasn't enough. We needed to be purple.

Horrible creatures appeared in the shadows, sickening shapes that shifted and moved, filling the edges of the chamber. My stomach lurched as I took in what they were—spiders, eels, snakes, scorpions, and there was no telling what else.

Dear Fate. This was like living through an actual nightmare. I hated spiders more than anything.

“What the feck do you think you’re doing?” a fae woman wearing a teal medallion yelled.

My attention snapped to Kaylen, who was now on a platform she hadn’t claimed, removing a crystal from its center. The shield light morphed from a deep teal to a lighter teal. She dashed back to the one she’d claimed and put the crystal in hers instead.

Gritting my teeth, I fisted my hands. Of course Kaylen would steal from others. She had no morals as long as her actions benefited her. Still, it didn’t change the fact that the others needed to get crystals of their own. “You all go before the easiest-to-reach crystals are taken.”

“We can’t leave the platform unattended!” Myantha clasped her hands in front of her chest. “Someone will take it!”

Snakes, spiders, eels, and centipedes scurried over the ground toward us. Fae fought off the pests and hurried back to their platforms, where they couldn’t be surrounded.

“All the assholes are back on their platforms, so we should be safe. I’ll stay here to guard ours in case that changes.” I didn’t want anyone to stay here and risk their life against the powerful psycho-bitches when this had been all my idea. “You all grab crystals.”

Aelir clapped her hands, and a few bugs flinched back from the noise. “You’re right. We need to split up and get back as fast as we can.”

I patted her shoulder, trying to appear confident. “We’re running out of time, so go.”

The girls split up, racing for the bear area, which was closest to us. Everyone who wasn’t on a platform continued to fight off the snakes, insects, spiders, and eels.

Guard eagles had joined the gigantic Guardian one, and they were all flying back and forth in sync with each other. More crystals were suspended in midair, but most women were snatching up the ones closer to the ground.

My heart and breath synced as dread weighed on me. What would Ember do in this situation? I had no doubt she’d come up with a solid plan. Fate, I missed her and my other pack mates.

Soon everyone came back to our platform, slotting their crystals into the center. The teal shield grew darker, but even when Myantha placed hers, it still didn’t turn purple.

“It’s not full power.” Aelir wrapped her arms around her waist and rocked. “We’re not going to make it.”

Fuck. We needed at least one more.

My allies screamed as the spiders and crawling things tried to slither onto our platform, and I knew that collecting the last crystal would have to fall on me. Especially since the only crystal I could still locate was hovering near one of the awful beast-like creatures hanging upside down above us.

I snorted. That was the Sinclair luck, clearly.

My chest knotted and tugged with panic and fear. We were more than likely going to die if we didn't turn our shield purple. The old dark gray reaper man had pretty much told us that.

I focused on the birds. There was one clear solution, but I had to time things perfectly. I had to be quick and strong, which meant I had to use the magic I had on hand even if it wasn't from this world.

My wolf.

"I'll go get the last one. Protect our circle." I shucked off my clothes, preparing for my shift.

Rhielle stumped back a step. "What the scaff are you doing? Getting naked isn't going to help! You'll be more at risk than ever."

"I won't be naked for long," I growled, my wolf surging forward. My bones cracked as my spine broke and I landed on all fours. Fur sprouted from my tingling skin, and soon I'd transformed into my wolf.

Aelir covered her mouth with both hands as Rhielle raised an eyebrow. The others gasped, and my senses acclimated to being able to see and hear better than I could even back on Earth.

"She's a shadow beast," Myantha shrieked. "But without shadows."

Without a second thought, I took off. My heart drummed, and the air burned in my lungs. The floor was dark and slick beneath me, but I continued running as fast as I could. My legs didn't feel quite the same as they did on Earth, but I wouldn't let that stop me. I had to make it back to the circle. I had to make it back before—



The huge bat-winged creatures hanging from the ceiling shivered and twisted. The last crystal shone in the dark just under the biggest one's head, with a stalactite formation right next to it. The guardian eagle circled underneath it, which was the only reason I continued to run. No wonder no one had gotten the last one. Even if I had wings, I would've tried to avoid it.

My chest heaved, and I slipped, dodging snakes and insects as best I could while squashing others. A few stung me, but I kept moving. I'd show the fae that, even though they thought I was weak, I was willing to fight.

I raced past Kaylen's platform and she yelled, "Of course you're an animal!"

But I ignored her, heading toward the dragon section with the large volcano and rocks. I leaped onto the rocks and climbed higher, the stone cutting into my paws.

A guard eagle soared by about ten feet in front of me. My pulse thundered as I launched myself off the rock and landed on its back. The guard eagle threw me off, and I angled my trajectory to hit the wall.

I slammed against the stone wall, knocking the breath out of me. Still, I scrabbled onto a small ledge, catching my balance.

Dammit. I would need to cling to an guard eagle to make this work. I had to shift back into human form and do the task naked in front of everyone. Great .

Pain radiated from my side and paws, but my injuries weren't severe, and the shift would help me heal. I yanked my wolf back, despite her howling in protest. She relented, knowing that it was our best chance.

My fur retreated and my bones cracked my spine back into place until I stood on two legs. Most everyone else had run back to their circles, preparing for the final test. The

woman with pale-blue hair who had been fighting with Kaylen was near the water serpent, searching for something. I hoped we both found our crystals and escaped.

This time, I caught the guardian eagle's eye, and it winged around to face me. Its appearance was ethereal and mystical, and I knew it wasn't from Earth.

I launched myself onto a guard eagle, and it waggled. I desperately grabbed its feathers, barely holding on.

When it evened out, I released my hold and leapt to another guard eagle that was circling the Guardian eagle. The crystal hovered above the guardian eagle, and I needed to reach out and take it. Assuming that something unexpected would happen, I clamped my legs around the bird's waist and grabbed for the guardian.

The guard eagle I was riding tried to buck me off, but I managed to reach up and grasp the bigger one around its neck. I flung myself up onto its back, and the bird's head twisted back toward me, one electric-blue eye locked on mine. I waited for it to do something, but it hovered, allowing me to climb up and take the crystal.

A bright silver glow lit up the ground, and a massive shimmering stag appeared where all of us had first landed. I forgot where I was as the stag stared me in the eyes. Warmth bloomed inside me, and I felt some sort of connection with the animal.

No. I had to be losing my mind. This had—

Warm, rancid breath hit the back of my neck, stopping me mid-thought. I raised my head and found what looked like a manticore, blinking its creepy, glowing, old-man eyes. It opened its mouth like it was ready to taste me.

A heavy bong vibrated through the entire room, stirring even more of the manticores...and the lights went out.

### Chapter Ten

#### Briar

The bong echoed through my ears until the piercing screams of the manticores drowned out its deep voice. Supernatural darkness swallowed me whole, and I shook myself back to reality. Even the lava had gone dark. Only the purple and dark-teal lights of the platforms were visible.

Time was running out, and there were people relying on me.

The guardian eagle remained steady, still not trying to buck me off. I had no idea why this one was being patient, but I knew for a fact the others would be more than happy to kill me.

My wolf snarled. I had to get my ass moving .

Wings flapped over my head as the manticores took flight. I tugged at my wolf, needing some of her power but not enough to shift. I needed to remain in human form to hold on to the crystal.

My vision adjusted to the darkness, allowing me to see even better than before, which emphasized how piss-poor the lighting had been.

I jumped from the guardian eagle almost as far as I could've in wolf form, to the nearest guard eagle below. My left hand grabbed some of its feathers and locked my legs around it a moment before the guard eagle barrel-rolled. On the second roll, my

head started spinning, and the crystal slipped in my sweaty palm.

Heart lurching, I jammed the crystal against my chest. The stone dug into my skin and stung. I pushed away the discomfort, and when the eagle spun me back upside down, I dropped to the next one.

Cold, foul air whoosh ed past me and I tried not to gag. My toes hit the edge of another bird. I dug them into the feathers, getting traction and pushed myself off to reach the last bird.

But the animal darted ahead, and I plummeted toward the ground. A scream echoed through the arena, and I wasn't certain if it was from me or the manticores.

Loud laughter came from below as I steeled myself, bracing for the inevitable impact. I closed my eyes, trying not to see all the horrible creepy crawlies skittering below me, and tightened my hold on the crystal. At the last second, I angled my body, hoping to land without breaking my neck or legs.

Boom! I struck the stone floor, my legs buckling. The momentum had me rolling over, and my head and chest slammed into a rock. Pain blasted through my body, and blood poured into my left eye.

My skin crawled, and I raised my head to find that the centipedes, snakes, and spiders were swarming me. Adrenaline burst through my veins, pushing enough of the pain away for me to jump to my feet.

The floor wavered underneath me as if I were on a boat. Yet I stood on flat ground.

Fuck. I might have gotten a concussion, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

“Briar,” Aelir screamed frantically. “Hurry!”

I shook my head, trying to get the world straight, and glanced down at the crystal to find I didn’t even have half of it. What the hell happened to the rest?

Heart hammering, I dropped to my knees and shoved my hands into the mass of crawling bodies on the stone floor, groping for the remainder of the stone.

Something hairy skittered up my forearm, and fangs sank into my wrist before I could yank away. I gritted my teeth, grabbing blindly for the crystal pieces. My fingers closed on something that had to be one—sharp, hot, and slick with grime.

A centipede coiled around my knuckles and bit even harder. My hand burned as if it were on fire. But then something pulsed through my veins, like my wolf was trying to help me.

Unlike Ember, I didn’t have healing magic, so I hoped to hell these creatures weren’t deadly. The sting intensified, and tears streamed down my face.

I didn’t have enough of the crystal. There had to be more pieces, and I needed all of it to protect our platform.

I shoved my hand deeper into the squirming mass, frantically searching for the pieces. The floor writhed beneath me like it was alive. Wet crunches met every push of my palm and knees as I fumbled forward and crushed spiders, scorpions, and Fate-knew-what. My fingers found another chunk of the orb. I yanked it free just as something with pointed legs dropped on to the back of my neck and stung me.

Something cold and gut-wrenching jolted down my spine, and my vision pulsed around the edges.

The stench hit next—rot, sulfur, damp fur, and something coppery that might've been my own blood. My stomach heaved.

I swatted at a snake as it slithered over my thigh, then lunged for the next glimmer of crystal as a centipede slid off it. I grabbed it, and a spider sank its fangs into my hand. Yelping, I snatched the crystal back, clutching the pieces together. It was still too small. I was missing one or two more.

Fate was a real bitch.

I dove for them, ignoring the needle-sharp legs crawling over my back. A sting hit my hip, and a second later something else bit my ankle. I grabbed a shard and bolted upright, panting and shaking. My hands were blistered, bleeding and raw from the stings and bites, but the crystal still seemed a little less than complete. There might be one more piece around here.

The gong sounded again, softer this time beneath the din of the manticores above and the creepy crawlies below. The dark-teal disc of light from our platform might as well have been miles away, and I had no clear path back.

Aelir screamed from the center of our platform, "Get your scaffing ass in here, Briar! Please! Just run!"

One last small chunk of crystal caught my attention, wedged beneath a cluster of twitching legs and glistening black pincers. I dove, and my hand plunged through slime and brittle carapaces.

Fuck, I screamed inwardly as my fingers wrapped around the broken shard, and I ripped my hand free.

This had to be enough. I staggered to my feet and charged forward. Nausea sliced

through my stomach, and the ground seemed to move from underneath me. I wasn't sure if it was from my head injury or the critters.

The stone smashed against the soles of my feet, sticky and slick with guts and grit. Something popped under my heel while another crunched under my arch. Prickly legs skittered over my feet, and pinchers cut at my calves.

My whole body felt as if I was covered in these atrocities, and I suspected that, even if I survived, I would never feel clean again. The cold continued to course through my bloodstream like it was their venom. My skin burned, slick with blood and spit and whatever else coated the ground.

Ahead, another woman was running, her light-blue hair matted to her skull and back. She looked as terrified as I felt, blindly dashing forward as the seconds ticked down.

Aelir screamed for me again. She'd stepped to the edge of the platform and was using her wind magic to try and clear the creepy crawlies away. The wind faltered and faded, but my path was better than it had been before, and I wouldn't complain.

Once again, loud laughter rang out, and Kaylen shouted, "Do that again, Aelir. Your magic is just so strong and powerful."

Keeping my legs moving as quickly as possible, I raised my free hand and held out my middle finger. She and Fate must have had a lot in common.

Before they could respond, the shriek of a manticore split the air above me, and heavy wings beat loudly as if it was coming after me. The rancid stench filled my nose. I ducked and rolled as claws stopped short of me by mere inches. If I hadn't moved, the manticore would've hit me in the spine. A gust of wind knocked me sideways, my shoulder slamming into the ground once more.

A tortuous scream lodged in my throat, and more blood trickled down the side of my head. The crystal shards nearly slipped again, and my hands were numb as I clutched them tight to my chest.

Struggling to my feet, I gritted my teeth, determined to keep moving. Even if I died, the others didn't have to. A stinger jabbed into my thigh as something stung me in the side.

My legs trembled. Each step was fire and ice, blood pouring now from my head to my knees. The ground swayed beneath me even worse than before.

As I neared the first of the circles, Kaylen cupped her hands around her mouth. "You're never going to make it. Come into our circle. We'll share." That vicious smile of hers mirrored Ceana's and that of the water fae standing next to her.

I knew better than to trust any of those twatwaffles. The pale-blue-haired woman knew it too, but Kaylen had stolen her crystals. Maybe she thought that meant Kaylen owed her.

"Don't trust her!" I gasped, my throat raw and lungs barely working. "Come to my circle. You can share with us."

Her eyes flicked from Kaylen to me to my dark-teal circle, still several yards away.

Aelir raised her arms, white hair whipping as she forced the air outward in weak blasts, tears streaming down her dirt-streaked face. Her magic splattered into the swarm, scattering some bugs, but it wasn't enough. Not alone. "Help her!" she cried out, spinning toward the others. "For Fate's sake, please—just help her!"

For a second, no one moved. Then Myantha stepped up beside her. Her face was tight with fear, and her medallion glowed that weak pink, but her boots thudded against the



concrete as she braced herself. Her earth magic cracked a stone and swiped along the path to smash some of the scorpions and centipedes out of the way.

Thalira stood behind them, water coiling at her feet but not moving. Her mouth was drawn tight, eyes fixed on me like she wasn't sure if this was worth the risk or if she should save her strength. Velessa held her injured arm, hunched in the center. Rhielle stood like a statue, elegant and still, shadows curling at her wrists. Brow pinched, she didn't lift a hand.

Kaylen's voice cut through it all, slicing over Ceana's shrill laugh and the other woman's nasally one. "Come on, Naevys. You know you can't make it. Briar, if the winds can forget, then why can't we? I found your little display inspiring. Let's all be friends!"

I didn't even look in her direction. The pale-haired girl beside me slowed, her feet dragging like she wasn't sure which way to go.

A stinger drove deep into my heel. Cold fire licked up my leg. I stumbled, caught myself, then shoved forward again.

I hit the stone edge of the platform hard, my knees slamming down. My shoulder cracked into the side as I slid forward, pain exploding up my arm. The crystal pieces spilled across the platform, one nearly sliding over the edge.

Gasping, I crawled and jammed it into the slot.

The circle's light flared under me, shifting from dark teal to a stronger teal.

Breaths scraped my throat like broken glass. Pain surged through every limb, a steady drumbeat of bruises, cuts, and stings. My arms trembled as I tried to sit upright, the jagged edges of the broken crystal digging into my palm like teeth.

Aelir crouched beside me, her pale hands shaking as she offered me my clothes. One more gong sounded, and a large glass-like bubble formed over our platform.

“I thought you weren’t going to make it.” Her voice broke as she leaned in closer. “I’m so glad you’re alive. Come on. Let’s get you dressed. Oh, Fate help us, you’re covered in stings.”

I nodded once, barely able to lift my head. Every muscle ached. My lungs still wouldn’t fill completely. The welts burned, my skin was wet with blood, sweat, and bug guts. I was alive, even if just barely. But the entire world was spinning like it was off its axis.

Footsteps clicked softly on the stone behind us. I forced my head to turn.

Rhielle stood at the edge of the circle, shadows curling around her. Her expression remained smooth, almost bored, but something sharp glinted in her eyes.

“That was an impressive showing.” One brow arched as she pursed her lips. “Not sure if it was smart, but damn, you’ve got follow-through. Even if it was foolish, I can admire that.”

Screams tore through the air, interrupting us and I turned toward them.

Siray stood at the edge of her circle, holding a short woman by the throat. The short woman’s bronze skin did not burn beneath Siray’s fiery grasp, but she couldn’t break free either. Fire flared from the shorter woman’s hands. Her crimson eyes blazed as she thrashed against Siray’s grip. Siray didn’t even flinch.

The short woman yelled, “Let go, you pyre pot!”

Siray smirked. “Let’s have our own little competition and see how the unknowns

fight. Malron, Deallan, get your contestant. Ready, Quen?"

The other two fae in her circle backed away, pressing into the opposite side of their shield like Quen might infect them just by being near.

In her own circle, Malron, her indigo hair loose around her shoulders, held one arm of a smaller fae. Deallan, unmistakable with her bright pink eyes and the yellow flower in her hair, held another. Mossy green hair clung to the woman's face as she struggled between them, her feet slipping on the stone.

"Please," she cried, looking between them desperately. Her breaths came in terrified pants, and her face had gone pale as ash. "Don't do this. I brought over half the crystals!"

"If you kill Quen," Deallan said to the moss-green-haired fae, loud enough for all of us to hear, "we'll let you back in."

"That's right, Quen," Siray said, tightening her grip. "You kill Yuki, and you're back in."

In the other circle, Naevys stood behind Kaylen, body drawn tight, arms wrapped around herself. Ceana laughed beside her, joined by another woman with sharp eyes and a cruel smile. Kaylen watched like a queen surveying a feast.

Naevys's gaze flicked to me. Her mouth pressed into a thin line, but she didn't move, fear bright in her eyes.

My voice came out hoarse but strong. "Stop!"

Not one of those damned mean girls so much as flinched.

With a nod at her friends, Siray hurled Quen from the platform.

Quen hit the stone hard and rolled straight into the swarm. She caught herself and snarled as she swiped the insects and centipedes off her. "Fecking bastards! I'll kill you all!"

Bugs surged toward her, drawn by the urge to attack.

Malron and Deallan flung Yuki out seconds later, sending her stumbling straight into the path of the swarm. Yuki screamed as she was thrown out of the shield.

Quen's attention snapped to Yuki, flames curling around her hands. Then she crouched and swept her arms wide, and red-gold fire exploded outward. A wall of it flared up, shielding them both from the incoming swarm.

Yuki shrieked and swatted at the bugs as she tried to find a bare spot. Rock cracked beneath her feet and launched into the air. She swung her arms, guiding the slabs like a second skin. The stones shot toward the manticores and bugs—not toward Quen.

My hand tightened around the four broken crystal pieces still in my palm. My knees burned as I forced myself to my feet, limbs shaking under the weight of everything I had already endured.

I stumbled to the edge of the platform, the purple flickering across my blood-slicked skin.

"Get to my platform," I shouted, lifting the pieces high. "Now! We've got space—get over here." I shoved my hand against the shield to see if I could open it. The cold material squelched around my fingers, more flexible than I'd expected. Then I plunged out into the horrid space between the circles as the manticores attacked the shields.

The second I stepped beyond the shield, the pain sharpened. Every sting, every bite, pulsed back to life like a second heartbeat thudding beneath my skin. My legs nearly gave out beneath me, and I stumbled forward, catching myself with a bloodied hand as fresh agony lanced through my shoulder. My breath hitched, shallow and ragged, and my vision darkened at the edges.

Aelir raised her arms again, the wind curling around her wrists before pushing out in short, desperate bursts. Each gust bought me inches of space as the insects scattered, only to swarm back the moment the air weakened. Myantha used her magic to shove jagged stone pieces through the swarm, creating narrow lanes that buckled and cracked beneath the weight of creeping bodies.

A low snarl echoed across the arena as a manticore dove from above, the rush of its wings nearly lost in the chaos of shrieks and snapping limbs. My steps faltered, and I barely registered the danger in time to flinch.

Thalira surged forward and swung a thick ribbon of water into the air. It whipped outward and cracked against the manticore's side with a wet, violent thud. The creature spun in midair, screeching as it reeled away and crashed into a wall.

Shadows unfurled behind me, curling like smoke and slithering low to the ground. Snakes and centipedes jerked and thrashed as the tendrils seized them and dragged them backward into the dark.

Quen had cleared a firebreak and now stood surrounded by flames, her hair wild and her hands glowing with heat. Yuki summoned a crumbling stone slab, her arms shaking as she kept her footing and moved toward me.

I reached them just beyond the edge of the shield, my legs wanting to give out with each step. I crouched, taking raspy breaths and fumbled with the crystal pieces. My fingers barely worked, but I managed to press one into Quen's hand and another into

Yuki's.

"Here," I rasped. "Go—get into the circle and put these in the center. I didn't have time earlier."

Before they could move, Kaylen's voice rang out across the arena, shrill and cruel in the firelight.

"Are you missing a friend, Briar? You must feel so sad. You wanted all the weaklings for yourself, didn't you? Well, I'm not greedy. You can have this one."

I turned just in time to hear the scream.

Naevys flailed midair as Kaylen hurled her out, the girl's body twisting as she flew across the arena toward the farthest edge of the swarm. Her scream split the air—high and terrified—before it cut off in a sickening instant.

A manticore burst from the dark, its scorpion tail lashing forward with brutal precision. The quills struck hard, driving through Naevys's back as the beast lifted her into the air. She spasmed once and then went still, her body impaled and hanging limply from the curved black spike. The manticore's face twisted into something like a grin—too human, too old—and it let out a low, rasping chuckle before beating its wings and vanishing into the darkness with her body still dangling beneath it.

The sound that tore from my throat barely resembled a scream. My vision blurred, red and wet and blinding, as something inside me snapped.

How could these people so carelessly kill one of their own? The places where my old pack's links used to be before the slaughter seemed to pulse inside me. What the fuck was wrong with this world?

My skin burned, searing me from the inside out. Shifting was dangerous when I was this injured, but I didn't give a fuck. I dropped to my hands and knees, my skin tingling as fur began to sprout.

"Briar, no!" Yuki said, grabbing one of my arms while Quen grabbed the other.

They had to move, or they'd get hurt. There was no stopping my wolf. "Move," I half growled. "Or you're going to get hurt." I yanked my arms from them, and Quen gasped, letting go and taking a couple steps back.

"She's got... fur." Quen stumbled over her words. "Let her go."

Immediately, Yuki released me, and I plopped back on the ground as my ribs cracked and folded. My breath caught and my spine arched and twisted, and cold fire tried to take over my body, but my wolf and I both pushed through despite the shift taking a little longer.

My wolf didn't care if this killed us.

She wanted blood, same as I did.

My claws raked against the stone. Shift completed, I lifted my head.

My stomach clenched. A manticore charged at us.

### Chapter Eleven

#### Briar

The manticore's wings ripped through the air, and my body tingled with adrenaline. I ran from Quen and Yuki, wanting to attack the beast without risking injury to them. I rushed toward Siray's platform and its glowing purple shield.

"Briar," Quen yelled. "What are you doing?"

Even if I wanted to answer her, I couldn't. The only way I could communicate as a wolf was via pack link, and I had no pack members here. The only comfort I had was the faint warmth of the links in my chest from my pack members back home.

The manticore was inches from my head, so I jumped onto Siray's protective shield, my claws cracking against the glass, and twisted and launched myself toward the enemy.

Locking my attention on where I wanted to land, my jaws came close to its throat. Bone ground against my teeth as I clamped down, which meant that I'd missed. The force of the collision knocked the beast off balance, and we crashed to the ground.

A deep, pulsing vibration rolled beneath my paws.

The swarm had changed. The sound of chittering legs wasn't light anymore—it was heavy, pounding, and impossibly loud.



Yuki appeared on one side of me, Quen on the other, both pushing forward through the haze and heat. The manticore rose, furious, its tail flicking once before it launched black quills at us.

The whizzing noise reminded me of bullets, and I didn't know how the hell I was going to protect the girls. This was it. Not only would I die, two others would die along with me. My heart twisted, and I threw my head back and howled. Ember, I love you.

Yuki's magic surged fast, and warmth swarmed us as a stone burst from the floor and caught the brunt of the attack. The spikes slammed into the rock with a sickening crunch, one ricocheting off and slicing into the edge of my flank. I bit back a yelp, paws bracing as Quen hurled an arc of flame straight at the beast's chest.

"Flames won't work," Kaylen shouted from behind her shield, voice trilling with glee. "Manticores don't burn, stupid."

Quen didn't look at Kaylen, and fire crackled higher around her arms. "Flame-resistant doesn't mean flameproof. Everything burns. Just takes longer."

The heat snapped against my skin as the flames caught and the air shimmered with rising waves. The manticore screeched, rearing back as fire clung to its coat, devouring the fur and catching in the bloody crevices where I'd torn muscle.

Yuki threw her arms wide again. The stone trembled beneath the manticore's feet, fissures opening beneath it. The creature hesitated, talons scrabbling for balance. A second shockwave echoed from deeper in the arena, and the manticore turned toward it. It took the bait and lunged, barreling toward the second tremor.

She kept feeding the illusion, guiding it with distant cracks—straight toward Deallan's circle.

More movement surged from the edges of the hall. The next wave of creepy crawlies had arrived.

They were larger now—grotesque and glistening, legs clacking, bodies thick, and mandibles snapping. A centipede lunged, and I slammed into it, tearing into its side as ichor sprayed across the ground. A scorpion wrapped around my back leg, its tail piercing my skin as I twisted and kicked free.

There was no break, no pause.

More agony followed by more pain, tormenting us all.

Just critters, manticores, and us, fighting and trying like hell to get back to our circle.

The swarm didn't care that I'd survived the fall or that we'd managed to drive off a manticore. They kept coming, one endless tide, and I wasn't sure we could keep standing.

The screeching of incoming wings had my ears twitching. The whistle of quills echoed in my ears. I dove to the side, insects crawling all over me as quills struck where I'd just been.

Stings and bites ached everywhere. The cold fire of venom fought both my wolf magic and the warmth that had filled me from making eye contact with the stag. But the pounding of wings informed me that they were coming at us again.

“Get up,” Thalira shouted from inside our platform. “You need to take cover. Get in here now!”

Blood almost frozen, I howled in agony and determination. The bugs faltered, and I climbed on all four legs once again.

More manticores soared down in spirals, claws extended, tails cocked. They hammered against the shields surrounding each circle. Kaylen's shield rippled and flickered, the force making the glow stutter. Beetles the size of dogs clawed up the glass-like barrier. The swarm had grown teeth, legs, wings—and now it had mass.

Thalira lashed a manticore out of the air with one crack of her water whip, slamming it into the stone below. The impact sent a tremor through the floor. Aelir kept her arms out, wind screaming past her in burst after burst, while Myantha drove stone wedges upward like blunt knives to carve through the approaching waves of creatures.

Shadow tendrils burst from the darkness, surging past us and strangling a manticore mid-swoop. Its body jerked and flailed, wings twitching erratically before it dropped from the air with a sickening crunch. Rhielle didn't move from her place, her face blank, but the magic curling from her fingers was anything but calm.

Raising her uninjured arm, Velessa shoved wind toward them with a cry, the funnel lopsided and wild. It caught the edge of another manticore and sent it tumbling over, its claws gouging long grooves into the floor as it spun.

My chest expanded with warmth and hope. This was how we all should survive—by working together.

Yuki lured the wounded manticore she had baited, guiding it with tremors and cracking rock toward Deallan's circle. It slammed full force into the side, sending a ripple through their shield. The fae within scattered, screams piercing the chaos as their lights flickered. The shield held, but cracks spread like frost under pressure.

“Let's go.” Quen grabbed my foreleg and tugged me through the small clearing Aelir was making with the wind.

I drove forward with all four legs, ignoring how heavy each felt to lift. I wasn't sure how much longer I'd be able to move, so I had to get to safety. The other two fae ran almost as fast as me, proving how slow I was now.

Just as wings flapped in our direction again, we reached our platform. I leapt forward, paws catching the edge. The shield gave way for me, and I passed through and landed hard inside. Behind me, Yuki slammed against the outside, the barrier holding her back. Quen hit next to her, both of them shouting.

Holy crap. I didn't just do all that for them not to be able to get in here. I refused to accept that. I prepared myself to launch outside again despite the bugs closing around us again when Rhielle turned from the swarm.

"Press your crystals into the shield. That's how it knows you!" she screamed.

Quen and Yuki didn't hesitate. The second the pieces met the barrier, light snapped out and pulled them inside. For one brief moment, it felt like we might be safe.

A horrible crack echoed from across the arena, sharp and splintering. Velessa pointed at the circle farthest away. "It's breaking open!"

The shield of the circle near the sea serpents and even the platform itself shuddered under the onslaught. Three manticores slammed against it in unison, and the dome fractured. A second crack followed like a snapping bone. Light vanished. The shield dissolved. The women inside screamed.

Then the swarm poured in.

Beetles, spiders, and snakes rushed the fallen shield. The women's pleas turned to shrieks. One woman tried to run, but a scorpion tail slammed her down. Another raised her hands in defense, and snakes circled them, hissing and biting.

My rage burned through the coldness, and I prepared to go help them when Rhielle stepped in front of me and looked in my eyes. “I respect you and agree with your philosophy, but if you leave you will die before reaching them. We need you here.”

I whimpered, hating that she was right. Quen, Yuki, and I had barely gotten here.

Still, each scream fractured my heart further, and I lifted my head, howling in mourning. I’d witnessed so much death, and it only got harder.

Quen and Yuki pressed their crystals into place. The hum deepened, and the shield over us surged. The circle’s glow brightened, rich purple swallowing the dark teal. A low hum reverberated beneath my paws. A hard shimmer formed at the base, the barrier thickening and stabilizing.

Still the swarm didn’t stop.

Insects clung to the shield, their bodies pressed so thickly against it that I could barely see through. Most of the creatures were now wolf-size. Their legs scratched the glass, sounding worse than nails on a chalkboard. Pinchers and stingers scraped and tapped, and their jaws snapped at the barrier.

Acid hissed in long, weeping trails where slime struck the shield. The manticores above dove again, hammering the dome. Quills bounced off—until one didn’t.

The impact rang like a bell, sharp and metallic. A jagged line split outward from the right side of the shield. The quill stuck straight through, and the fracture spider-webbed outward.

Creepy crawlies poured through the gap.

My stomach dropped, and I snapped at them, trying to force them back.

Rhielle's shadows surged. Aelir spun, throwing small wind blades. Myantha slammed her feet down, and jagged stone punched up from the ground outside our shield.

I lunged into the mass, teeth and claws raking whatever I could reach, and ignored the awful bites that engulfed me.

Quen's fire licked over my side as she aimed high, burning through the breach. "Somebody block the gap!" she screamed.

Yuki crushed three beetles with a slab of rock, then threw it toward a centipede crawling over the edge and jammed the rock against the quill. The rock cracked into pieces the right size to fill the space and push the quill out.

Screams rose across all the circles. The other teams were under siege too.

A manticore struck our shield hard enough to send another crack rattling across the top. The circle shook as the shield waved like glass about to shatter.

Another swooped in, mouth wide open and creepy-ass old man eyes fixed on us. My heart skipped a beat as Thalira's deep blue whip lashed again. She made contact—but she didn't let go in time. The creature jerked her off her feet, and its claws snatched her through the shield opening.

She screamed, hands scrabbling to find hold.

No. Not one of our own.

I surged forward and closed my teeth around her tunic. I pulled hard, trying to drag her back against the momentum. Her legs hit the floor, but the whip yanked taut again.

That wasn't going to work. I had to think of something else. Ears ringing, I released her and locked on the thick, water-woven strand. My teeth sank into the water, and I bit down hard. The water actually had resistance. Thalira yanked forward and so did I... and then my teeth cut through the stream, and it snapped and vanished in a splash.

We landed hard together.

Thalira gasped, chest heaving, arms curled tight to her ribs. She didn't speak. She didn't need to. We were still alive—for now. But how much longer could we make it? We were all flagging.

A thunderous thud struck the shield's left side. The platform groaned, and another spiderweb fracture bloomed outward from a thick black quill. The shard had punched through, and hope vanished, making me feel hollow. My ears pinned flat as an unnatural clicking echoed in my skull.

Then came the hiss. Not from a single creature, but from hundreds. The shield split wider, and a flood of centipedes, spiders, and things I didn't recognize poured through the opening. Limbs flailed. Screams tore through the air as the swarm invaded, biting and stinging with frenzied glee. Magic lit the space in bursts—wind gusts, water lashes, and fire arcs—but there were too many.

From the other platforms, more cries rang out, blending with ours. A chorus of pain and terror. I backed toward the center, snapping at a wolf-sized beetle trying to climb the ledge. Quen crushed one with a column of fire, and Yuki raised slabs of stone to block another, only for it to crawl up and over. The shield's protection meant nothing now.

Thalira shouted something as another manticore swooped low and caught the end of her water whip. She tried to pull back, but it yanked her forward, her feet skidding once again, sliding into the mass of insects. This time I couldn't reach her in all the

chaos.

The gong rang.

The sound cut through everything—scraping claws, shouts, magic bursts—and all at once, the creatures stopped.

The silence was deafening, and several women began crying.

Still, I didn't trust these assholes and crouched, preparing for yet another surprise.

The swarm scattered, vanishing into cracks and slithering back into shadows. The manticores beat their wings, ascending as one, and disappeared into the dark ceiling. When I looked up, they were there, hanging like monstrous bats, relaxed and silent.

Stillness clung to the air. The shields dissolved into shimmering light. The golden glow of the arena returned, casting the whole place in a sickly kind of calm. The bodies, the blood, even the piles of corpses—gone. Just vanished, like none of it had happened... like none of it mattered.

Once again, bile inched up my throat. None of the fae appreciated life, and they didn't seem to mourn the dead. How barbaric.

The elderly council member in a dark gray robe stepped forward. "Survivors," he called, his voice amplified. "Step forward. Come stand before the Council."

Breathing ragged, I padded forward to where the others were gathering, the sharp tang of blood still clinging to my tongue. I throbbed with fatigue, fur matted and heavy. The observers platform hovered above us.

Kaylen was among the last to join the survivors. Her once-flawless braid was half



undone, and her leathers torn. She lifted her chin and glared up at the observation platform, ichor streaked across her face.

“Who won?” Her voice cracked.

The old man peered down, tilting his hooded head. "Is your heart still beating?"

Kaylen blinked. “Yes.”

"Then you won. If your heart is still beating, you live to continue fighting for the prince's hand."

A few of the contestants laughed, but not all.

Kaylen scowled and glared, threatening us all.

He was right, except for the last part. I didn't want to even pretend to want to marry someone who supported games like these. It was sick.

Aelir turned to me, swaying on her feet. “My heart's still beating,” she whispered. Her smile built slowly until it was as bright as the sun.

Her happiness made me forget about all the bad stuff, and I nodded, trying to communicate back to her while in wolf form.

The air dropped in temperature, reminding me of Elara's warning. I glanced back just in time to see Kaylen drive a wind blade into Aelir's back.

No! My wolf snarled as unfiltered rage soared through me.

Aelir gasped, and her eyes widened in shock as the weapon punched through her. I

charged at Kaylen, sinking my teeth into her right forearm till they hit bone. Then I released her and head-butted her back.

Stumbling, Kaylen screamed as she clutched her forearm. Blood poured from her wound and slipped through her fingers onto the floor.

Then Aelir collapsed, and her pulse weakened.

I had to help her and stop the bleeding, which meant I had to be in human form.

Ignoring the way my body screamed in protest, I yanked my wolf back. The venom seemed to explode through my body, but I didn't give a damn. I wouldn't allow Aelir to die alone.

Pain ripped through my joints, and soon I stood naked once more. I dropped to my knees and gathered Aelir into my arms.

Her breaths came shallow. Blood spilled down her back and from the corners of her mouth. She tried to speak but no words formed.

"I'm here," I murmured, my voice cracking. "Stay with me. Just hold on. We're still alive. Remember, we won."

Life began to fade from her emerald eyes.

Tears filled mine, but I blinked them back. I had to get the dagger out of her back so I could stop the bleeding.

### Chapter Twelve

Vad

Gritting my jaw so tight that my teeth ached, I lunged forward, but the veil didn't budge again. Intense heat shot through my knuckles, causing the burns to deepen. This time the tops of my hands and my wingtips were impacted. I needed to get in there to her. She'd gotten so injured, and now was mourning the death of another contestant, leaving her back open to Kaylen.

As expected, Kaylen summoned and raised a wind dagger in her uninjured hand and poised to strike Briar.

No. Fate, please don't let her die. I shoved the black stone railing toward the veil. The stone groaned, but that was all.

Hands blazing with red flames, Quen shouted, "Back off, you fecking bitch!" She stood between Kaylen and Briar, making it clear she would step in to protect Briar.

Thank Fate Briar had saved those women. A little bit of worry lifted from my shoulders, making it slightly easier to breathe.

Myantha crouched on Briar's left side, placing an arm around Briar's shoulders. Her lips moved, but all I could distinguish were two words—light and passed.

And Briar sobbed, leaning to kiss Aelir's forehead as one of her hands closed Ailer's eyes.

“Lower the veil,” I growled. My hands gripped the railing tighter, and magic sizzled over my flesh as I pressed harder against the veil. As much as I fought to hide the desperation in my voice, some likely seeped through. “Lower it now .”

Vyraetos turned from the gap in the railing to face me. Beneath his dark hood, I glimpsed his withered face. He spoke with the slow tone of an elder lecturing a child. “It cannot be done, Your Highness. Not until the contestants have all been removed. To do so would taint the results. The magic of the arena will draw them back to the Ascension Hall momentarily.”

“Then get them out of there. All of them.” I bit out the words.

My heart ached, wishing I could wrap my arms around Briar and vow that everything would be okay. My wings tightened and flexed, and Silus cleared his throat.

Kaylen snarled, bringing my attention back to the candidates to find her expression twisting.

If one of these women didn’t kill that bitch, I might do it myself, which wouldn’t bode well for anyone.

Face flushing, Kaylen let the knife disappear. “There can be only one queen. Why do you care? With her eliminated—”

Briar stood, her hair hanging down her front, covering her ample breasts. It was somehow a brighter copper than before the lights had gone out.

She lifted her head high, and I couldn’t stop myself from taking in her figure. She was gorgeous, inside and out. I hated that everyone could see her like this. In fact, I wanted to stab everyone’s eyes out, but that could happen after she got to safety.

“You fucking monster ,” Briar spat, Aelir’s blood dripping from her hands. “I will take pleasure in killing you.”

“Like you ever could,” Kaylen exclaimed, but the irony of her clutching the forearm Briar had bitten to her chest in clear discomfort had a low laugh escaping me before I could hold it in. Briar’s spirit was exceptional.

She’d proven she couldn’t be discounted, and if Kaylen were smart, she’d realize that.

“Seriously.” Briar snorted. “You’re saying that after I nipped you on your foreman and you freaked out? The only reason your bone didn’t fracture was that I pulled back. Next time, it won’t be your forearm I go after.”

Remembering her in beast form had a shiver running down my spine. My wings tightened. I’d never seen anything like that before—it had been magnificent, but also unnerving. Who knew what other magic she possessed?

“You won’t get the chance, weakling,” Kaylen screamed, and wind began whipping around Briar.

A sharp blast of flames exploded from Quen’s hands, and the fire singed Kaylen’s hair.

Kaylen squealed, falling back a few steps. The wind faded.

Lifting her arms, Yuki raised two blocks of stone, creating a barrier between their group and the others. “And you thought no one would pay back the debt? If not for Briar, we wouldn’t be breathing. You and your cabal tried to kill us after we did our share. You’re scaffing cowards!”

The coiling of blue water whips and the hissing of wind struck up as two others took up positions on either side of Briar. And then Rhielle spread her arms, and her shadow tendrils crept out like roots spreading over the stone.

“If you—” Rhielle scoffed “— ladies would like a cheap, cruel death, I will happily oblige you. But like I said, these challenges are hard enough. We don’t have to be friends, but by Fate we surely can be enemies.”

Kaylen and her supporters growled threats but didn’t break the barrier.

And my respect for each woman surrounding Briar rose exponentially.

The murmurs of the council members jarred me back to the balcony. They spoke of Kaylen and Rhielle but didn’t mention anyone else, not even the women who’d died.

What the feck was all of this? What game was Fate playing with these atrocious trials? No rumor or tale I’d heard of the trials in other kingdoms had come close to capturing what we’d just witnessed.

I’d felt uneasy the entire time, my stomach twisting in knots from the moment we’d stepped into this foul-smelling observation booth situated above the cavernous arena. And it had only gotten worse once the trial started in earnest. The council had offered us chairs and refreshments, but I’d refused. Thank the scaffing void for that.

I had to find a way to ensure that Briar was kept safe until the end, even if she wasn't the one Fate chose. She had to live.

Something was wrong with me. Maybe the ailment that destroyed my father and weakened my sister was now affecting me. The tugging in my chest kept me from breathing properly, my lungs so tight I couldn’t take a full breath. I wanted to punch straight through that veil and go to Briar.

“You can tell that that one has tremendous power yet to be revealed,” said one creaky-voiced shadow councilor. “And she’s a Shadow Fae as well. When we discuss the most promising of the candidates, she must be at the top of the list.”

"I agree," another of the Shadow Council said. "She is already showing great promise, and unlike that one, her magic is knowable. We don't want a red shadow beast for a queen."

“Yes, and the ruthlessness the tall Sylvan Fae showed was striking—”

A growl rose in my throat. Kaylen would never be queen. I’d cut my own throat and hers before that ever happened. However, I’d made enough errors in front of the Council and needed to compose myself. Briar was safe. She had made strong allies to help her fight. She'd done well.

I couldn’t continue to break down in front of the council—couldn’t let them see this soul-sucking weakness that made my blood boil—but I wouldn’t stand by in silence. “That Sylvan Fae is a coward. Physically she possesses strength and magic, but she has no strength of will nor discretion. Certainly not behavior appropriate for a queen.”

Two council members, one from the Neutral Council and from the Shadow Council, stepped back, lifting their heads in shock. “The purpose of this test, Your Highness, was to identify ruthlessness. It is not forbidden for the contestants to behave in such a manner.”

I hated their smug condescension. The knife in my gut and the tightness in my lungs remained, along with that horrid tugging sensation. “No, but it speaks to her character and the kind of queen she would be.” I kept my voice steady. “As far as I’m concerned, any of the fae who lured another to their platform and cast them out after they had already contributed to strengthening the shield should not be considered

further. Such a woman would be unfit as a queen and just as likely to create problems as resolve them.” Briar had shown ruthlessness as well, but against herself and in her efforts to ensure all in her circle survived.

Vyraetos nodded somberly. He kept his hands folded before himself, his movements so slight he looked almost like a statue. “To lead is not to conquer by any means necessary, but to weigh the consequences of one’s conquest and intention. That, she failed to do. She is like a double-edged sword without a hilt, sharp, but capable of cutting us even more grievously than our enemies. She has not shown honor or wisdom.”

He agreed with me? I almost drew back a step, and despite the confusion, I found it a little easier to breathe. Most of the others seemed in agreement as well, murmuring or nodding.

A Neutral Fae with a softer, younger voice cleared his throat. “We cannot eliminate her or any of the others from the tournament based on the conduct described when that was not listed among the rules. They must be considered and have the opportunity to continue proving themselves so long as they live, and so long as they do not murder a member of the Shadow Kingdom royal family.”

Vyraetos lifted his hand. “I am not suggesting that they should be eliminated from the competition. All conduct must be considered. It may simply be that Fate has allowed them to be in this place so that they may serve as the refining fire for the true queen. It seems likely that the remaining tests Fate will require will examine wisdom and intellect, but we will see what is drawn forth tomorrow when we discover Fate’s will for the second test.”

Most of the councilors nodded.

I braced my blistered hands on my belt. “Regardless, I want guards in the halls and



protective sigils applied to the guest wings. The needless bloodshed stops now. And the contestants must all receive healing treatment.”

I caught Elara’s eye. She had drawn back into the shadows, her hand against the wall. Her face was deathly pale, her lips tinged purple through her weakening glamour, and her eyes shone bright with unshed tears. A shadow passed over her face as she strengthened her glamour.

“Prioritize treatment and care as justice deems,” I commanded.

She gave a small nod, and her lips pressed into a tight line.

Thank Fate she was smart and understood what I could not speak aloud. Regardless of the conduct of the women, I had to remain princely. But my first stop out of this cave would be to Briar.

Movement shifted near me, and a low groan reached my ears. I froze, ice cutting through my veins.

I’d forgotten about my father. He’d remained silent throughout the trial, but now tears—actual tears—filled my father’s eyes, and his body sagged. I was at his side at once, gripping his arm and guiding him to the door. He stumbled half a step and then grabbed hold of my arm. His fingers squeezed harder than they had in a long time. “Not like then, but the same. The blade through the back. Can’t be saved,” he muttered. His left shoulder drooped, his wings flinching and then folding tighter against his back as his dark-blue eyes grew dimmer and murkier.

Feck! Not here, not now. We had to get him out of here before the councilors noticed. His hold on his magic wasn’t slipping this time—his body and mind were.

Elara’s gaze flicked between our father’s face and me. She stepped forward out of the

shadow. "With permission, I will see to the contestants. Esteemed council members, I invite you to return to the Ascension Hall with me to continue the evaluations." She spoke louder than usual this time, drawing their attention to herself. She didn't wait for my response before she was moving to the exit.

Silus inclined his head and fell in alongside her. Both disappeared in a spiral of dark smoke.

As the Council continued to speak among themselves, I guided my father to the larger door with the shadow beast sigil. Thalen came up on my father's other side and pretended to lean in to whisper in his ear, but really helped to support him.

As soon as we stepped upon the shadow beast sigil in the doorframe, I reached out with my magic. The red of its eye glowed, and the black mist coiled around us. We reappeared at the end of the hall in the royal family's private quarters, just a few doors away from my father's chambers.

I half expected Thalen to make some ill-timed joke, but he had gone almost as pale as his hair, and his amber eyes had dimmed. Somehow that made the situation worse, making me feel as if my world was breaking apart.

Father wrapped his arms around himself. Two tears rolled down his cheeks. "It shouldn't be this way. It wasn't this way."

"What shouldn't be this way?" I frowned and guided him forward when his pace slowed. His grip wasn't as strong as it had once been, but his weight certainly hadn't lessened. At least here, only the servants who had been sworn to our family were present. Their loyalty was to us and not the Shadow Kingdom as a whole.

"They've never been this brutal," Father continued. "And I was invited to three besides my own. Never—never like this."

My scowl deepened, and an uncomfortable pit formed in my stomach. "The trials? I have heard about their harshness, but not of the kind of brutality we witnessed today. I believed the purpose was to test the candidates."

He waved his hand weakly, a rumble of a growl forming in his throat. His booted feet shuffled over the rug, creasing and rumpling it with each step. "It is—it is not like this. It was not like this before. There were deaths, yes. From accidents. Most survived."

As soon as we got him to his bedchamber door, it opened, and my father's most trusted servant appeared. He bowed his head and stepped forward to take my father's other side, allowing Thalen to dart away. He disappeared into one of the washrooms, and I heard the faint sounds of retching and wondered how long he'd been holding that in.

Father's hand on my arm faltered, but he fumbled about until he held on to me again. "I tried to save your mother, but it did no good." His voice cracked. "They stabbed her like that. So quickly. So cruelly. Didn't even give her a chance."

My spine tensed, fire radiating through every joint in my body. This wasn't a conversation I wanted to have right now.

"Easy, Father. Deep breaths."

His wings twitched and fluttered as he tightened them against his back, and he mumbled something I couldn't quite make out. His foot caught on the black rug, causing his body to lurch and the servant grunted.

The bedrooms in this palace transformed to reflect the tastes of those who lived in them. Ever since my mother had died, his had been dull black and lifeless gray. No trace of bright color or shine. No richness or luster. I hated it in here, and tonight it

felt even more oppressive than usual. It usually smelled of junipers and smoke, but now something was off, like bad wine or vinegar had been added to the mix.

"Father—" I looked to the gray-cloaked servant as we moved Father onto the bed. "Go fetch him some fortified wine, red tea, and the healing herbs. He needs rest."

Mumbling and slurring, Father lay back, his eyes unfocused.

I unfastened his surcoat and loosened his tunic so that he could breathe easier. Then I removed his boots and set them at the foot of the bed. "Rest. You'll feel better in the morning." A morning would come when he didn't, and that knowledge cut through me like a knife.

"You should go now." More tears rolled down his cheeks, and his jaw trembled as he ground his teeth.

"Father—"

"Go!" His voice broke near the end of that single word.

I bowed my head then and started for the door, the weight of it all crushing me. My boots made no sound on the thick rug.

"Vad..." Father slurred, and I turned back toward him. "Vad, there's something I need to tell you." He stared up at the lifeless black canopy that stretched over his bed, his hands folded over his chest.

Head spinning, I inhaled sharply at Father's vulnerable tone. He hadn't used that tone with me since I was a child, before Mother passed. "I'm here, Father."

"There's something I need to tell you—about that night."

### Chapter Thirteen

Vad

A maelstrom of emotions seemed to crush me. Briar's face popped into my mind. I met my father's murky gaze, his eyes dimmed with age and illness, but now there was a rawness there.

His throat bobbed, and a muscle jumped in his jaw. Then his expression twisted, and he turned his face away. "Nothing. Go. And don't ever speak of this."

The words struck me like a punch to my face, and every muscle in me knotted.

I braced myself and fisted my hands, then strode away. My father was dying. Why couldn't I hate him more? After all these years, the coldness of our relationship ripped through me.

I strode down the hall, hands still gripped in tight fists. It didn't matter. I had to see Briar and ensure she was dressed and clothed. Why? The feck if I knew. But my feet were already carrying me from my father's quarters to the main family hall to the general hall—

Silus appeared from around the next corner, his expression grim. He strode toward me and grabbed my arm as he blocked my path. "No."

I jerked back, glaring at him.

"I know what you're doing." His voice was low and his grip unyielding. "Elara is managing everything, and you need to stay away."

The words hit me like ice as I jerked free. "I don't know what you're talking about."

His dark eyes narrowed, and he straightened his posture. "Don't speak to me like I'm a fool. You're getting attached to Briar. It's obvious to anyone who knows you. And you can't pick her. Even if Fate chooses her, I'd tell you to reject her."

Blood pounded through my veins like a drum, and dread pooled with rage in my stomach. Between Thalen and Silus, Silus's counsel was usually wiser, and I'd encouraged both to speak with me freely in private. "You think you know better than Fate?" I demanded, drawing back from him. "If Fate—"

"Fate won't choose her, but you might. You swore you'd take the strongest. That that was all you wanted, but your resolve seems to be changing now—"

"Nothing has changed. I have made no decision." I braced my hands against my belt, willing myself to respond in a calmer fashion. "I am simply concerned for her well being."

"No, you're drawn to her, even if I can't fully see why. I suppose she's brave, but like I said, her mouth runs faster than her sense. She is foolish, and her magic is wild. Unknowable." He released a long breath, then shook his head. "She turned into a weird version of the shadow beast, Vad. Just as Kaylen has shown herself to be too treacherous to be a good queen, Briar is too emotional and unpredictable to be a good option. If you chose her, her power would infuse with yours and either strengthen or weaken the entirety of our kingdom."

My spine locked straight, every fiber within me screaming to contradict him and argue that Briar would be good for this kingdom. Even so, fear twinged within me,

warning that I didn't know what else she could do or how her shadow beast magic would merge with mine. Besides, I didn't want love or a longing for companionship to influence my decisions. I had to be a strong king.

Still, I couldn't stop myself from gritting out, "You should not underestimate her. Nor should you underestimate me. I will always do what is best for this kingdom, and I'm insulted at your insinuation."

His expression hardened. "Then cut her out of your heart and mind. You were right from the beginning to avoid becoming attached. She has no chance of winning, and forming a connection will only wound both of you in the end. Fate will choose Rhielle or Kaylen, mark my word."

I flexed and then refisted my hands, and my fingers scraped over blisters—burning proof of how I'd tried to break through the veil to get to her. My voice was tight when I finally spoke. "You truly believe it would be better for that calloused harpy to win over Briar?"

"It's not about what I think. Rhielle seems the best choice, but who's to say how it will play out in the end? Kaylen may redeem herself. What I am saying is that it will never be Briar, and if you are the prince I think you are, you will not give her any further attention."

Rage poured through my veins. I wanted to throttle him, but the worst part was that I feared he was right. My heart clenched so tight I couldn't breathe. "Get out of my sight."

"I apologize if you feel insulted. That wasn't my intention. You are like family to me, and I care for you and the kingdom. That is all." He bowed his head and strode away. His soft footfalls vanished around the corner. He was wise enough not to say anything else, but now I was truly alone.

I needed relief. Silus was right. I didn't need to check on Briar, especially if I didn't plan on seeing the others. Dragging a hand through my hair, I stalked to the back of the royal quarters and shoved into the private wine room. The walls were filled with cedar wine racks, each one holding a glistening bottle of vintage or specialty wine and marked with a parchment label and flowing script.

I grabbed a dark-violet bottle without looking at the name, ripped out the cork, and took a long swig straight from the bottle. The sweetness flooded my mouth, but it brought me no pleasure. Instead, I grabbed two more bottles, tucked them under my arm, and returned to the private dining room two doors away.

Three bottles total. I always grabbed three. One for me, one for Silus, one for Thalen. If Elara joined us, I shared with her. But now it was just me, and I wanted to drown in it all. I had to keep my thoughts at bay.

I gulped the wine down, pull after pull, barely stopping for breath. It took almost a whole bottle before my senses dulled. I ripped out the cork from the next and drank just as deeply.

Feck. It wasn't helping. If only I'd managed to maintain the coldness I'd tried to project at the start. I didn't want to care. Silus was right. It would be easier that way. Why was it so hard now though? Maybe it was this infection—this illness. That had to be why I was so hung up on her, right? Something about Briar worsened my condition. She made my blood pulse faster and my body throb.

Groaning, I drove my fist against the table and took another long swig. I was losing my fecking mind!

All I wanted now was to forget. Just forget for a time. To not be the prince. To not be staring my father's death in the eye and knowing that, at best, the transfer of power would come with his funeral to follow soon after, and a loveless marriage beyond



that. And who knew how much time remained for Elara? I'd hoped that the power of my becoming the ruler of the Shadow Fae might strengthen the magic in such a way that she might be healed, but that was a smoke dream. I wanted it to be simpler. To just be...a fae with his healthy and whole friends and his family—who met a girl and fell in love and who could beat the shit out of any scaffing fool who looked at her the wrong way. Feck, I wanted to break Kaylen's neck and feed her corpse to the shadow beasts.

Heavy footsteps echoed, sounding like hoofbeats on stone despite the rugs that ran the length of the chamber and hall beyond. I staggered to my feet and shoved back from the table.

A silver stag stood in the doorway, its body luminous against the dark chamber. I blinked, then drew in a sharp breath. It was still there, eyes black and fathomless as they fixed on mine. The edges of it glowed faintly, like mist. Was I dreaming?

It turned, long antlers shining, and resumed its slow march down the hall. My pulse quickened as I followed, each step pulling me deeper into the shadowy corridor toward the central family hall.

The stag paused before a painting—our family portrait. My father, mother, Elara, and I, arms wrapped around one another, smiles wide, peaceful, and happy. I hadn't looked at that painting in years. I hadn't wanted to. My throat tightened as the stag lowered its head and stabbed its antlers into the canvas. It ripped through my parents' images, and red blood spilled from the gashes and dripped down the walls. The fluid streamed onto the stag, but it didn't stain the pale silver fur. My face in the painting tore away, clean and ragged. I watched, frozen, as the stag turned its antlers on the sculpture below the painting. A shadow beast, its mouth open in a silent howl. A symbol of our line, our power.

The sculpture shattered, shards splintering across the stone floor. The stag stepped

forward, kicking pieces aside, then turned and looked at me again. The air shimmered, and my head spun. I leaned against the wall, my vision blurring. I closed my eyes, waiting for the room to steady.

When I opened them, the stag had vanished. The painting was whole again, the shadow beast restored.

Cold dread pooled in my stomach, and my head spun. Feck. Could the night get any worse?

I staggered down the hall, clumsy and uncoordinated. This was my fault. I'd failed somehow. Something was wrong with me.

A strong sensation tugged in my chest. Somehow I was now outside my observatory. My feet had brought me here without my knowing it.

I heard laughter. Her laugh...and Thalen's.

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*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm*

### Chapter Fourteen

#### Briar

The shadowy wolf logo appeared underneath my feet as I clutched my outfit in my arms. Tears blurred my vision as Aelir's smile for winning stuck in my mind.

How could Fate be so cruel to allow someone as kind-hearted as Aelir to die like that? Fate had to be bitch. I'd always thought Ember was being dramatic, but not anymore.

The cold floor of the Ascension Hall bit into the bottoms of my feet. The entire room spun like I'd been drugged, likely from the venom or shock. Probably both, but at least I knew without a doubt I was alive.

I took a shaky step forward as Myantha crouched beside me. "You should get dressed. You'll feel better and safer."

Nodding, I held on to the shirt and handed the pants to her. At this point, I wasn't sure I could balance, so I slowly pulled the shirt on.

Quen and Yuki stood a few paces in front of me, fire snapping from Quen's hands. Yuki raised a barrier, her expression as hard as the stone she wielded.

Velessa and Thalira flanked us, their eyes on me and then on Kaylen and her group and up to the platform where the dark gray and light gray reapers continued to watch us.

I could feel their eyes on all of us. Damn perverts.

Still, my heart warmed as my friends clustered around me, close and protective. For the first time since getting here, I didn't feel alone.

Myantha handed me the last piece of clothing, her fingers trembling and her expression still shell-shocked. "I can't believe we're back."

Not all of us though... I gritted my teeth, trying to push the sadness away and focus on the living. Not the dead. I'd remember and mourn Aelir later. She would never be forgotten.

I slipped my legs into the pants, hot rage coursing through me. "I'm glad you're all here." My voice cracked. "Alive." Kaylen and her posse would pay. I'd make sure of that.

"Thanks to you, Briar," Myantha said, helping me adjust and smooth out the shirt. As she did, she offered me a small, uncertain smile.

Kaylen and her mean girl squad gathered at the far end of the hall, pointedly ignoring us as they spoke in low, conspiratorial tones. Even still, Kaylen cradled the forearm I'd injured.

My hands balled into fists. They didn't deserve to be here. They didn't deserve to even breathe. My entire body tightened. They should have died a slow and painful death.

Rhielle had her arms crossed as she shifted her gaze between them and us. Her face was tight, and the way her nose wrinkled made me think she felt the same way as me.

"Why are they still watching us up there?" Quen pursed her lips.

“Because they must observe how everyone reacts after the trial as well.” Elara approached with a quiet grace, her steps silent. “You will all see the physician before heading to your rooms, where dinner will be served.”

Silus trailed behind her, his tall, stoic frame radiating calm.

I laughed darkly. “Don’t act like you care. You, Your Royal Highnesses , and your reapers stood in safety and watched us suffer and die. You didn’t do a damn thing to stop it.”

My friends gasped while Myantha drew back and dropped her glass disc. It clattered on the floor.

Elara didn’t flinch, and she didn’t look away either. “I offer no justifications for it, but I assure you I took no pleasure in this trial either.” Her gaze darted up toward the platform, and her throat bobbed.

My insides twisted, and I feared that I would never feel normal or happy again.

Kaylen’s sharp voice cut from across the room. “She should see the physician last! She’s a fucking animal, and she bit me!”

Crossing her arms, Elara turned and arched a brow. “You murdered a fae after the Council declared the winners. You and those who supported you will go last, as you deserve.”

Something on the platform rustled, and I glanced up. None of the reapers had moved, but the sound had come from up there.

Strange.

Kaylen looked a moment longer, then straightened her shoulders. Her expression smoothed into one of indifference, and she tipped her head slightly. “As you say, Your Highness.”

The words were so uncharacteristic, I swallowed a snort. But Elara turned to me again.

“You seven, follow me.” She headed toward the doors that led to the hallway.

I couldn’t help but note the stiffness in her movements. Something had to be going on. My heart ached for her, but I pushed the feeling aside. I couldn’t feel bad for the people who’d had me dragged here to die.

The heavy doors swung open, and my allies and I followed her out of the Ascension Hall. A few servants in gray, dressed similarly to the servants who’d helped me in the morning, stood waiting. Their fitted robes were lined with sleek black cloth, and on the left side of the bodice was an embroidered golden mortar and pestle set above coiling iridescent black shadows.

“Come with me,” the tallest of the three commanded, and all three turned, leading us in the opposite direction of our rooms and through a set of doors that was already open.

Just before the doors shut, I glanced over my shoulder, watching Kaylen and her friends grow smaller as they remained deep in conversation. At least they were far enough behind us that they wouldn’t easily reach us. I tapped into my wolf magic, enhancing my hearing. I didn’t want them to kill anyone else. I’d learned several people would be willing, if given the opportunity. Stabbing people in the back was literally an option.

As we made our way deeper into the palace, bright light spilled over us. We bunched

together, probably feeling safer that way. The walls were dark with flashes of gold spreading through areas, but not as stunning as the Ascension Hall.

The servants led us into a ginormous room that once again screamed royalty, healing, and leisure. A pool of crimson water shimmered in the center, and four light gray beds sat along each side. Dark wooden tables stood between beds, filled with jars and bottles. A huge fire flickered at the other end of the room under a great window that allowed sunlight to fill the space. The air smelled of various herbs and salts.

I headed to the farthest bed on the right side, wanting to keep watch on the doorway. I had no doubt that Kaylen would march in here as soon as possible, unless Elara made her group wait. Rhielle took the bed next to me and leaned back as if she hadn't a care in the world. Her long wavy pink hair flowed over her shoulders despite being streaked with ichor.

A little bit of jealousy slunk through me. If only I could even pretend to relax an eighth as much as she was and remain in such control.

The others lay on their own beds, not quite as at ease as Rhielle, but more so than me.

The fae attendants returned, their steps quick as they brought in trays of clothing, sponges, and ointment. They stripped our filthy leathers away and deposited them in a single bin and then bathed us with the cool red waters, making observations about the injuries and who needed what. They gave all of us steaming mugs of red tea and urged us to drink. It tasted like hazelnuts and chamomile.

Our injuries weren't nearly as bad as they could have been. Thalira had one especially bad scorpion sting that showed signs of infection, Velessa's arm was badly sprained, and several others had bites that required tending. Rhielle was mostly unscathed, aside from a nasty bite mark on her calf. Apparently she had some sort of shadow magic armor. Myantha had taken multiple bites and stings, but none were infected.

Quen and Yuki were in the worst shape, with numerous purpling welts and bite marks, resulting in the servants suggesting they needed a specialist and then moving them to another room. Other servants entered with soft loose pastel dresses that looked as comfortable as sleep shirts. They worked with fast, efficient hands, but despite their speed, they were gentle, even kind.

After being bathed, I sat on the edge of a table as a gray-and-green robed fae pressed my shoulder. Another rubbed salve over my skin, saying something about protecting against the venom's side effects. It warmed my skin and smelled like lavender, peppermint, and chamomile. They seemed surprised when I barely flinched.

"She's not even bruised," the first said, disbelief in her voice.

"Are you certain?" asked the green-robed fae as he approached, arms clasped behind his back. He was older, with fading blond hair and murky brown eyes. The embroidered emblem on his chest included a staff and a dark cloud in iridescent black. "Were you hurt, young one? I am one of the head physicians in the palace. You have nothing to fear from any of us, and if we can give you aid, we will."

"Yeah," I said, shifting on the linen cot. "But I'm fine now."

They exchanged a glance. "She's the one who turned into the weird shadow beast," said a small gray-robed fae who stood near the door. Fear tinged her voice.

"Does the change allow you to heal?" the green-robed fae asked. Fascination softened his voice. "You are the one from Earth?"

"Yes." I shrugged. "It's my wolf magic shooting through my body."

"What's a wolf?" He frowned, his forehead scrunching with thin lines as he tilted his head.



I paused, searching for the right words. “It’s what you call a shadow beast, I guess. I can shift from human to beast at will.”

The fae looked as if he wanted to ask more questions, but I was already slipping off the table. I left them to puzzle it out on their own and made my way back down the hall, pulling the fresh clothes tighter around me. When one of the other fae started to follow, he shook his head and said to let me be.

“Briar,” Myantha shouted, but I hurried out the door and slammed it behind me.

I needed solitude and to try to make sense of everything. No matter what I did or said, everything went wrong here. Even though he simply seemed interested, there was no telling what the physician would tell the reapers and the royals. I quickened my pace.

When I jogged down the hallway and knew the other women wouldn’t catch up to me, my lungs filled easier than they had since I’d walked into the Ascension Hall at noon. The sense of relief was overwhelming—no bug guts, no blood, no stings.

But every step away also drew my anger and twisted my heart. This entire competition was an excuse for sadistic assholes to get their jollies. Aelir had died, and for what? So Kaylen could look like a coward, though I suspected she believed the move was badass.

"You do know it's not safe to wander alone out here, Chaos?"

A knot formed in my throat as I spun around. Thalen was leaning against the dark wall. Shit. I’d been so focused on my emotions and my inward spiral, I hadn’t even noticed someone right on my heels. What kind of wolf-shifter was I? Clearly not strategic and smart, like Ember and Ryker.

“Oh, wait. I forgot.” He grinned and pretended his fingers were claws. “You can turn

into a wild bitey shadow beast."

I rolled my eyes and turned my back on him. He was all mouth, which meant he had to be lacking in other areas. I doubted he was a serious threat.

"Do you plan on biting my head off?" he teased.

Of course, he didn't know when to stop. He reminded me of Gage from my pack, and for the first time, I wished I had alpha-will power to make Thalen shut up. "Don't tempt me." I lifted a brow and looked over my shoulder.

"I knew you liked me." He held up a hand, examining his fingernails as though they were of great importance, and scurried to my side. "Always said you were a smart one."

"You all watched someone I care about die and didn't do a damn thing. Six others died too, for absolutely no good reason." My voice shook, and I stiffened. "Rules or not, that's not okay."

Thalen sighed and ran a hand through his shaggy hair. "It isn't, and I know." His eyes darkened and an unreadable emotion flickered through them before he caught it and drew it back in. "None of us could get through the veil to assist you. And believe me, some tried."

My mouth dried. No, he wasn't going to twist this and get me to soften to him once more. "You all are the royal family." I took a step back from him. "What do you mean you couldn't get through it?"

He hesitated, then put a finger to his lips. With a sly smile, he looped his arm with mine. I tugged back, but he held on tight. My heart pounded. Maybe he was a threat.

“If you come with me, I can explain things better.” A line of concern etched into his forehead as he studied my reaction.

This could be a test, but was I willing to give up an opportunity to have some things explained to me? I needed to understand this world and what the hell this whole competition was about, but at the same time, what if he was leading me to Kaylen so she could kill me?

“Why should I trust you?” I had to use the one thing I had to my advantage—see if I could catch him in a lie.

He looked me dead in the eye. “You shouldn’t. I’ve given you no reason to, but I’d like to now.”

His honesty caught me off guard, and the barrier I’d put up between us became less sturdy. Still, I couldn’t agree. Not yet.

“Are you going to hurt me emotionally or physically if I go with you?” I tilted my head, searching for any sign that I should be cautious.

“Only if having good conversation and laughter harms you.” He shrugged. “But I won’t put you under any physical or emotional duress. I like you, Briar. I want to trust me.”

“And you’re going to tell—” I started.

He placed a hand over my mouth and lowered his voice. “Yes, but we need to go now, before someone catches us.”

“Fine.” I hoped to Fate I wasn’t making a bad decision. Wait. No. I didn’t want Fate involved, or I’d probably wind up flung out a window, based on my luck with her

lately.

“Good girl.” He winked and led me down the hall, past guards who stood as still and cold as statues. We moved into a darker section of the palace, and every step away from my allies gnawed at me.

The decor became even more fancy and the furnishings richer, and the quiet had the hair lifting on my neck. I should’ve changed my mind and left, but honestly, if I had to choose, I’d rather die by his hands than Kaylen’s. Still, not dying would be preferable. “Maybe we should turn back.”

“Don’t fret, Chaos. It’s unbecoming.” He headed to two huge wooden doors and pushed them open.

My feet froze in place.

The space was huge, a massive bay of glass windows curving into a domed ceiling. Dark wood and gleaming metal bookshelves lined the walls. An enormous telescope stood in the center.

It was like nothing I’d seen before—magical, surprising, and somehow, more like home. Dusky notes of sandalwood, parchment, and smoke with just a hint of peppermint curled into my nose, easing some of my tension.

Thalen closed the door and headed to a large cabinet in the corner. “We need this right now.” He removed a dark bottle from the back and filled two glasses. His eyes were serious. “Sit with me, Chaos.”

I didn’t argue. My legs felt like water, and I followed him to the back corner, where two massive leather couches sat. I sank onto the seat farthest from him but on the same couch, and he handed me a drink before settling beside me. The liquid smelled

like smoked cider, but it tasted far sweeter.

He took a long drink, then sighed. "Politics." He clicked his tongue and then draped his arm across the back of the couch. "Politics among our kind are far more complicated than just royals and the people who do what they say. There's one council for each kingdom and another neutral council that oversees the entire realm of Nytharia. The recommendation for the queenship is decided by these councils, and they use magic that is beyond our abilities, because it's combined with the magic of the Aurelines."

I froze.

My many-greats-grandfather's voice replayed in my mind. Whatever you do, don't let them know you're an Aureline. That would be even worse than them knowing you're a wolf.

"The Aurelines ensure Fate's will is done, while the specific kingdom's council looks to the well-being of the kingdom. In the end, the prince can choose, but he is strongly advised to follow the will of the councils. Most people follow the councils' advice." Thalen didn't seem to have noticed the change in me. "King Merrick didn't follow the advice. He married for love. The old fae is a romantic at heart, even if he hides it now. And the queen's death nearly destroyed us all. I still remember where I was that day." He swirled the dark liquid in his glass and stared at it. "But what's relevant is, he did not follow the councils' wishes, and King Maverick and Queen Valora had many happy years together before tragedy struck."

Queen Valora. Vad's mother.

Some of the anger left me. I understood what losing a parent felt like. I'd lost both of mine at the hands of vampires. I didn't know what to say, because "I'm sorry" wasn't enough.

Thalen took another drink, and his expression softened. "I just wanted you to know that, after what you did today and how you've handled everything—well, I'm proud of you. Hard as it was, you were out there being my feisty Copper Chaos. And if I wasn't already proud of you for fighting for the women who were betrayed, I'd sure as the scaffing void have been proud of you for biting that fecking harpy on the arm. I just wish you'd snapped it off and fed it to her."

I choked on my drink and began a strangled combination of coughing and laughing. Thalen joined me, as we held our glasses toward each other for a cheers.

The door crashed open, and I jumped from the couch, nearly spilling the drink in my hand, ready to confront whoever it was.

Vad stood in the doorway holding a bottle of wine, his face reddening with a scowl. My heart stopped.

Thalen stayed relaxed and seated. He grinned and motioned for Vad to come inside. "I wondered how long it would take you to get here."

"Thalen?" Vad slurred, his eyes wild beneath his tousled dark hair. He staggered into the room and dropped his bottle. "Thalen. Tha—"

The glass exploded against the floor, and a dark red liquid similar to the crimson water of the healing pool gushed everywhere.

Vad didn't seem to notice. Instead, he charged at Thalen, pure hatred narrowing his pupils.

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*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:45 pm*

### Chapter Fifteen

Vad

Blood boiling uncomfortably, I shoved the door open, not caring that it slammed against the wall. My temples ached, or maybe it was the alcohol. Who knew at this point?

All I could focus on was Thalen with her. The edges of my vision turned red.

What was wrong with this fucking world? Silus had told me to stay away from Briar, and this airhead secreted her away to my favorite place?

Were they both in on it? Silus to push me, and Thalen to steal her heart away from me?

My heart twisted at the betrayal. I might wind up sending both of my supposed friends back to their original kingdoms, Sylvan and Terran.

If I couldn't have her, they couldn't either.

No one could, and definitely no one could touch her other than me.

I jabbed a finger in Thalen's direction to demand an explanation of his intentions. I needed to understand why, out of all of them, he would target Briar and dare to woo her here in the observatory.

My sanctum.

“Tha... leeen...” I closed my mouth, trying to make it work. Feck it all! It sounded as if I couldn’t speak. I was the damn prince, soon to be the king.

The bottle slipped from my hand and crashed to the floor, the rich dark liquid splashing everywhere. Some of it soaked the cuffs of my black trousers. But the only thing that mattered was how close the windbag was to Briar.

Feet unsteady, I tried to move gracefully across the shaking floor, and my wings flared, bristling outward.

Thalen smirked. The scaffing bastard beamed, like he was so proud of himself.

All control snapped as something in my chest yanked me toward him. He had to pay.

With a roar, I charged at him.

Thalen spread his arms wide and lifted the squat glass of dark liquor. He took a sip and darted away at the last second. His silver feathered wings unfurled, and he caught the air, leaving me to smash into the couch face first.

Yelping, Briar placed her drink on the table and squatted next to me. When her hands touched my arm, jolts I’d never experienced before shot through me, stronger than they had the last time we’d touched.

“I wondered when you were going to get here, you big brooding bellend. I would offer you a drink, but it seems you’ve had five or six. Maybe even seven.” Thalen chuckled behind me.

Briar snorted but then tried to cover it up by clearing her throat. “Are you okay?”



Grunting, I struggled upright, my wings flapping.

“Can you put those away?” Her voice shook with laughter, though she tried to hide it. “It’s not helping you stand.”

“Chaos, let him be. It’s funnier this way,” Thalen quipped.

My face heated, and I wanted to bury it in the couch. Clearly I looked pathetic, but the fact that Thalen had a nickname for Briar made me force myself upright.

“Do you have your balance now?” she asked, turning me toward her.

I didn’t even consider fighting her. I needed to see her face more than I needed to breathe. When my eyes met her gorgeous jade ones, my heart seemed to stop.

Feck. I looked downward. Her cornflower blue dress was all soft and loose around her curves. It would be so easy to slide my hand between her thighs and—feck! I had to stop my mind from where it was going.

All the blood in my body surged somewhere other than my brain and the bulge grew in my pants once more.

It was so hard to think. All I wanted to do was bury myself between her—

Thalen’s snicker jolted me back to reality.

He landed beside me and took a flamboyant bow. “I knew you’d show up eventually. My job here is done. Have fun, you two. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

The world spun even more with the abruptness of the movement, and by the time I turned to track him, Thalen was standing in the doorway. His eyes twinkled, and his

hand gripped the handle. He waggled his eyebrows, then jerked the door shut with a heavy click.

Wait. Was this a setup? I wasn't sure if I should be pissed or ecstatic.

Briar sat down on the other side of the couch again and curled up with a glass that was still half full of night brandy.

I took a ragged breath. He'd poured her that drink. She should not have anything given by another man! It was intolerable.

With an undignified grunt, I swiped the glass from her.

"Hey," she exclaimed, trying to get it back from me.

I moved quickly toward the cabinet in the bookshelf of the left wall, sloshing some of the dark liquid over the edge. "I'll get you something better to drink."

Her shrill voice cut through the haze in my mind, the indignation palpable. "That was mine."

I waved her off. "Yes. Was . I'll get you another." My gaze fell on the glass as I debated pouring the night brandy out. No—that'd be a terrible waste of excellent liquor, and being alone with her was already affecting me and it'd been mere minutes.

There was only one solution. I drained the glass in a single gulp, barely tasting it. Shaking my head, I drew in a deep breath, trying to steady my emotions, and opened the cabinet to remove the blackberry whiskey. This particular whisky was as smooth as that hourglass figure of hers, and every bit as rich.

The damn cabinet kept moving as I tried to pour her a glass. What was going on with

the ground? If Terran Fae were here, the guards would've alerted me. Good thing I was here with her if something was in the process of happening. I should get back to her and be by her side... for her protection of course.

Her perfect, full breasts looked even more delectable framed by her folded arms. They'd be so much better without being covered by all that fabric. The image of her standing nude in the arena popped into my head, furthering the problem in my trousers.

With what should have been an elegant tip of my head, I placed the glass in her hand. Her fingers wrapped around it, brushing against mine.

A strange heat and jolt spread through me. I needed to jerk back, but instead my fingers lingered. Feck it all. She was exquisite, staring right at me.

She arched a brow. "Are you going to let go?"

I dropped my hand immediately and already missed her touch, though I was a mere wing length away from her.

I needed another drink. A way to numb the effect she had on me. Staggering back to the cabinet, I started to pour one for myself.

"Do you really need another? I don't think that's a wise choice."

I scowled and turned toward her. "And I don't think I want anyone else commenting on my choices." Silus and the councilors had already gotten on my last nerve questioning me. I didn't need her to start as well.

She lifted her chin, and those eyes flashed bright. She placed her drink on the table and stood, coming to me.

My head spun, but this time it wasn't from the floor—it was her. The determined set of her brows had more blood leaving my head. I couldn't wait to see what she'd do to me. I hoped it was—

She took my drink and the bottle, and poured the dark liquid back in. Then she poured hers in as well and corked it. "And I've had enough people trying to control mine, to the point that I can't even go home to my family."

I stared at my empty hand, not sure if I was annoyed or amused. She pushed past me and thrust the bottle back into the cabinet.

"This could be your home, and I could be your family," I said, my voice thick. I dragged a hand through my thick hair. How eloquent I was! Disgust at myself twisted within me. Why couldn't I talk well tonight?

She uttered a sharp laugh, but she didn't sound amused. "Only if I win, and you pick me. And let's be honest—we know that the latter will definitely not happen, so let's not play games."

Silus's words rang in my ears, and a low growl built in my chest. She started to walk away, full hips and bright copper hair swaying in tandem, taking my heart with her.

I surged forward, spun her around, and pushed her up against the wall. I held her wrist with one hand and caged her in with my other arm braced against the shelf above her head. Books, crystals, and trinkets jostled, and she stared up at me.

My breath rasped in my throat, mingling with hers. I smelled sandalwood, then her—a swirling scent of ginger, cinnamon, hazelnut, and night brandy. She was all fierce heat and defiance, glaring like she was contemplating her next sharp retort.

But I needed to talk first. "What if I don't want to let you go? I could always make my

choice now. Just pick you. Say it's you. No matter what happens, you are the one I choose."

Her brow furrowed and her breath caught, her pulse thundering in her throat just above her collarbone. The urge to press my lips to that spot rose along with my own need. Images flashed into my mind of her in my bed, arching beneath me and pulling me closer as I held her even tighter and drove into her again and again.

"People are dying in these games," she said tightly. "Are you actually saying that if you pick someone, then it's all done? We don't have to compete in any additional senseless trials?"

I blinked heavily, a sourness spreading over my tongue. "No." The thickness in my throat intensified, along with the urge to hold her. "No...I can't stop them." I moistened my lips as my gaze held hers. Her lips were full and perfect. Had she ever been kissed? Surely she had. The thought of someone else's lips on her made my stomach queasy.

If someone had kissed her, I needed to correct that wrong and be her last. But if no one had, I wanted to be her first and only.

I leaned in closer so our lips were just inches apart and pressed my body to hers. "No. The Council—the councils won't let them stop, and there must be three trials. They're planning the second now."

Her chest heaved, her breasts pressing into my chest. Her gaze darted from my lips to my eyes so fast she likely hoped I wouldn't notice...but I did.

"Do they plan everything? How many live? How many die?" That hard note in her voice trembled at the end.

“Everything that can be decided, they decide. The rest is left to Fate. All I can do is...be there.” Wishing that I could do more. Wishing I could protect her. My eyes shuttered, and my chest tightened to the point of pain.

I dropped my head to her neck and breathed her in. Feck. She smelled divine, and I never wanted to part from her again. I traced a line from her throat to her cheek with the tip of my nose and breathed her in again, luxuriating in her scent. My head spun as the blood throbbed in my veins, the bulge in my trousers now painful. I wanted this woman. I wanted her more than air and wine. No one in my past compared to how she made me feel.

Leaning closer, I pressed my forehead against hers. Her lips trembled as she stared up at me. “Fate is a pain in my butt,” she said.

I laughed softly, releasing her wrist and adjusting my position so I was as close as possible without leaning my whole weight on her. “Your butt is too perfect for Fate to hurt it.”

The most beautiful shade of pink flared across her cheeks, and her focus landed on my mouth. Everything inside me burned, but in a way that was comforting, and I wanted more.

I couldn’t believe I’d said it, but I didn’t regret it. All I’d regret was not tasting those sweet rosebud lips. If she’d had blackberry cloud truffle on her cheek, I’d have licked it off this time.

Unable to resist any longer, I grazed my lips over hers. A jolt of blazing warmth hit my soul. The tantalizing depths of her sweet mouth were only a breath away. It sent a pulse straight to my groin. I resisted the urge to stroke her cheek, but I brought my mouth to hers. Just one kiss. Maybe then all these strong feelings would go away.

Her hand flew to my chest, her touch firm. "Stop," she whispered hoarsely.

Stop? Every muscle in my body tightened, screaming at me to just kiss her and cover her body with mine. The blood thundered in my veins, throbbing and pleading for me to take her.

But no—she'd said stop. She'd—she'd asked me to stop.

The wheels of my mind turned slowly, and my fingers dug into the shelf near her head. I didn't want to stop. I needed her like air. "Just one kiss. That's all. I'm not asking for more."

"I'm not strong enough for that," she whispered, and her words broke me.

### Chapter Sixteen

#### Briar

My heart twisted and my head spun. I wanted him to ignore my plea and not just brush my lips but devour me. The spiciness of his arousal added to his leathery scent, making me want to rub myself all over him so we smelled of each other. My wolf whimpered, edging me to push my resistance aside.

But my head still screamed stop. If he kissed me, I wouldn't want to stop, and I couldn't afford such a massive distraction. My goal was set—survive and get home. I couldn't let some fae royal shadow Vaddy keep me from doing that. Besides, he wouldn't pick me even if he wanted to. I didn't fit in here, and the thought of watching him with another... Tears stung my eyes.

No. I couldn't keep going down that thought process. He wasn't mine and never would be. I needed to get away and not put myself in a situation where, if I survived, I left broken-hearted.

He let out a long sigh, his cool alcohol-soaked breath hitting my face. He mumbled, "You're right. This isn't wise for either of us."

The words stabbed my heart, but I couldn't fault him for them. He clearly believed the same thing I did.

He took a step back, and the jolts from his body touching mine diminished to a faint buzz. I clenched my hands, wanting to pull him back against me.



“You should leave before I change my mind.” He lowered his head.

I wasn’t sure if it was from shame, embarrassment, or something else. But the reason didn’t matter. I needed to get back to my room before I did yet another thing that put me in a worse position.

“Are you able to find your room?” I didn’t want to leave him drunk and without someone to tend to him.

“Don’t worry. I have no doubt someone will join me soon.” He winced.

My back straightened. Did he mean another bridal candidate? “I see.” A huge part of me regretted stopping him. I wanted his company to see us together. At least my scent would be on him.

This was further evidence that I needed to stay the hell away from him. “Well, I’m going to leave now.” I spun on my heels, not wanting to break down in front of him. I hoped like hell I didn’t pass his visitor on my way to my room.

I marched to the door and threw it open, accidentally slamming it against the wall.

“Briar, are you all right?” Vad asked with concern.

Yeah. We were not doing this. I was acting insane, and staying would only let my psycho self out more. “Just peachy. Night.” And I marched out the door.

Footsteps came toward me, and my mouth soured. I didn’t want anyone to see me. I tugged on my wolf to help me move faster and hear better as I sprinted down the reverse path Thalen and I had taken, just wanting to get back to my room.

The hairs on the back of my neck wouldn’t settle. That feeling of being watched slid

over my skin like slime, thin and crawling.

The footsteps faded, and there were no sounds of someone flying. I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself.

This whole day had been a disaster. I needed to go to “my” room and process everything. I was now so paranoid that I thought I was being watched when no one was around.

The only sounds now were my own footsteps brushing against the smooth stone and the whisper of my skirt skimming the floor. But the sense of that ominous presence stayed, coiling tighter with every step.

Ugh. I couldn’t shake it. I quickened my pace, then slowed to see if I could detect anything.

A set of footsteps thudded.

There it was. The sound was too soft for a servant, but too steady for coincidence. My stomach clenched, and my wolf huffed, like she was saying told you so .

I picked up speed, and the footsteps synced. Fear clawed my chest.

Twice more I changed my pace—fast, then slow, then fast again.

So did they.

Panic surged under my skin, thick and stifling. I broke into a run, the dress catching around my legs as I rounded the corner fast enough to damn near slam into one of the black-armored guards stationed by the archway.

The guard turned toward me, his creepy ass eyes the only thing I could see.

“Someone’s following me,” I said, my breathing jagged and loud. My chest burned, my lungs dragging in air that didn’t feel like enough.

Two of the black armored guards stepped forward, hands gripping their swords as they moved to investigate. I didn’t stay to see if they found anyone. I didn’t care. I just ran the rest of the way to my room.

My feet skidded as I threw myself through the doorway. I slammed the door shut and shoved the heavy end table back in place, the legs scraping across the floor. Rubbing my hands together to try to release some of my anxiety, I surveyed the room slowly. Soft lamplight cast the room in a gentle golden glow, and I searched the darker corners for a sign that someone was there while tugging on my wolf senses.

My heart slowed as I realized I was alone. I dropped onto the bed with a huge exhale, the warmth of safety wrapping around me and my fear retreating.

I curled inward, arms wrapping tight around my body as everything the fear had held at bay crashed over me. Aelir’s face flashed in my mind—her wide green eyes, the way her voice trembled when she’d whispered that she didn’t want to die. Kaylen had taken her life from her like it didn’t matter, like she was just a bug to be squashed in the path of Kaylen’s plans.

I wished I’d been faster. Maybe I could have stopped that fucking bitch.

And Ember—Fate, Ember —was still on Earth, probably wondering if I’d vanished or died or just walked away. I missed her so much it physically hurt. Like something had been torn out of my chest and left raw. My only comfort was the faint warmth of my pack links.

My fingers curled over the spot until my wolf let out a broken whine, mourning with me.

Then the moment with Vad came to me. He seemed drawn to me the way I was to him, though we could never work out. My lips tingled where his had brushed them. And I hated that I'd stopped him, because if a brush felt that amazing, I could only imagine what a real kiss would be like.

I could smell his scent on me, and I sobbed until my nose became so stuffy so I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't allow him to ruin me.

At some point, without meaning to, I fell asleep.

\* \* \*

The soft click of the door woke me, followed by the scraping groans of the servants pushing the nightstand out of the way once more.

I sat up fast, hands balled, ready for a fight. When I saw the three servants squeeze through the opening, I relaxed.

They carried a breakfast tray and a jade dress, moving with that same eerie coordination they had before.

I stood numbly and took the dress from the one servant while the other two set out breakfast on the small table.

The moment I lifted the dress, I paused. I'd known it was a dress, but I hadn't expected this .

It was beautiful, perfect for a Renaissance fair, but I couldn't imagine fighting in it. It had several layers and long sheer sleeves that would fall past my wrists. A vine design had been embossed across the bodice, and it had to weigh at least fifteen pounds. It was heavier than anything I'd ever worn before, and made of sturdy fabric.

“Let us help, miss,” the closest servant murmured.

I wanted to protest, but I wasn't sure I could figure out how to put this thing on with all the layers. I removed my nightgown and stepped into the new dress. Cool and deft fingers laced the back and adjusted the skirts so they fell correctly.

As soon as they were done, they took a step back.

Even though I loved the color, I didn't want to look in the mirror. I already didn't know who I was becoming, and the last thing I needed was to see a person I didn't recognize staring back at me.

I ran my hands down my stomach, and my thumb got stuck in a hole. I sighed bitterly. Of course, I would manage to destroy the dress before I even made it outside my room.

I glanced down to see the damage...and the corners of my mouth tipped upward.

This dress had pockets!

A servant kneeled and slipped thin black leather shoes onto my bare feet.

When all the servants stepped back, I spun around with my hands in my pockets. Who'd known such a little thing could make me so happy?

My joy was cut short by the gurgling of my stomach. Intense hunger pains shot

through me, reminding me that I hadn't taken the time to eat dinner before my emotional burnout last night.

Knowing I needed strength and energy, I grabbed a piece of bread with apple strawberry jam and devoured it. The sweet and fruity taste reminded me of the treats Ember and I baked back home. As I picked up a second piece, one of the servants handed me the red tea that the physicians had given us last night. Needing any additional healing I could get, I guzzled the hot tea, enjoying the contrast of the nutty herbal flavor with the sweets. I ate the second piece of bread in two huge bites.

The servants stared at the floor, and I became eager to get away from them. "Ascension Hall?"

The middle servant nodded.

I hurried out of my room, passing by guards. Two of them flanked me as I walked toward my next personal hell.

A tingle of awareness shot through me once more, and I glanced over my shoulder. Neither of the guards seemed alarmed, and, of course, I came up with nothing.

Staring forward, I yanked on my wolf. She seemed restless but not as alarmed as last night.

The black and gold halls seemed less endless. My shoulders tensed. I hoped I wasn't getting used to being here, because I didn't like what that meant. I didn't want to get used to anything in this world. I needed to win—survive—and get the hell back to Ember.

As I stepped into the Ascension Hall, my gut did that same uncomfortable flip as the first time I'd been here, though now it was for different reasons. My allies were

clustered to the right in one corner of the room, away from Kaylen and her mean girl posse. A couple other women stood awkwardly at the back of the hall as if unsure where to go. All of us were dressed in similar styles and all different colors.

A tug yanked in my chest, and without meaning to, I glanced up at the balcony. The usual people were there, Vad looking more sullen and stoic than ever. The memory of his body pressed against mine and him breathing in my scent knocked the breath from me. My body warmed and my chest heaved, wanting him to swoop down here and finish what he'd started last night.

His stormy gaze met mine, and the jolt of attraction bolted through me despite him not being anywhere near me. I licked my lips, and saw his breath hitch.

Thalen leaned over and blocked my view of Vad. He flashed the bird at me all over again.

My lips twitched into a reluctant smile, and my tension eased just a bit. Somehow it no longer seemed like a dismissive gesture. I could almost hear him calling me Chaos in that singsong tone.

I lifted my hand and returned the gesture, and he beamed, bright amber eyes glowing like torchlight. He placed a hand over his heart and mouthed, That's my girl .

Vad fisted a hand in Thalen's hair and yanked him away, and Silus flanked Vad's other side with a huge scowl.

I tore my gaze away and took in the room. The smile slipped from my face.

Everything had changed. Yet nothing had changed. The reapers were still there, standing ominously on the platform to the right of the royals in dark gray and light gray robes with thick hoods. I hated them. I dug my fingernails into my palms, using

the sting to ground myself. I hated that they'd pulled me into this mess without any care for what I wanted.

More than anything, I hated how Vad had looked at me last night. I scanned the area, trying to determine who his special visitor had been.

He'd said things that had made me think I was special, but I should've known better. He hadn't meant any of it. Hadn't known what he was saying. It was the alcohol. Just the alcohol, and he'd managed to sooth his frustrations with one of the other ladies here. Bitterness froze my blood.

Before I could dwell on it, Rhielle swept through the doors, face pale and a thick bandage wrapped around her neck. Her magenta eyes locked on Kaylen, but Kaylen wasn't looking at her at all. She crossed the room to where our friends stood.

I hurried over to her on weak legs. She was injured worse than when I'd left her with the physicians, and we had another trial to get through. "What happened?"

"Someone tried to kill me last night." Rhielle's nostrils flared.

Our entire group reacted. Thalira gasped, Myantha covered her mouth, and Quen stiffened, orange fire flaring at her fingertips. Velessa cradled her injured arm in its sling and stared at her in horror.

Yuki's eyes went wide, and she asked, "How did you—"

"Survive?" Rhielle cut in. Her voice was sharp and furious. "I can summon my shadow shield in one beat of my heart. The assassin barely nicked my throat before I blocked the attack." Her gaze was pure fire. "But the blade was poisoned. I spent the rest of the night in the infirmary, and I didn't see who attacked me in the darkness."



I wanted to vomit. Not even in our own rooms with guards outside were we safe. How was that even possible?

“That’s terrible,” Myantha said, her hand at her mouth. “Do you think it was—”

“Of course it was her. And I’m going to make her feel threatened out of spite.” Rhielle’s eyes flashed with anger.

I understood the sentiment. I was close to wanting to rip everyone not in our circle to shreds. “I completely support you.” The problem was, now, a part of me actually wanted to win, which was asinine.

Rhielle turned to me and whispered, “I don’t want to win—I just want to make Kaylen believe I do. Veralt will understand.”

My brows furrowed. “Veralt? Are they on one of the councils?”

“No.” Rhielle rubbed the spot over her heart. “He’s my lover. I hope to marry him, if I can get out of this mess.”

My body quivered with even more rage. Fate had selected a woman whose heart was already taken and had thrown her into this mess? Why did she spite us so?

Vyraetos, head of the reapers and the leader of all this nonsense, stepped to the edge of the platform. He cleared his throat and lifted his pale wrinkled hands. “Congratulations. You have all survived to be part of the second test, and none were disqualified in the night.

“Today your intelligence will be tested. Before you depart, you will each be given two discs. One will be fastened to each of your wrists. If you survive, you may keep them. When the test begins, you will be placed on a platform at the start of a

labyrinth, and you will have to find your way to a tower and navigate your way to the top. At the top of the tower, you will find round slots with an emblem that matches each of your discs. You will place your discs in the slots, and then the straps will come free. If you have wings, they will be magically bound when you are transported through the portal of the shadow-beast sigil. I suggest you draw them in before you leave the Ascension Hall.

“If you have magic, it will be restrained while you’re in the labyrinth itself with one exception—the starting platform. If you try to use magic anywhere else, you will be punished. Passive magic may be used so long as you do nothing to command it. The glyphs and sigils throughout [ED1] [JG2] will prevent you from doing more than that. All you will have to help you are your wits and these weights, which hold the sign you are to match.”

A lump formed in my throat as he waved his hand, and servants in dark blue appeared with blank dinner-plate-sized bronze discs. The servants moved down the line, fastening them to wrists with thick leather straps. Once both plates were fastened to a woman, light pulsed in the discs, and an image formed.

Lovely. I was quite certain that I’d be imageless again. So I’d bet there was no way I could “win.”

Quen stood beside me, a fire beetle appearing on her discs.

The servants took both my wrists and fastened the slick leather to them. As soon as they stepped back, light flared on my discs, revealing a butterfly with flame wings identical to my tattoo.

When I dropped my hands, the discs pulled downward, surprising me with their weight. They were annoying, but not nearly as unwieldy as I’d feared.

Kaylen hefted them like they were nothing, giving me a mocking pout when she saw me looking at her.

“Too heavy for you?” she called out, her voice dripping with false sympathy.

I hoisted the discs over my head and held them, giving her a toothy grin in response.

She narrowed her eyes and smiled but didn’t follow suit.

Interesting. I paused, tilting my head while studying her. She appeared a lot healthier than she had last night. A lot healthier than the rest of the fae. I had my wolf to explain my fast healing, but she didn’t.

Something seemed off.

Her color had returned, and while her gown had long sleeves, they were sheer, and I couldn’t see my bite mark, or any of the marks from the creepy crawlies. Could fae heal that fast?

Kaylen looked at Velessa and clicked her tongue. “Oh, fellow Sylvan sister, I feel so terrible for you. How are you going to manage your second disc with your arm in such bad shape?”

Lifting her chin, Velessa hugged the discs to her chest, keep the one from putting weight on her injured arm.

My heart twinged. There was no doubt she’d struggle in this round.

“How is everyone feeling?” I turned my attention to our group. Maybe others had improved as quickly as Kaylen.

Yuki and Quen softly admitted they were feeling stiff and sore from the previous day's stings. It was worse this morning, though the physician said most of the pain should pass by evening. Myantha was likewise riddled with bites and stings, and she scratched at her arms.

Struggling to put weight on her left leg, Thalira winced as they fastened the discs to her arms, her dark brow furrowing. "We have to keep these on the whole time?"

The servants nodded.

This was ridiculous. I stepped forward, the discs swinging at my sides. "What about those of us who are injured?"

"They must be clever to survive. The faster you move, the less likely you are to be attacked by the moving platforms and creatures."

Of course there would be more fucking creatures. And knowing my luck, it'd be the wolf-sized creepy crawlers again. I shuddered, remembering the cold venom. I locked my attention on the hooded reapers. "Some of us can barely walk, let alone fight, run, and navigate an ever-shifting labyrinth of moving platforms, and now you're added creatures?"

Vad's shoulders tensed. He studied me, and I thought I saw a flicker of concern cross his face.

My heart tugged, wanting to let him know I was talking about the others and not myself. I wanted to wipe away that concern.

But then Silus whispered something to him, and his mouth tightened. He turned his gaze away.

Vyraetos remained as calm as before. "If you wish, you can remain on the solid black starting platform at the beginning of the labyrinth. The solid black platforms throughout will not transform, and, while creatures may still attack, they will not attack as much on the outer sections of the labyrinth as they will inside.

"But, if no one has reached the end within an hour, then the starting platform will begin to shrink until those contestants have no choice but to compete. This is a trial in which it is possible for everyone to die. But only three must reach the end for the trial to conclude.

"In fact, there is an extra incentive to be amongst the first three. At the celebration ball, each will receive a dance with the prince, in the order of the prince's choosing. And one may be chosen to lead the opening dance with the king."

"Praise Fate." Kaylen smiled and batted her eyes.

Please Fate, no . Don't let the woman he entertained last night be that bitch.

The two women who'd been standing on the sidelines and the mean girl posse began having hurried and hushed conversations. The tension in the room intensified. A deep scowl broke across Kaylen's face. Whatever the girls around her were saying, she didn't seem pleased.

I gripped my discs and drew a deep breath. I couldn't let the tightness in my chest slow me down. I had to get through this. Not so I could dance with Vad—I didn't give a damn about that.

My wolf snarled, calling me out on my lie. That was something we'd have to address later.

"I can't believe they're doing this." Thalira limped a few steps closer to the center of

our group. “Forcing us to compete when we’re barely able to stand, and not even allowing us to use our magic?”

“Believe it.” Quen wrinkled her nose. “They’re ruthless. We know that much.” Her shoulders sagged as she examined her hands. “I don’t know how I’ll fight without magic. Feck this. I don’t want to dance with the prince. I just don’t want to die.”

Myantha nodded, hugging herself and drawing closer to Velessa. The purple-haired fae hugged the younger woman with her good arm and whispered something to her.

“Only three of us have to make it through to end the challenge for everyone.” Rhielle’s eyes burned. “I’ll get to the end and laugh in that smug bitch’s face.”

“Sounds good.” Better her than me. I tightened the straps around my wrists and glanced at Vad.

He was staring at me, arms crossed, and I felt the pull toward him again. Too much . I couldn’t think about him now. I couldn’t think about anything but surviving.

Vyraetos studied all of us in silence for a moment longer. Then he lifted his arms. “Once again, you will enter the labyrinth in a random order. This has been confirmed. The first to enter are Kaylen, Calla Lily, Myantha, and Briar. Step onto the Shadow Beast Sigil, please.”

Of course I’d be stuck with her.

Trying to keep my eyes from rolling, I strode to the center of the room. I straightened my shoulders and lifted my chin, ignoring the way the discs pulled on my wrists.

Kaylen’s lips curled into smirk as she stepped into place beside me.

“This should be fun.” She stood confidently, tossing her white-blond hair over her shoulder. “I hope you don’t strain your arms.”

Calla Lily and Myantha joined us. Myantha trembled as she took her place, her honey-gold locs falling over her face. She looked at me, and I wanted to reassure her. But I couldn’t. This was going to be hell, and all we could do was fight our way through it. And if I couldn’t protect her any better than I’d protected Aelir, then she’d be dead.

Black mist spiraled around us, and we vanished. My feet scraped on smooth cold stone, and an ungodly stench assaulted my nostrils.

I opened my eyes and pushed myself up, and when I saw the labyrinth stretching before me, all I could say was, “Fuck.”

### Chapter Seventeen

#### Briar

The fae bastards had dropped us into hell. I blinked, hoping this was some sort of sick illusion.

The stench—thick rot, stagnant water, and the sharp bite of mold and metal—hit hard enough that my eyes watered and bile churned in my stomach. It clung to the back of my throat, coating my tongue until all I could taste was decay.

My shoes were on slick black stone, solid but damp beneath the soles, and I stepped forward onto the platform with the others. The air here didn't move. Not a whisper. Just thick, sour stillness.

Myantha gasped, as did Calla Lily.

Kaylen simply stared.

The labyrinth stretched out ahead of us, suspended in air like some deranged spiderweb. Dozens of narrow wooden paths jutted out across the expanse, most no wider than my hips, some barely more than planks lashed together and covered with dry lichen. They intersected at random black platforms, and some stretched into nothingness. The wood sagged with age, worn pale at the edges and darker in the middle, with spots that reminded me of old rot or blood. No rails. No support above, and only a handful of stone columns crumbling beneath them like afterthoughts. We could easily slip and die.



My thoughts turned to Aelir.

A tall, gray tower cracked with age rose in the center like the bones of some ancient god. It had no windows, just deep grooves and shadows carved into its rock like forgotten symbols, and a large arched doorway on each side. The top was where we were headed.

Hundreds of clicking sounds echoed in the air, soft and staccato, like chitin on wood, and beneath them thudded something slower. A deeper cadence. Heavier. Mechanical. Like a massive clock ticking toward something none of us wanted.

Kaylen walked past me without a glance, heading toward the north edge of the platform. She halted and stared out at the maze, arms loose at her sides, gaze flicking over the paths. No quip. No glare. Her silence didn't comfort me. It stretched too long, and that quiet calculation in her eyes said she was already three moves ahead of the rest of us.

I didn't trust her.

Calla Lily let out a sharp breath. "How in the scaffing void are we supposed to survive this?"

"I don't know," Myantha said, her voice smaller than usual, "but Briar will protect us."

A spike of tension twisted under my skin as Thalira, Velessa, the brown-haired fae who had been with Calla Lily, and Malnon appeared in the center of the square black platform. The expectation wrapped around my spine like a heavier weight than what was strapped to my wrists. I stepped forward, the toe of my shoe brushing the edge of the stone. It looked solid at least, and a wall rose up along the back, giving a little protection.

Rhielle, Quen, Ceana, and the lilac-haired fae appeared next.

I braced my hands at my waist, the discs swinging lightly at my sides. “I’ll stay and defend anyone who wants to stay here, as long as they fight as best they can and swear they won’t hurt anyone.” Heavy gray clouds obscured the sky, blocking out the sun. I couldn’t see anything threatening overhead, but that meant nothing. The Hall of Ruthlessness had been just as quiet before the manticores dropped in like Fate-damned thunder.

Rhielle moved past me without a word, yanking up her sleeves and heading for the southern edge of the platform. She crouched low, fingers brushing the stone, then pressed her foot against one of the connecting planks. It groaned under her weight, the wood dry and strained, but it didn’t break.

Yet.

She drew back, scowling. “I’m going.”

I moved to the edge and looked down.

The drop was far enough to kill, but that wasn’t what made my skin crawl.

Jagged rocks jutted up between black pools of filth. The water should have been crimson, like it had been in the last trial, and I could tell even from here that the color came from rot and decay, not magic. Sludge floated across the surface like grease on soup, thick and unbroken.

And moving in the water—my gut twisted.

Massive leeches, long and pulsing, slid through the muck. They had circular mouths full of ringed teeth like lampreys, the kind that bored straight into bone. They

undulated through the filth, sucking and writhing. Alongside them skittered enormous crabs and lobsters, all in shades of shadow and bruise. Their claws clicked against one another, sometimes clashing, sometimes prodding gently, like they were testing their own strength—or waiting for a signal to swarm.

It wouldn't take much.

Whoever made the run had three options to start.

Two of the paths ahead led to the same black platform, probably twenty feet away, the boards thinner there and sagging even more. The third shot off in another direction entirely, toward a distant block that looked older but maybe offered a clearer route toward the tower so long as you didn't mind going farther.

Squabbling voices snapped me back. We'd split into two groups again, but Calla Lily and Oaro were now with my friends. While we were a wall, the mean girls were falling apart.

Siray had her hands on her hips, and her eyes narrowed at Kaylen. "I have no interest in the prince. But I will test myself against this labyrinth to see if I can best it. Do not patronize me, air fiend. I know why you want us to remain behind."

Glowing at Kaylen as well, Malron had her long violet hair swept back from her face. It contrasted sharply with her pink gown. "You do not get to dictate how I perform in this trial. I do want to dance with the prince, and I have the same rights as you."

Deallan fixed the yellow flower in her hair, her smile sharp and mean. "We're strong enough that we can handle it. Fair is fair. If we get to the end, we get the dance. You can say what you like, Kaylen, but you don't control us."

Hands on her hips, Kaylen glared at them. “If you think you can make it to the tower, be my guests. But don’t expect us to wait when you fail.”

“Very well.” Malron turned on her heel, her back facing Kalyen. “Try not to fall in, harpy.”

I drew back toward the others as Malron strode to the center path. An unsettled sensation twisted inside me. Why would Malron be foolish enough to turn her back on Kaylen after she’d stabbed so many that way?

The low heavy clicking sounds intensified, rising above the clacking sounds below.

“Looks like there’s trouble in their cabal.” Quen quietly snorted. The fire beetle emblem on her discs glowed faintly.

“Trouble or not, I’ve got no chance of climbing anything.” Velessa hugged herself, supporting her arm carefully and clutching both discs to her chest. “I’ll stay here.”

“We don’t all have to go,” Yuki said. “Those creatures down there—if I can’t use my magic, I’ve got nothing.”

Myantha nodded, her dark-brown eyes wide as she looked at the paths.

Already at the edge of the southern route, Rhielle yanked her sleeves high. She called over her shoulder, “I’ll get to the end as swiftly as possible. Stay safe.” She hopped onto the board, then continued testing steps along the walkway. The boards creaked with each step.

I didn’t doubt her. A little bit of tension seeped from my shoulders at having one less person to protect. Rhielle would make it to the end. Spite was one of the best motivators.

Unfortunately, Kaylen would probably make it too.

Malron walked down the middle path, heading for the closest block.

The lilac-haired mean girl who had stayed pretty quiet had slipped over to the top of the block. She jumped onto one of the floating planks.

“Let’s go.” I motioned forward, scanning the rest of the group. “We’ll stay here and keep as many of the creatures off as we can, then move when we have to. Who wants to be the third? Maybe a fourth? Anyone who is staying needs to help guard.”

Malron was now a third of the way down the center path, followed by Siray.

Malron paused and faced us. She shouted at Kaylen, “See you later, you fecking—” But then blades shot through the wooden planks. Six deadly spikes flung up, and two impaled Marlon instantly. Her body hung for a moment, lifeless and limp.

Then the circular blades retracted, and she fell into the dark waters below.

Mere inches from where the spikes had been, Siray screamed.

Shock rippled through me, and I stumbled. I stopped just short of the end of the platform, heart thundering in my chest.

Myantha’s hands flew to her mouth.

Siray bolted the rest of the way to the square platform. Her foot caught on one of the boards as it snapped. She fell forward and clawed herself back up.

Another loud click sounded with a heavier, more final note. Then the entire maze started to shift, the boards lifting or falling and then reforming in a different order all

around the tower.

Leaping from the shifting walkway, Siray narrowly landed on the black square platform.

“Everything’s moving!” Velessa shouted, as if no one else was seeing what she saw.

The paths ahead and on the sides shifted, swirling in a mad cyclone faster and faster. The lilac-haired fae stood there, stunned.

“Hey, get back here!” I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted, “It’s moving! Come on!”

The path the lilac-haired woman was on collapsed, boards falling into the water like rain as others moved upward. She dropped with a scream, and the leeches descended upon her as soon as she hit the water.

My throat burned as bile inched upward.

The third path had even bigger gaps now, the floating segments too far apart to reach without jumping and now angled in a different direction.

Rhielle’s route was gone too, the connecting plank snapping like a twig as the entire section twisted away. Rhielle stood on the black platform several yards away, her eyes wide.

We didn’t have time to plan more. The massive leeches and crabs had already taken notice, pulsing through the water and toward our platform.

The first ones reached us quicker than I’d expected, curling upward and straining with their huge, toothed mouths.

“Feck!” Quen sent a fiery red blast at them but missed. She dropped to the ground and lay on her stomach, driving her elbows into the slick floor so the discs didn't weigh her down.

Calla Lily swallowed hard. “I have to try to get across.” She bolted down the middle path, arm up to shield her face, weaving through where the blades had taken Malron. The boards flexed under her feet. One cracked, but she didn't stop.

The leeches surged up the sides, thick bodies slapping against stone as they attacked our platform. Crabs followed, claws raised, their shells black and bruised. One scraped across the platform and snapped at Myantha. Quen torched it, and it recoiled with a hiss. The smell of burning shell hit fast. Yuki summoned up three large rocks and slammed it repeatedly, driving it back.

But several huge ass crabs seemed intent on me. The first crawled faster than I'd have thought possible, and my wolf surged forward. I waited until the last second and, just as the first one reached the top, I slammed my disc into the crab's face. The metal vibrated all through my arms and into my bones.

The crab jerked back, legs skittering. But another one was already crawling up, mouth open and ridges grinding. I braced again.

Beneath all of it, the clicks returned. Slow. Steady. Heavy.

I'd just swung my disc and knocked the second crab off the platform when Calla Lily screamed, “Help!”

I glanced up to find her in the center of the path she'd chosen, its the planks snapping under her.

She tried to jump to the next plank, but it broke upon impact. She dropped like a sack

of potatoes, but caught the broken edge of the hole in the bridge with both hands. Her legs kicked, feet slapping wood of the nearby structural reinforcements but unable to get a hold. “Please! I can’t hold much longer!”

Kaylen shot past us, barely touching the boards. Her steps made no sound.

I stared after her. Had the fallout with her friends made her want to change her tune? I couldn’t believe it, but—

Instead of stopping to help Calla Lily, Kaylen jumped over the broken planks and kept going.

That fucking bitch. I should’ve known better.

Hands slipping, Calla Lily hung on for dear life.

I gritted my teeth. There was no way I’d leave someone to die like that.

The platform sagged under my weight, and unlike Kaylen, my feet thudded against the wood. The planks splintered, revealing what poor shape the bridge was in. Still, I pushed forward, determined to save Calla Lily before it was too late.

Her fingers were barely holding the edge of the wood, and sweat beaded her brow. I reached the last plank, ignoring the way it creaked, and caught Calla Lily’s hand just as it slipped off the board.

My entire body strained as I tried lifting her, and I grunted. “Lock your hands on my arm.”

When her hands locked on my forearms, her weight pulled me forward. My heart seized as my feet scraped the planks, slipping. My skirts tangled around my legs. A



board behind me cracked loud and sharp. Something sliced my leg, then pain seared through me.

I leaned back and hauled hard.

Another crack shuddered through me. Then the clicks came faster. The spiked blades shot up again, the leftmost one grazing the side of my lower leg before I could slide it fully into the gap between the spikes. Agony shot through me as blood spilled down my boot, but I refused to let go.

I groaned and pulled Calla Lily out of the hole, and then I dragged her the last few feet until my back pressed against the wall of the starting platform.

The creatures below backed off and retreated from our platform. The water stilled again. But the ticking continued. Not loud. Just steady. But maybe a little faster than it had been.

For a second, we lay there, Calla Lily's hands still clinging to my forearms. I couldn't hear her breathing at first, but then she sobbed.

Once I realized Calla Lily was okay, the adrenaline wore off and the pain from my leg stole my breath. It was seeping blood from the scratch made by the blade. I needed to stop the bleeding so it wouldn't lure more predators toward us.

I ripped off one of my sleeves and sliced a strip from my dress. Ignoring the warm liquid, I wrapped the fabric tight around the wound and tied it off. My fingers were shaking, but I got it done.

Cold tendrils of fear choked me as I found the center path was shot. No support left. Most of the boards had started to tilt.

The right path wasn't much better. Gaps between platforms that would force us to do long jumps, which most of them couldn't do with all the extra weight we carried, especially since there was no margin for error.

I bit my lips, trying to find the answers and attempting to ignore the way my leg burned. The more time this trial took, the harder it would get. Would any of these pathways even be here in an hour if at least three others didn't get to the top of the tower?

Thalira drew up her blue water whips and came to the edge to peer down, wincing as she moved. She wasn't putting much weight on her foot, and it was clear that wielding water while off balance and with the discs had taken a toll on her.

"You have to go, Briar," she rasped, her arms dropping to her sides. "Ceana and Deallan have already gone after the others, but the likelihood of any of those empty minds other than Rhielle and Kaylen making it is low. We can hold out for now, but you're the most likely to get to the tower."

I shook my head. There was no way in hell I'd leave them. If I hadn't been here, I wouldn't have been able to save Calla Lily, and she'd be dead. If I left them and they died, that would be on me. I had to protect them. They were my fae pack. "I can't. It wouldn't be right." I straightened my shoulders, ready to fight.

Another horrified scream echoed through the air.

My blood iced over. Someone was in danger and most likely hurt.

### Chapter Eighteen

Briar

I spun toward the scream, the blood thundering in my ears. My fingers curled into fists. Someone was in imminent danger.

Mist curled from below, obscuring the water. I had no doubt it would soon cover us whole and make us struggle to even see each other.

I gritted my teeth, the heavy sluggish feel of hatred oozing through me. I despised this place, and I hoped like hell each observer got what was coming to them. My chest tugged, and I glanced up, but I couldn't see the royal family or the Council.

Thalira placed a hand on my arm, startling me.

“We'll protect everyone here. We can use our magic and can hold out for an hour. You need to go help—you can move faster than all of us. Please . They said that every three women who complete the challenge will lessen the attacks here. You can make that happen for us.”

Yuki pointed to the filthy waters below, though we couldn't see the creatures any longer as the mist was now filtering around us and thickening over the planks.

“Something lured them away, but we know they'll be back. Do you hear the clicking?”

“It’s hard to hear.” Velessa adjusted her hold on her discs. Myantha and Calla Lily both huddled close to Velessa and Yuki. The others tightened their circle, eyes wide but determined.

“Yeah, I hear it.” I gripped a handful of my hair, fighting to process all this. “It’s a little faster now. And the creatures stopped for no reason. It’s like they were called away. This trial isn’t to test ruthlessness. It’s for intelligence. So there’s probably a pattern.”

Another loud click sounded over the clacking and slooshing below, a stark reminder that we were running out of time. Too many had already died, and I was being torn in two, wanting to stay here and protect my allies, but realizing that leaving them might be the best way to do that.

The mist had thickened around the walkways now, obscuring the others’ positions... if they were even there. Who knew anymore.

I bit my lip as the scream echoed in my head. Someone might be in danger, which made the decision for me.

I needed to leave. And this damn skirt was going to be a problem with all its layers and weight.

I hoisted the front of the green dress up past my knees. I needed to gird my loins. I gathered the skirt in front with the cold wind whipping under the backside to my butt. Not wanting to flash anyone behind, I pulled the front fabric I gathered between my legs and held with both in the back. Dividing the material equally in both hands, I wrapped it around my waist, tying it in a bow. Thank Fate, the pockets were still usable.

“What are you doing?” Quen raised an eyebrow.

“I girded my loins,” I replied. “It’ll prevent the skirt from tangling my legs as I jump.”

“Well, that’s gonna make things easier. Well played, beast girl.”

I drew in a deep breath and straightened my shoulders. “Don’t let anyone here die. As soon as I complete the trial, I’ll come back for you.”

Thalira nodded. “We’ll do what we can here. Hurry.”

Of the paths that were still available, the one with the gaps that angled to the right of the nearest platform was the best choice, even if jumping was going to be a bitch. My feet slapped the slick stone, causing my soles to sting. I could make out only a faint outline of the path, and I hoped to hell my wolf wouldn’t let me down.

I struck the first plank of the walkway and swung my arms for balance. The discs jerked me forward so that my weight went to my toes. My body tilted over the edge, but I thrust my arms back and caught myself before I could fall.

The world tilted, and my stomach swooped as the moldy wood groaned beneath me.

Another heavy, steady, mechanical click of the course followed. My muscles tightened, and the hairs on my body prickled.

Even though I couldn’t see the water, I could hear splashing, as if the creatures were moving closer.

The putrid smell of decay burned the insides of my nostrils as I squatted and studied the longer planked walkway ahead of me. All the planks were connected, but some of them had struts underneath with cross sections of wood or stone to help support them. Others did not. The farther I got from the original platform, the fewer supports there

were. Kaylen had leaped over some spots. She must have known somehow.

Taking a shaky breath, I jumped onto the first reinforced plank. There were six more sections before the relative safety of that next square black platform.

Another click reminded me that each second I delayed made the trial riskier for my friends.

Gritting my teeth, I aimed for the next supported spot. My side ached, and the scratch on my leg burned, but things could be a lot worse. I had to remember that. I focused on the task ahead and jumped over the weakest portion of the walkway and hurried to the next one.

Another click , another leap.

My lungs burned, and my wolf surged forward with renewed energy, urging me on. If I could get to the next safe spot, then I could—

A deeper and more sinister click echoed throughout the space.

Down below, chaos surged. Glistening eyes peered up through the mist, stalking me just beneath the cracks in the boards.

“Shit!” I jumped to the next section, and as soon my foot touched, several of the boards cracked like ice. My heart dropped. I was about to fall.

Unable to see and definitely not wanting to fight on the planked bridge, I leaped the next gap, drawing the thin air into my lungs.

A massive leech, longer than my body, slithered onto the left side of the walkway slightly in front of me. It curled and snapped its teeth. The smell of rot and decay hit

me hard. I swung my arm wide and hit its thick, fleshy body with the disc, the impact vibrating through my arm. The ridges of its mouth were already too close for comfort, and I swung the other disc, forcing the leech to slither back some, but not enough.

My leg screamed, but I had to move. More would be coming. I punched forward, aiming the disc at the leech's mouth and smashing into it.

It shrieked, a high-pitched keening sound, and fell over the edge. I heard the splash, but before I could even take a deep breath, there was yet another click .

A swarm of black-green crabs, claws raised and shells clattering, swarmed over the spot in front of me and scrambled across the wood. One caught the toe of my shoe and pinched, the pain sharp and sudden. I gasped and yanked my foot back, then kicked it away, and faced the next platform. I made the last jump before the crabs could attack me again.

The board splintered beneath my feet, but I leaped. The discs slammed into my sides, bruising and striking me as I crashed onto the stone. I yelped as I rolled to the center of the black platform, gasping in relief.

I pressed my hand against my injured leg. Warmth blood had soaked through the material, but the bandage was still secure. My head was spinning, but I was alive. And all my limbs were still attached. For now.

The crabs and leeches fell back once more, and the smell of rot lessened. I strained my ears, and the clicks continued, steady and mechanical.

The mist thinned, and more screams from the starting platform filled the air, followed by a few in the distance within the mist.

I turned to see the faint misty silhouettes of my friends on the starting platform

battling their asses off. The crabs and leeches were attacking them in full force, but the group held tight. Thalira's water whips lashed out, wrapped around a leech, and flung it back. Velessa clutched her discs to her chest as she kicked at one of the crabs and drove it back, and Calla Lily delivered a powerful strike from a stone block straight into its head. Quen threw herself to the ground and sent a fiery blast out that hit three leeches at once. Their flesh sizzled, and they slid down the square platform. For now, they were holding their own.

Thank Fate. A sob built in my chest, but I held it back. I had to remain level-headed and survive.

More mist curled around the paths, and the maze shifted once more.

I turned my back to my friends and scanned the routes available.

Suddenly a massive claw slammed down on my stone platform, and I leaped back, barely avoiding the blow.

A bull-sized lobster hauled itself up over the edge and bore down on me with its claws snapping. Its shell was thick and black, and its beady eyes met mine.

I ducked and rolled as the sickening snap of its claw missed me by inches.

The maze shifted, and it was exactly as the old reaper had said. He was going to make sure as many of us died as possible.

My wolf growled, urging me on, but I was dizzy. I hit the edge of the stone platform, then turned to face the massive lobster. It lunged forward, claws open.

I dropped to my knees and rolled under it, then sprang onto the nearest wooden walkway without noting the direction. Blood dripped down my leg, and I staggered,



but caught my balance once more. The damn discs kept throwing me off.

I peered as far along the walkway as I could, noting the points where it was reinforced and wasn't.

The temperature dropped rapidly.

Another loud click . The creatures fell back, and the routes changed. The boards under my feet vibrated.

Panic surged through me. The next platform was several yards away. I sprang forward just as the boards started to lift and twist beneath me, and I lunged and swung my arms to create momentum. My feet clipped one of the boards, and I lurched ahead.

My breath ripped from me, and I fell.

My fingers caught the edge of the stone platform, and the harsh scent of rot and metal filled my lungs. The momentum of my fall nearly pulled me off, and I scrabbled for a hold. My legs kicked as I tried to swing them up, but I couldn't get a foothold.

I refused to let go.

Taking a deep calming breath, I hauled myself up inch by inch, the discs making it even harder.

Finally I dragged myself onto the platform and rolled onto my back, chest heaving, pain flashing white-hot through my arms and fingers. The world narrowed to a dark blur, and I listened intently for signs of an attacker.

It was quiet. The huge lobster was gone.

My head spun, and I wasn't sure if it was from blood loss or the ever-changing maze.

I staggered upright. My body ached, and I felt woozy, but I couldn't stay here. I had to keep moving and reach the end. I had to make sure the others survived.

The cold air burned my throat, but it helped me focus on something other than the agony in my leg. The boards moved into a new position and the thick mist obscured my path, but the tower loomed above it, closer than before.

A little bit of hope blossomed in my chest.

The stinking mist coiled around me like it was trying to choke me, and another piercing shriek echoed in the distance.

Rhielle. She had to be in trouble.

Pushing all discomfort from my mind, I forced myself to continue. The loudest clicks signaled transitions to the monster attacks and the shifting of the platforms. I was sure of it.

The route twisted and turned, and more boards rose and fell around me, but I could see the pattern. I could hear it. I could feel it.

The sound pulsed under my skin as I leaped to the next section, pushing myself harder. I had to find Rhielle.

Two more platforms, and I'd reach the tower, if I could make it that far. No. No if. I had to.

I sprang to the next plank, and the wood splintered beneath my feet. I swung my arms to keep my balance, and once again the discs nearly pulled me over. Just as I regained

my balance, a massive leech, bigger than a wolf, struck from below. Its body slicked the wood as it wriggled toward me. A huge ring of teeth flashed in its open mouth.

I nearly froze, but I had no time to waste. I needed it to leave me alone.

“Fuck you, get back!” I threw both arms forward, the discs vibrating as they struck its body. I swung again, and the leech shrieked out a high-pitched wail. One disc squelched through its mouth, and teeth scattered across the wood as the leech fell.

I leaped past it, heart pounding. Adrenaline pumped through my body, helping keep the pain at bay, though my legs were becoming increasingly weighed down. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could push myself this way. My hips and thighs ached, but I tightened my core and launched myself onto the next platform, and then kept going down yet another path toward the tower.

Landing on stone, I rolled to the center of the final black platform. My breath came in ragged, shallow pants, but I forced myself to stand and stagger forward. I adjusted the straps on my wrists where the leather had bit in deep, and noticed my skin had been chafed raw. Beneath the sheer sleeves of the dress, numerous bruises marked my arms, but I’d made it. The cold gray tower stretched above me, massive and daunting. I didn’t see any enemies or threats.

I dragged myself through a massive archway and into the tower. The air was somehow more damp, cold, thick, and horrid inside.

Eight columns took up the circular path to the roof. Kaylen had climbed the column straight across from me in front of another archway. She was about five feet from the top but seemed to be stuck and struggling. Ceana and Deallan were on columns flanking her, Deallan about a foot shy of Kaylen, and Ceana only halfway up.

Someone groaned, and I jerked around and found a pale Rhielle, leaning against the

stone wall, clutching her ankle and breathing with rapid gasps. Her ankle was swollen and purple with an odd series of bloody grooves down one side. Dark veins snaked up from the wounds toward her thigh. Clearly she couldn't climb.

My heart skipped a beat.

“What are you doing?” Rhielle's rasped. The bright pink of her eyes had dimmed, and her beautiful hair was snarled and matted with slime and ichor, as if one of the leeches had rolled over her.

She lifted her chin toward the ceiling. “Get your ass up there, Briar! Don't let that bitch be the first to win.”

### Chapter Nineteen

Briar

I shook my head and rushed to Rhielle's side. "No. Let me help—"

"Go!" She tried to shove me away, but it was barely a tap. "I can protect myself, I promise, but the other girls are in more danger than me."

My heart twisted at the thought of leaving her, but she was right. We needed to slow down the fucking labyrinth. "Fine, but I'm coming back for you. Just hold on."

I turned my gaze upward, examining the columns. They rose easily twenty feet, if not more, to a wide ledge similar to the flooring, which ran the perimeter of the top of the tower like a rooftop landing with open air in the center.

My heart sank. We had to climb up there with these fucking discs and in a heavy dress. At every turn, the Council members and Fate seemed even more monstrous than before.

Kaylen's silver eyes met mine. Her face was slick with sweat as she clung to her column. She seemed stuck. Ceana was still moving slowly, her hand tapping each section before she inched higher. Deallan's limbs jerked with impatience as she yanked herself upward, her eyes burning bright with determination.

The discs hung from their wrists, dragging them down and making them struggle to climb upwards.

There had to be some sort of trick to it that would prove our smarts. With the weighted dresses and the discs, climbing would be hard enough. I skirted the floor ledge, careful to stay away from the pit in the middle, to the column on the other side of Deallan and looked. The columns were about two feet apart from each other, with about a three-inch gap between the tower floor ledge and each column, but the giant hole they circled would be deadly to fall into. Sure enough, crabs, leeches, and lobsters milled about below in the watery pit, squelching and disgusting. Below the floor ledge, the columns shone with something sleek and greasy.

My leg throbbed in sync with my racing pulse, and my mind hazed.

Shaking my head, I glanced at the columns again. Something was off.

“Be careful.” Rhielle’s words were strained. “The columns bite.”

“What?” I narrowed my eyes, taking in the gray, coarse surface. The column appeared thick with a strange scalelike texture carved into the stone, but I couldn’t see any hints of a mouth.

The mechanical click sounded again, even deeper than the last. My skin prickled, and I staggered back in horror as four or five mouths opened at irregular intervals along each column, showing off needle-sharp teeth that hooked inward.

Kaylen screamed, but she held tight. Her body swung wildly, and she barely regained her footing as she moved to the side of a mouth. Ceana shrieked and clung to her column. Her movements were frantic as she dodged the biting mouths. Deallan wasn’t so lucky. She cried out as one of the mouths caught her hand. “Let go!” she howled as blood gushed from the mouth, which loosened just enough to draw in more of her hand. The crunch of bone made my stomach heave.

She needed help, and Kaylen and Ceana were screaming.

Heartbeat pounding in my ears, I grabbed the leather straps at my sides and braced one of my shoulders against the column I'd chosen, then swung my discs around opposite sides of the pillar in a fast arc. The metal clanged as the two discs twisted together on the other side of the column and locked into place through the tension of the leather. I jerked the straps tight and used them for leverage to haul myself upward, like a makeshift tree-climbing belt.

The leather had enough length for me to lean back and brace my feet against the column as well. The column's surface scratched at my wrists and forearms, and the scaly stone grated against my feet as I climbed.

A horrible thought occurred to me. How the hell do I avoid the mouths?

The discs couldn't be removed until the trial was over or I completed it, so hopefully that meant the mouths couldn't bite through the leather straps. If I could avoid sticking my foot in one, maybe I'd be okay.

I inched toward the nearest mouth, its lips peeling back to reveal the fishhook-like line of curved teeth. My breath hitched. Those teeth didn't just bite—they caught. If I yanked away, they'd shred me. "Hold on, Deallan!"

The discs creaked as I leaned my weight into the climb and searched for traction with my feet. The mouth was now a foot away and moving toward me again, grinding against the stone as it opened wider, hungry.

How the fuck were they moving? It had to be some sort of freaky-ass fae magic.

Above me, Deallan screamed, driving me to climb faster.

My hearing tunneled as a wet snap rang through the tower.

Deallan's entire hand was crushed between those horrible teeth. Blood sprayed her column, splattering in a violent arc.

I was still a few feet short of reaching her, but I lunged upward, discs scraping the stone as I shifted my weight. I braced one foot as best I could and tried to reach out to her with the other. "Grab my foot, Deallan!"

Deallan lost her grip on the column and pitched backward. She hovered in midair, one arm handless, blood trailing behind her like a ribbon. Then she fell straight down, grabbing for my foot but missing.

Her scream cut off as she splashed into the pit.

The water erupted, thick with sludge and rot, and creatures surged over her. Leeches wriggled like black ribbons around her limbs. Crabs climbed her torso, snapping and tearing. The water churned, red blooming through the mist as her body thrashed once—then stopped.

I clung to my column, bile rising in my throat, the slick of sweat and blood on my palms threatening my grip. My leg pulsed with every heartbeat, pain growing stronger with each second. Tears ran down my cheeks, and I had to force myself to look away.

Another person I'd failed.

A mouth groaned open beside me. I shifted higher, muscles shaking, the discs slipping slightly. The leather bit into my fingers, but I adjusted the tension and kept moving.

One mistake, and I'd join her.



I climbed, shifting the straps higher inch by inch. Strain crept into my limbs like rot, causing each movement to hurt worse than the last. The discs groaned under my weight, and the stone raked against my skin, leaving raw red marks behind.

Ceana clung to her column, frozen. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. Her gaze remained locked on the pit below, where Deallan had fallen to her death.

A lump formed in my throat. “Keep moving!”

Her fingers barely twitched. I couldn’t reach her from here. If she didn’t snap out of it soon, she was going to die.

“Briar,” Kaylen called. Her voice was barely audible from above. “You shouldn’t keep going. The crabs and leeches will attack again soon, and Rhielle is helpless over there. You need to protect her. Do you want one of your friends to die when you could save her?”

A hard knot formed in my stomach. Kaylen was right. I shouldn’t have left Rhielle.

“Feck off, bitch!” Rhielle’s face reddened with anger. “Briar, if you come get me and let Kaylen finish first, I’ll kill you myself!”

That lit something in my blood. She was right. Kaylen was manipulating me, and worse, I was letting her.

My wolf surged. Hot. Focused. Wild.

I bared my teeth and moved the discs up the other side of the column again, aiming to position the leather strap across one of the gnashing mouths. It gaped, already twisting toward me. I jerked the strap tight and pressed my leg against the anchored discs, climbing with every scrap of force I had left.

The mouth chomped, gnawed, and gagged on the leather, its teeth clacking uselessly against the strap. It couldn't hook on. Couldn't pull me in.

My heart started beating again, and I kept going.

I climbed fast enough that the mouth couldn't catch my foot, the strain setting my limbs on fire. My dress clung to me from blood and sweat, and one of my sides screamed with each movement. The scent of blood, sweat, and mold thickened, and my hands slipped.

Pulse racing, I caught myself and forced myself to climb higher. My breath came in tight gulps.

And before I realized it, I was at the top. The column ended smoothly.

I hauled myself up, barely getting one elbow up before the discs bit into my side, and I flopped onto the top ledge. But I couldn't stop. Not yet. I had to do something else with these discs.

The top of the tower spread out around me. The circular, flat landing had thirteen tall circular stone containers set next to the wall around the outermost edge. Each container was marked with an emblem carved deep into the surface, one of the symbols that had been etched on our discs on display, glowing faintly against the cloudy sky. My gaze landed on a butterfly with flames for wings.

My tattoo—and the symbol on my discs.

Something writhed on top of each container, shifting in patterns like ripples on stone. The movement barely registered at first, but as I stepped closer, my vision sharpened.

Vipers. Dark-scaled, their bodies blending into the stone so well they'd be invisible if

not for the glint of their eyes.

I froze as one of the vipers flicked its thin ruby tongue, tasting the air. If these snakes were like our vipers back home, they would strike at any sudden movement or if they sensed fear. We stayed away from vipers even in wolf form because they were unpredictable, but I didn't have that option here.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself, and trying to focus on the task and not my injuries. Then I locked eyes on the closest container. My breath slowed.

No jerks. No panic. I walked forward with steady, measured steps, each one anchored with control. Confidence—not speed—was my best shield.

The discs pressed against my sides, heavy and cold. I stepped into place before the container marked with my emblem. The slit waited, with no sign of what might be inside or how I was going to get the leather straps off. My skin buzzed. The snakes didn't move.

Not yet.

I bent slowly, guiding a disc toward the opening. My fingers brushed the rim. The nearest viper's tongue flicked again.

Then I slid them in, first one, then the other. For a moment, the tension on my wrists tightened, then the leather straps dissolved. The discs disappeared with a satisfying shoonk .

A sharp crack split the air, and I forced myself not to flinch so the vipers wouldn't attack.

Light flared up the stone, and a burst of heat rushed against my face. The scent of

cinnamon and smoke hit me like a punch. The container shimmered, shifting from dull gray to copper. The vipers retreated, their coils tightening before they slithered backward and vanished into more slits along the top.

The entire tower groaned beneath my feet, and I could only pray that meant both that I had finished and that the labyrinth had calmed.

Another deep, grinding click reverberated from below.

I slowly kneeled on the ledge as the vipers slithered away and spun, sprinting back to the column's edge. Kaylen had managed to climb a few more feet. Her limbs trembled under her weight, her progress stalled.

Ceana hadn't moved at all, stuck in the exact same position as I'd last seen her.

I yanked at the gown tangled around my legs, tearing off multiple layers of the skirt in one pull. My body lightened, and with the thicker layers gone, the air hit my skin like ice. I stood in my small clothes, soaked through with sweat and blood. No time for modesty, not that I'd had any since the last trial.

I crouched and ripped the fabric into long strips, then knotted them one by one into a rope. I tied the makeshift rope to the top of the nearest column in a constrictor knot. The stone tugged at the edges of the fabric as I lowered the rope. I didn't see any moving mouths, but I needed to hurry before they appeared once more.

"What's wrong with you? You're a fecking abomination!" Kaylen's nose wrinkled in disgust. Sweat beaded her face and soaked her ruined dress.

Even when she could ask for help, she'd rather insult me. I snorted and didn't waste my breath replying. I climbed down the rope, wrapping the fabric around my forearm to slow my descent. The knots slipped fast, the fabric fraying on the rough stone.

Getting down was far easier than going up, and soon my feet slammed onto the lower platform.

Rhielle stared at me, blood on her lips. “What the feck are you thinking? Why are you down here?”

I dropped to one knee beside her. “I’m making sure you can keep your promise. But you have to help me so we both stay alive.” I leaned in, gripping her good arm. “You’re still going to beat Kaylen.”

A crooked grin broke across her face, sharp with pain but fierce. “Damn right, I am. Let’s do this.”

I helped her up, steadying her weight against me. Together, we limped toward the nearest column. Despite her limp, Rhielle’s feet barely dragged.

I pressed my back to the column and braced her body with mine. “Your turn.” Quickly, I explained about the vipers at the top.

She nodded and swung her discs around the column. The metal locked in place with a satisfying clang.

I turned to face the column and stepped in close, positioning myself between her arms. Then I crouched and hoisted her up in an awkward piggyback hold, her weight unbalanced but bearable. My legs strained and wanted to buckle as her arms locked around my waist. Her legs hugged my sides, trembling but strong enough to hold.

“Don’t let go.” I took in a ragged breath, already feeling the strain from her weight.

“Don’t plan to,” she gritted out.

Then together, we climbed.

The straps strained under our weight, but they held. We levered ourselves upward, inch by inch. Rhielle's breath shuddered against my neck, and my legs burned as my wound bled more. Every movement pulled at my injuries, and no doubt hers as well.

But we both were determined not to stop.

Working together was easier than I would have thought possible. My muscles trembled from the strain, but Rhielle clung tight. Each foot braced against the stone while each shift of weight got us closer to the top. Her breath puffed hot against my neck, uneven but steady.

The straps creaked but held.

Inch by inch, we reached the top.

Kaylen mumbled stuff, but I didn't have the energy to spare to listen. Most likely, she was pissed that I was going to beat her twice. A smile tugged at the corners of my lips, but I was too tired to lift them. Every bit of energy had to be saved until Rhielle finished too.

I hauled us up with one last shove. My knees hit stone, and I fell forward, dragging Rhielle with me until we collapsed on the platform. The cloudy sky blurred in my vision, and for a second, I just breathed.

Then I forced myself to my feet.

Rhielle grunted as I lifted her again, hooking one arm under her legs and the other around her back. Slowly, minding the vipers, I carried her around the ring to the container with the shadowed panther, muscles sleek, eyes sharp, etched in obsidian.

Her emblem.

Kaylen finally reached the top of her own column. Her face was greasy with sweat, and her legs trembled.

“Move slowly, and don’t be scared of them,” I reminded Rhielle and set her down in front of her container.

“I’m too injured to be scared,” she hissed as she very carefully guided the discs into the slit. Her fingers trembled as the snakes licked the air. The metal sank in with a soft snick, and her leathers fell from her wrists.

A burst of violet light surged around her container.

The air filled with the scent of lavender and ripe plums. Warm and sharp. Familiar and defiant.

Rhielle’s eyes widened, and she laughed. Her head tilted toward Kaylen.

“Eat shit,” she said, grinning through the pain.

The mechanical click sounded again, deep and final.

Kaylen snarled and shoved herself over the ledge. “You think that means anything?” She dragged herself toward her own container, fury etched in every step. “You’re both still scaffing abominations.”

She slammed her discs into the slot, and the tower shuddered.

The snake on top of her container coiled tight. Kaylen didn’t notice...and it struck.

Its fangs dug deep into her face, and she screamed bloody murder.

My stomach lurched, and I had to look away. Even if I hated her, no one deserved that sort of pain.

The sound tore through the platform as she stumbled backward, hands flying to the wound. Blood poured from beneath her eye as the snake retreated back into the stone like smoke.

Another loud, ground-shaking metallic click rang and settled deep into my bones, making my teeth chatter. There was a grinding noise, like a machine stopping, and the world disappeared from under our feet.



### Chapter Twenty

Vad

The gray stone walls closed in on me as I watched Briar once again lift Rhielle so the fae could slide her discs into her container. The leathers fell from Rhielle's hands. My own hands clamped onto the stone table that held three crystal seeing-orbs showing three different points of the labyrinth.

My veins burned with rage that intensified with each second, and my entire concentration homed in on the orb that made it possible to view Briar. My wings were spread wide, tense beside me. I could feel Silus's disapproval, but I didn't give a feck. He could go jump in the void.

Every ounce of my control was consumed by forcing myself to remain in this safe, protected room in the palace, watching the woman who'd captivated me fight for not only her life but the lives of others. I should be beside her, protecting her and shunning Fate for this abomination of a competition.

At this point, there was no denying my feelings, inexplicable and frankly impossible as they were. Within mere days, this strange, human beast-woman had barged into my life and made me question every choice I'd made. Watching Briar almost die so many damn times had made my feelings clear.

Elara stood next to me, and the tip of my wing curled around her. She glanced at me with a concerned expression, but thankfully, Father was engrossed in the trial itself, a deep-set scowl upon his face.

At least, we agreed the trials were utterly barbaric.

“I wish you would’ve allowed us to eat and drink this time.” Thalen edged around the table to Briar’s orb, though his attention seemed to flicker to another orb where the woman with honey-gold locs kept appearing, even though she was still on the starting platform. He pointed at Briar. “I feel drained and famished just watching my girl.”

My girl . I snarled, wanting to choke the airy bastard.

Thalen glanced at me with a wicked grin. “What’s wrong, Vad? Did I say something that upset you?”

“Enough, Thalen,” Silus warned, snagging him by the arm and dragging him behind Father, Elara, and me again.

“Rhielle already behaves like a queen,” one of the Shadow Council members stated. “She’s injured and yet finished second in the entire competition. She keeps finding ways to outshine the others while appearing regal.”

My hands fisted. I wanted to punch the scaffing life out of him. The only reason Rhielle had finished at all was because of Briar, but they were diminishing Briar and her sacrifices. What was wrong with these councilors?

An Aureline Council member gestured to the same orb. “But she succeeded only because she received aid. Look at Kaylen. She embodied true cleverness and resilience. No one helped her. She showed discretion in her interactions with the others as well.”

Kaylen jumped over the top of the column and raced to her container. I needed her to put her fucking discs in. Not because I wanted her to be one of the winners but because I needed this trial finished so I could get to Briar. As soon as Kaylen slid in

her discs, the snake on top of her container attacked her, and an explosion went off. I turned and marched to the door with as controlled a stride as possible.

“Prince V—” one of the council members called, but I ignored them. I had stood there during the entire trial, listening to them insult Briar and praise the others without saying a word. The trial was over, and so was my obligation to them for the time being.

Hands fisted at my sides, I raced to the Ascension Hall, my mind spinning. My heart pounded and my legs grew heavy, so I flew the rest of the way there.

The guards were just opening the doors to the hall when I reached them. I thrust by and finished shoving them open, the edges catching on my bracers. My bristling wings clipped the door, but none of that mattered. The damn tugging took hold.

Aching need pulsed through me, underscored with desperation. Where is she?

Everything blurred in a haze of black and gold walls as I scanned the gathered women. Soft murmurs of surprise from the platform indicated the councilors were gathering there. They probably weren't pleased with my arrival on the hall floor. But as far as I was concerned, they could jump into the scaffing pit of leeches themselves if they disapproved so much.

Kaylen clutched her face, still wailing from her well-deserved snakebite. Ceanahunched in the back of the group, her deep violet hair hanging in stringy sweaty strands and sticking to her face, while Siray pointedly avoided looking at anyone, her burgundy dress ragged and soaked with slime.

The rest had gathered together in the center, most of them sitting or crouching. Briar's little group that she'd fought for and protected gathered around her. And my heart damn near lurched from my chest.

There Briar was, sitting with her legs apart and the ragged pieces of her dress skirt tied around her thighs, her shoulders slumped as if she wanted to collapse on the floor. A filthy makeshift bandage wrapped around her lower leg had turned all shades of green, black, and brown, with some shades of crimson from fresh blood. She was pale and bruised, with glistening raw patches on her wrists from the leather straps of the discs.

My rage burned hotter. How dare those scratches and bruises mar her beautiful porcelain skin. The desire to fall to my knees and kiss each one filled me, but there was no justification I could offer for that.

The women in the group scattered or drew back as I approached, and Briar's eyes widened.

I knelt beside her and lifted her ankle to inspect the wound on her leg. As soon as our skin touched, a jolt of energy cut through me and vibrated into my bones. An urge to take a guard's sword and kill the councilors filled me, but that would result in all of Nytharia turning against us.

My vision blurred, and I blinked. Scaffing void, had there ever been a more beautiful leg and ankle that had been forced to endure such suffering? Hatred boiled in my soul that Fate would ever ask her to endure these trials to prove she was worthy. There was no doubt she was the most worthy to stand at my side, and I'd prove to her that I was worthy of her affection.

"How badly does it hurt, Briar?" I rasped, my throat thick with emotion and all the things I wanted to say but couldn't.

Her full lips parted, and her delicate tongue darted over them. My blood heated to a fever, urging me to kiss her here right against the shadow-beast sigil. The awkwardness of our position and some shred of sanity held me in place though. I

cradled her ankle in one palm and rested the other beneath her calf, my fingers carefully positioned to not touch any of the redness on the bandage where the wound was likely situated.

“I’m fine.” She started to draw her leg back, her toes curling as she wriggled. But she didn’t fully pull away.

“The physician will look you over now. Can you walk?”

“What?” Her head tipped back, her eyes brightening even through what had to be such horrid pain. “Why, are you going to carry me?”

“If necessary, yes.” I forced the words out. Of course I would. I’d snatch her up and hold her close right now if it wouldn’t make her even more of a target. That little sane part of my brain desperately begged me not to listen to the heated arousal that suggested we could just go somewhere private right now.

Leather boots squeaked on the polished marble floor behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder to see that the physicians had arrived.

I growled. I hated that they were going to touch her and see her this way. Only I should be allowed to touch this woman. The idea of their hands on her had my vision darkening at the sides, the urge to murder them overwhelming me once again.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my irrational thoughts. I couldn’t stitch her wounds, nor did I know what herbs would best aid her healing. I released her leg and nodded toward it, encouraging the now-scared-looking attendant beside her to do his job. For good measure I shot him a firm glare before focusing once more on Briar and trying not to look at those beautiful thighs.

Feck. A groan built deep in my chest, coiling through me to my core and beyond. The

things I could do at a similar angle. She could sit on the desk in my observatory, and I could—I—I had to compose myself. Still kneeling, I dragged my attention to Rhielle. She was watching me with an arched eyebrow and a smirk on her face similar enough to Thalen's that I wanted to smack her.

"Rhielle." I nodded.

"Mm hmm?" She tilted her chin up, that eyebrow still lifted. She sat in a similar position to Briar, one leg extended and her head high. Her hair was plastered to her head, filthy and matted, and the bandage around her throat had gone green. But she looked like a cat who'd caught a snake, and I knew why. The image of her and Briar working their way up the column with Rhielle on Briar's back flashed into my mind, including them passing Kaylen, and the sheer shock on that vicious harpy's face. If I hadn't been so worried, I'd have wanted to laugh with Rhielle and Briar about how Briar had helped her reach the end.

Rhielle reached out a hand, a couple of her nails torn and bloodied, and placed it over Briar's. "I don't know if you're aware, but the only reason I'm here is because of Briar. She was exceptionally clever, and I am honored to call her friend."

Briar's face twitched at that, more wetness forming in her eyes. Her smile tugged higher.

"I'm aware." The words were like sandpaper against my throat, making it even harder to fight the urge to focus fully on Briar.

A low choked laugh sounded behind me, alerting me to Thalen's presence. Silus was likely beside him, probably staring in stoic disapproval.

"You need the physician's attention too." I gestured to Rhielle's ankle. "That venom looks to be traveling quickly."

“Well, it’s certainly traveling faster than I’d like.” Rhielle lifted her ragged blue dress, exposing her thigh. Long dark veins snaked and branched up from her ankle past her knee to at least the middle of her thigh. Probably higher, though she stopped lifting the dirty blue fabric.

“Hm.” I tilted my head, trying to focus and not imagine seeing Briar’s thighs again. Especially in this position.

Briar stiffened and leaned forward, lifting a hand. Then she scowled and drew back. Her nose wrinkled in the most adorable little frown, and my heart leapt. Was she jealous?

Some part of me calmed as I studied Briar in my periphery and continued to speak to Rhielle, hiding the small smile that wanted to pull free. “I’m sure Physician Karu will have some herbs to ease your pain and also stop the venom. She is one of the most skilled in the Shadow Kingdom.”

Physician Morlo would be looking over Briar. He was the best of all the physicians and the one my family most favored and trusted. Elara had already ensured that he tended to Briar yesterday.

The nervous gray- robed healing attendant edged closer to Briar. I gave him a warning look to make it clear that, if he so much as thought about enjoying touching her, I would rip his spine out. And I’d do the same if he failed to treat her properly as well.

I stood and held my hand out to Briar. For a moment, she simply stared, then she slipped her hand into mine. The most delightful warmth spread up my arm and filled me, and it took so much strength not to tug her all the way into my arms and kiss that sweet face of hers. Instead, I helped her stand and steadied her. My one hand fell to her hip, the curve fitting my palm perfectly.

Neither of the councils favored her, but I wanted her. That wasn't the liquor talking either, though I'd give anything right now to have her tucked away with me in my observatory, sharing a large glass of night brandy or moon wine as I told her I chose her. Above all the others, I chose her.

Elara cleared her throat softly behind me. I looked back and saw her smiling and Silus scowling. Thalen was nowhere to be seen.

I frowned, but Elara made a small gesture toward the physician's attendant and said, "If Briar is to be ready for the ball tonight, we should let her visit the physician, should we not?"

Sometimes, the way she asked such obvious questions made me just want to contradict her. No, we should not let the physician see her. We should let her stay with me. But I was a prince. And I didn't want Briar to suffer. Some healing potions and salves as well as red tea and whatever other herbal solutions the physician had would give her comfort.

Reluctantly, I released her hand. The attendant bowed his head, his long ash braid sliding over his shoulder. "Can you walk, miss?"

If she couldn't, I would carry her. I stepped closer, my wings tensing.

Briar shook her head, then cut her eyes up at me. "I can walk. Lead the way." She rose and followed the attendant, her steps slow but surprisingly steady.

I cast my gaze around the chamber and tried to orient myself. Silus was still beside Elara, his face a blank mask. And—

A sharp yelp cut through the heavy air, causing me to turn.



Myantha staggered to her feet, seeming to have tripped, her ragged pink and red skirt tangled around her golden-brown legs. Thalen stood beside her, his hand at her elbow as he helped her stand. He said something to her in a tone so soft I didn't catch it, and she turned her arm over to show some of the stings and bruises. Whatever he said in response made her blush and duck her head. Oh. This was a delightful twist. There were so many ways I could get even if this was going where it seemed to be.

Before I could speak, Kaylen crossed to me, clearly desiring attention and feeling she deserved it as she was one of the three winners. "Your Highness." Her now unbound wings fluttered as she tipped her head. A yellow fluid on her cheek had already seeped beneath the crude temporary bandage. "I am honored to be among the three chosen to dance with you at the ball. If I might be so bold, I know the perfect song. 'Waltz of the Moonlit Wings.' It's a special song among the Sylvan Fae."

I pressed my lips into a tight line. That song was easily ten minutes long and could be made even longer. It was traditionally played as the third song in the lineup if the king did not open with a dance with one of the contestants. "No. The songs have already been chosen, and you will receive the first dance."

Her brow furrowed. "The first?" Her mouth pinched. She understood the first dance was the shortest, and its sole purpose was to indicate that the ball was beginning in full and that the attendees should begin to pay attention.

"The first." I canted my head, my voice hard and with enough authority that she would not dare to question me. "And I recommend that you see the physician soon for that bite, or else the venom will leave you with a nasty scar. It would be a shame for your one good feature to be so ruined."

Her face twisted, and a look of pure hate and venom sparked in her silver eyes. She dipped her head forward though and said, "As you say, Your Highness."

An uneasy sensation coiled within me, warning me yet again that this woman was not to be trusted.

### Chapter Twenty-One

#### Briar

My body ached so much I could've easily burst into flames. The stone mug of red tea in my hands nearly splashed over the edge as I walked into my room and leaned back against the door. I had all sorts of paste on me. Physician Morlo had treated me and told me to return to my room and bathe for thirty minutes while drinking all the contents in the mug.

I placed the mug beside the basin and returned to the door to shove the nightstand back in front of it so no one could get in without me knowing. My arms ached and my legs burned, and I only managed to put it on the side, but I would still have enough of a warning.

Eagerly, I filled the basin and found a gown in the dresser across from the bed. It was silky and thin, intended as pajamas, and it stuck to the paste, but it beat being naked until the bath was ready. After a few minutes, I decided I didn't want to wait any more and stepped into the steamy water as the basin continued to fill. The crimson water lapped at my legs and rose higher as I took a sip of the nutty herbal tea and laid my head back to try to relax for a bit.

The whole trial had been awful, but at least every one of my friends had made it. Still, the most pressing thought on my mind was how the prince had come to me. I could've sworn he'd been concerned, but I had been the first to win. He'd checked on Rhielle and even Kaylen when I was leaving. That was the order we'd finished in.

I wasn't special to him, and I didn't need to fool myself otherwise. Besides, he'd checked Rhielle's leg too.

The pit in my stomach deepened, and my wolf growled at the memory of his eyes on her wound. My fingers flexed over the edge of the slick basin, my knuckles blanching. The urge to rip her throat out surged through me once more.

I held my breath and submerged my entire body underwater, needing help to clear the awful thoughts in my head, and for the heat to cover my whole body. Seeing his eyes on her had had my pulse racing, and I didn't know what the hell was wrong with me. I stayed under until my lungs screamed; then I lifted my head and allowed the cold air to assault my face.

Taking in ragged breaths as my survival instincts kicked in, I forced myself to relax. Rhielle was my friend, and she'd needed tending to, the same as me. Hell, she'd needed more care than me, and I should have been grateful that he'd been concerned for her too. Losing control of my emotions around him wouldn't amount to anything good, especially if I attacked my only friend here.

I closed my eyes, my throat tightening. I didn't belong here, and the sooner I got back to Ember, the better. I needed to get far, far away from Vad. Away from his stupid handsome face, his stupid strong arms that made me wish he'd cover my body with his, and his amazing spicy leather scent that I wanted to rub all over myself.

Fuck. I missed him. My entire body tensed as my wolf whined.

No. I didn't miss him. I couldn't. I stayed in the water, trying to relax, though my entire body remained weak with fatigue and strain. Still, I remained in the basin, following the physician's advice. I had to appear put together for myself, nobody else. I refused to allow them to believe they broke me.

When the last of the tea was gone and the heat had turned tepid, I eased myself from the basin and slipped back into the gown. The fabric clung to my damp skin, but it was soft and light. The stiffness and aches had left, the cuts, scrapes, and bruises gone like the water draining from the basin.

The only thing other than my heart that still hurt was my lower leg. The cut from the spike had been fairly deep, though now it was only a little tender.

Between Morlo's advice and my shifter healing, I felt almost normal.

I'd barely walked back into the bedroom when there was a knock on the door and the nightstand scraped across the floor. "Hey—" I snarled.

The three servants in gray robes peered through the crack, eyes bright with excitement. The tall one slipped inside and pushed the nightstand away and let the other two in, both holding cedar boxes, one large and one small. "Come along now, miss," the tall one said, coming to stand in front of me and taking me by the arm. "We must get you ready for the ball!"

The two other servants placed the boxes on the foot of the bed and scampered back, squeeking and clapping their hands.

It was a little weird, but it didn't feel like they meant any harm. "What are these?"

"Just open them! They're for the ball tonight." The short one practically vibrated with excitement as she pointed to the larger of the two boxes.

Curiosity won out as I stepped forward and opened the lid. The woodsy scent turned into a fragrant cloud of freesia, lavender, and jasmine. Inside were layers of lavender and white gauze and silk with branching lines of gold. My eyes widened as I lifted out the garment and held it up, letting the small scented floral bags fall from the skirt

to the floor.

Holy crap, I'd never seen a dress so beautiful. There was no way I could wear this. I'd mess it up before I even left the bedroom. "Is this for me?"

It was a strapless ballgown with a structured gold branched bodice made of deep violet fabric that faded to ivory as it flared out into the skirt and then transformed into a richer blue violet. Gold embroidery formed branching tree patterns at the hem, and gold flecks dusted the bodice like falling stardust.

The shorter one nodded. "I've never seen one so beautiful as this before."

"I can't wear this." Even though I itched to touch it, I couldn't risk ruining that .

"You must." The tallest servant clasped her hands. "The prince specifically sent this one to you."

My heart stuttered, but I pushed the fluttering fool from my mind. Vad had probably picked everyone's dress, not just mine. Still, it would be rude to reject it. "Okay."

Fuck. I'd never been a girly girl, but some part of me couldn't believe I got to wear something this beautiful. And unlike the dress from today, this one was impossibly light.

The gray-robed servants giggled with excitement, gushing about how beautiful I would look and how the color would contrast so beautifully with my hair and eyes. Within minutes, they'd helped me into it.

Some sort of magic had to have been used to make this dress because it didn't pinch my sides or squish my lungs. It was as light as the loose cornflower blue dress they'd given me yesterday and made the most delightful rustling sound when I moved,

making me want to spin like a little girl.

They moved me in front of the mirror so I could see myself while the tall one dusted my face with a delicate brush, the second smoothed my hair, and the third tidied up. “You’re like a vision from the golden forests in the twilight mountains.”

“The prince won’t be able to look away,” the short one giggled.

My cheeks heated, and my spine tightened. No sense getting my hopes up. He was going to dance with Rhielle, Kaylen, and me, and they’d be looking even more gorgeous, I was sure of it, especially Kaylen. Hell, everyone would be.

They continued to fuss over me for a few minutes more, smoothing and stroking and cooing like I was some kind of doll. “So beautiful indeed,” said the tall one, beaming at me as if I were her own daughter. “Now. Open the second box when you are ready, and then proceed to the main hall. You’ll take the same path that you do to the Ascension Hall, but you’ll see where you’re to go. It’s very easy to find.”

“Good luck, miss!” the short one called.

“Enjoy yourself!” the slightly more slender one sighed.

They disappeared just as quickly as they had arrived, closing the door with a firm click behind them.

My stomach twisted with nervous energy, a thousand butterflies fluttering like the tattoo on my wrist. The fiery tattoo pulsed faster than before, the wings rippling underneath my skin.

Returning to the foot of the bed, I opened the second box. Once again, floral scents released into the air, coming from scented bags fastened into the corner of the box,

but my breath caught in my throat.

The shoes were every bit as gorgeous as the dress and far more dangerous. I belly laughed. Did they really expect me to wear these? There'd better be some magic in them, because, beautiful as they were, I couldn't imagine walking in them without tripping and crashing to my death, wolf shifter or not. But...with how good the dress felt and knowing the other fae would be wearing similar shoes, part of me wanted to try.

Besides, the heels could be used as weapons if I needed to defend myself.

They were crystal stiletto heels with realistic violet roses sculpted along the sides, and they laced to the lower calf like ballet slippers. The largest of the roses blossomed right at the ankle, and the sleek material was something I didn't recognize.

I slipped them on, and my feet felt as if they were being hugged by a cloud. I smiled. Maybe there was magic in them because I didn't find myself unsteady, and my toes didn't hurt at all. The small clusters of roses and ribbons were sturdy and yet did not press against the most tender point of my calf.

Slowly, I turned in front of the mirror, my steps cautious at first. The skirt swished, and the floral perfume swirled around me. Even if no one danced with me, I could have fun spinning in this dress and hanging with my friends. We'd have a great time, even if Vad barely interacted with me. I didn't need him or anyone.

My wolf whimpered at the thought, but I exhaled. No, we can't be upset when Vad ignores me. Nothing good will come of it if he does, and besides, I need to go home...to my real home.

There was one more trial to go, and then he'd choose someone else to be his queen. It was best to focus on having the best time I could with my friends, though the thought



of him touching someone else— anyone else—twisted like a blade in my stomach and made me want to kill even the imaginative girl.

No matter what, I wouldn't let anyone see this affect me. He wasn't mine and never would be. My wolf tried edging forward again, but I pushed against her. I didn't even understand why she was acting this way. It wasn't like Vad was my fated mate. He was a fae prince, for Fate's sake.

Okay, I had to get out of here. My thoughts were upsetting me and making me spiral. I needed to be around people and maybe toss back a few drinks. I had this, but my wolf snuck another whimper in, making me want to pull the ends of my hair.

With a steadying breath, I strode out the door into the hall.

Rhielle had just stepped out of her room as well. She was a vision in a midnight-blue gown with diamonds fastened throughout the uppermost gauze on the skirt to create an effect like a starlit night. The ridged bodice cupped her breasts, shaped by lines of diamonds. An elegant matching cloak was fastened with clusters of diamonds to the gauzy shoulders of her gown, fluttering with each movement.

“Wow, look at you—” I stopped short when I saw the long, jagged, purple scar cutting across the column of her pale throat.

“Let them see it. I'm not here to impress anyone with my beauty.” Rhielle adjusted her cloak and then set her hand on her hip almost in a dare.

“No...” I shook my head, hating that she thought I would point out her battle wound. “I meant the dress. It looks great on you. Are you feeling better?”

“Enough to show my face. It'll be an early night for me, but I'm not letting those bellends see me falter.” She stuck out her right foot. Though it had mostly healed, a

few blue veins remained, far lighter and less swollen, indicating that she continued to heal. They almost looked like an extension of the sculpted midnight blue stilettos.

“Do they really expect us to dance in these?” I teased, trying to lighten the mood. “I think I might break my neck if I move too fast.”

“Or if Kaylen shoves you away from Vad.” She looped her arm in mine as we started to walk down the hall, our heels clicking on the marble floor. “Not that there will be too much of that tonight. The prince probably has to be the lead officiator. I heard a rumor that the king isn’t feeling the best, so he won’t be opening the ball with the traditional dance, and Vad is going to have to see to the rest of the ceremonies that are customary here. So you can have my dance with Vad, if you’d like.” Her brow arched as her smile broadened.

Heat shot down my spine, and I tossed my hair as I scoffed. “You earned your dance fair and square.”

“Well, you did more than a little to help get me to the finish line, so it’s only fair you enjoy the reward more than a little.”

“Dancing with Vad isn’t a reward,” I argued way too loudly, and the stench of sulfur from my own lie hit me hard. My stomach clenched, and then I snorted, trying to make it sound like I’d been joking.

She chuckled and patted my hand. “You’re right. It isn’t. It’s utter drudgery. We should just let Kaylen dance with him all night.”

I bristled, and Rhielle watched me closely.

I hated that I’d fallen for her game, but the thought of Kaylen touching Vad had rage boiling inside me, and the thought of snapping her hand off was way too appealing.

As we passed into the main hall, soft elegant music reached us, and I had limited time to redeem myself.

I cleared my throat. “I can’t do that to him. No one deserves that sort of punishment.”

She clicked her tongue, and her pink eyes sparkled beneath the exhaustion. “Selfless as always, Briar. Maybe you should have all three dances with him to save him from such a fate. I’m sure he’d be grateful for your intervention.”

I rolled my eyes and huffed as I tried to think of something to say back.

As I opened my mouth, I stopped.

The main hall opened before us, and the massive double doors at the far end were wide open. Soft golden light spilled into the corridor, and the music grew louder. Dozens of fae milled about, their gowns and suits elegant, and every single one of them was beautiful. Was there even such a thing as an ugly fae?

“Briar! Rhielle!”

Standing by the nearest door, Myantha waved us over. Her iridescent white gown glistened under the chandeliers, catching the light of the crystals woven into her dress. The lighter fabric faded into a warm pink at the hem, and her honey-gold locs swept around her shoulders. “You look so beautiful, both of you!”

I forced a smile to my face as I fought like hell not to search for Vaddy. “So do you. You’re stunning!”

“When we aren’t fighting for our lives, we actually look quite lovely.” Rhielle smirked, then winced, her hand going to her throat.

“You feeling all right?” I placed a hand on her shoulder to help steady her.

Rhielle paused and then straightened her spine. “Like I said, it’ll be an early night for me.”

Quen and Thalira stood farther inside the room and motioned us over. The ballroom itself was an enormous space with multiple ornate balconies overlooking the main floor. Elegant black columns supported the balconies, running up to the cathedral ceiling arched high above us with eight huge chandeliers hanging from thick chains. No one was on the main dance floor yet, but dozens and dozens of fae had gathered around it.

We stood on a landing that led to a polished black marble staircase with gold inlay. Staircases rose on both sides of the broad landing and led to the second and third floors. At the far end of the room, a raised platform bore one large onyx throne with two smaller ones flanking it. Black mist coiled around it, and two large stone lamps burned with golden fire. No one was there yet.

That must be where the royal family will sit. My heart clenched at the thought of him .

The orchestra continued to play. Harps, flutes, and some sort of steady drumbeat. The musicians were tucked away behind the pillars on the left side. On the right side were tables full of all kinds of food and drink.

“They’re getting ready to start,” Quen said. Her eyes sparkled with excitement as she squeezed my arm.

Thalira glanced back at us as we stepped to the edge of the landing near the balcony.

Rhielle walked alongside us, her manner quiet now. “I have to see this.”

“Why?” My brows furrowed. “What’s going to happen? You mean the dances?”

“Is the king really not going to attend?” Thalira mashed her lips together. “This is the ball before the final test.”

Rhielle twitched a shoulder. As a Shadow Fae, she seemed to understand how things were handled in the Shadow Court better than the rest of us.

“They aren’t quite as rigid here as in some of the other courts.” Rhielle placed a hand on her stomach like she was steadying herself. “I’m sure the king will appear eventually, and he’ll likely perform the ceremony then. Or maybe they agreed that any officiations or necessary formalities should happen after the ball. It’s hard to say.”

The music changed then, transforming into a waltz. Myantha gasped. “Oh that’s wonderful.”

My gaze turned to the ballroom floor, and my heart leaped, then sank. There was Vad, as devastatingly handsome as always with his cut cheekbones and broad shoulders and wavy dark hair. He wore a black velvet surcoat over a gold embellished tunic with tailored black trousers, his red-black wings on full display.

On his arm...was Kaylen.

I’d known he was going to dance with her, but somehow, this stung. He’d gone to her first. He hadn’t even come to find me or make sure I was here. My vision blurred, and I realized I was about to fall apart.

“Kaylen has the first dance.” Velessa laughed.

She moved beside me. She still had her arm in a sling, but the sling had been

embroidered with roses and violets to complement her pale blue dress.

Thalira and Yuki giggled, exchanging glances as if sharing a secret. Rhielle appeared satisfied. Quen was nodding as well.

I couldn't believe how cruel they were being. Why were all of them so happy to see him dancing with Kaylen? She swept across the floor in a bold yellow gown that, frankly, washed her out, but she didn't seem bothered. She had one hand on his shoulder and the other tucked in his, her face upturned.

Rhielle nudged me. "Come on. They're getting the first dances out of the way. I'll show you where we should stand. It's probably only going to be a two-minute song. Maybe three if I'm reading this properly. I'll bet you're the third dance."

The others nodded happily as if that didn't mean he was picking me last.

My hands clenched, and for a second, I wanted to smack them.

"Come on." Rhielle winked. She took my arm, and we all moved to the far side of the landing and the stairs as the dance continued. I kept my back poker straight, not wanting to show my disappointment, and blinked back tears. I'd known better than to hope. In fact, I'd even tried to push the sensation aside. The two of us would never happen.

Rhielle stopped me at what seemed like a random point on the right edge of the dance floor between the fourth and fifth chandeliers. There was a small diamond etching in the floor as if to indicate this was where we were to stand.

"Would have been nice if they'd told us when to be here," I murmured.

Rhielle side-eyed me. "The servants probably told him we were here. Do you want

the second dance? You can have both.”

I started to open my mouth in response when someone plucked my elbow. “Well, well, well, Copper Chaos, look at you all fancied up.” Thalen slid in beside me, grinning bright. He wore a sharp navy-blue surcoat with an amber and crimson neck scarf and a crisp white shirt and navy-blue trousers. The amber embroidery on the surcoat looked like thin flames or gusts of wind.

“I see the prince’s first dance has started.” Thalen’s cheeky tone grated on me, but he grinned as if everything was going to plan. “Care to honor me with a dance, Chaos?”

“Step back there, Silver Streak.” Rhielle set her hands on her waist. “She’s got the second and the third dance, and you aren’t messing that up.”

I pressed my lips in a tight line, not enjoying myself at all. But then a heavy hand came to rest on my shoulder.

“I would like to ask for the honor of the next dance, Briar.”

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Briar

My body tensed, and I turned to find King Merrick standing before me. He held out his other hand, waiting for my answer. He was dressed almost identically to Vad, but he wore silver instead of gold with a more decorative pattern.

The music changed, turning into a somber song with harps taking the lead.

Thalen's mouth dropped open, which didn't help my nerves at all. He was speechless, and that unsettled me more.

I swallowed hard, not truly wanting to go on the dance floor with the king, but also not wanting to insult him. "I don't know how to dance, Your Majesty."

He bowed his head ever so slightly and reached for my hand. "Don't fret. I'll instruct you."

My mouth dried. There was no way I could truly get out of it, so I slid my hand into his and smiled. "I'd love the honor then."

The king drew me closer, but Thalen remained motionless, blocking us from the dance floor. The king used his free hand to gently move Thalen to the side so both of us could pass.

I expected others to follow us onto the floor, but everyone gathered around with their



eyes on the two of us, like it was some sort of spectacle.

“Place your left hand on my shoulder, and follow my lead,” the king instructed, placing a hand on my waist and taking my free hand in his. He stepped slowly so that I didn’t have a hard time keeping up with him.

The lights played on the king’s face, and I could’ve sworn for a second there were dark circles under his eyes before they vanished.

“Tell me about your family?” The king tilted his head. “You have such unusual magic. Steady now. I’m going to twirl you.”

With a flourish, he spun me, and I glided back to him.

I couldn’t help but notice Vad dragging Kaylen off the dance floor. Once they reached the edge, he turned to watch while Kaylen stood beside him with a look that screamed she was constipated.

This was a trick question, and I wasn’t sure what he wanted to hear. But hell, what did it matter? It wasn’t as if I had an actual chance here. “I have an older sister who I love dearly. We lost our parents a few months ago due to a supernatural war on Earth, and we found a new family that took us in. My sister is mated to the alpha of our new pack.”

“The loss of people you love is difficult. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.” He paused as his eyes darkened to a navy blue, like he’d gotten lost in memories. “Take smaller steps.”

Both extreme reactions had me stumbling slightly, but I managed to recover fast.

“You mentioned words I don’t comprehend in this context. What is an alpha and a

pack?”

They had shadow wolves here or something like that, so I was surprised he didn't understand these concepts. However, maybe the wolves weren't able to shift, so they couldn't directly communicate with the people. “The alpha is the leader of the pack who makes final decisions. The pack is like a family. At birth you're born into one, but if something happens, you can change packs by following a new alpha.”

“So an alpha is like a ruler.” He pursed his lips. “Interesting.”

I wanted to ask about his family, but I was thinking about Vad too much, so I kept my mouth closed. I didn't need to hear someone else talk about him too, especially his dad.

“Why did you help the weaker fae instead of protecting yourself? You were injured far beyond what was necessary because of your intervention.” The king stepped back and then returned to the same position. “Now we move back three steps.”

I gritted my teeth. Of course he disapproved of my antics. I was quite certain everyone had expected Kalyen or Rhielle to win, and both of them had gone for it, leaving the rest of us behind. The difference was that Rhielle had helped others when she could or, at least, had done no harm, unlike Kaylen, who didn't hesitate to kill. “A pack protects all its members. When my parents were alive, they believed in protecting the young, the old, the strong, and the weak equally.

“Every life is important, because our world needs balance. The weak provide strength in ways that can't physically be seen most of the time, but they're usually the doctors helping to heal people or working the fields to bring food to our table. Everyone has something valuable to contribute, and what kind of person would I be if I could protect someone and chose not to? I wouldn't be able to live with myself. It should be the best for all and not just one person.”

“Interesting.” His face remained solemn. “I’m going to dip you now.”

My body tilted backwards, and the golden ceiling came into view, sparkling with all the lights from the ball, his grip on me steady and polite.

When I came back up, he’d masked his expression into one of indifference.

Yeah, he didn’t like me. However, there was nothing I could do to change that. I searched inwardly, tugging on the faint warm pack link that represented Ember. Fate, I missed her so much right now.

“Why is your shifted form a different color from the shadow beast? And what precisely does your magic allow you to do?”

The harps played even louder, causing my heart to ache even more. “When you say shadow beast, I’m assuming you’re talking about the wolf on the Ascension Hall floor and on your surcoat?”

He paused for a moment, his head tilting. “You call it a wolf?”

“Yes. And all I can tell you is that my wolf isn’t made of fae magic. Mine comes from Earth, and we turn into animals that humans expect to see. We can shift at will and can speak to other members of our pack with our thoughts.”

His face wrinkled with what had to be concern. “I’ve never heard of such a thing. Now take a step back.”

I obeyed, hating the way he seemed to be inspecting me. I glanced around, hoping Thalen would save me, but he was in the corner of the room, talking intently to a blushing Myantha.

Traitor.

“What do you think of these trials?” the king asked.

I inhaled a deep breath. Clearly, the king wouldn't like what I had to say, so there was no point in holding back. “I think they're grotesque and outdated. An arranged marriage would work better than this and wouldn't result in the loss of lives while people look on. Fae don't seem to have a problem turning on each other if that means they can get ahead, and I think if things like that continue, the pieces of a person's soul that make them care, love, and get angry will be replaced with raw hatred.”

He nodded, his expression somber. "And what do you think of Vad?"

My breath caught. Out of all the questions, he'd asked about Vad. “I think he's vulnerable and hides it with arrogance. He pushes everyone away but you, Elara, Thalen, and Silus, because he's afraid to care for anyone else. He has the potential to be an amazing man and a wonderful leader, but if he continues down this road, his stupid self will always fall short. He needs someone who's going to love him, push him, and be by his side at all times with more than just her mere presence.”

He gave a contemplative hum, not reacting otherwise. Then he looked me in the eye and asked, "Do you like him?"

My legs stop moving and my mouth opened and closed like a damn goldfish. No words came out.

How the hell did I answer that?

Vad

My stomach soured as I took Kaylen through the steps of “Moonlight Waltz,” the

fastest waltz in the traditional first dances for a Shadow Fae ball. This dance would seem to never end. Kaylen disgusted me in ways I couldn't put into words, even as she tried to bat her lashes and flirt. As hot as Briar made my blood, Kaylen chilled me to my soul and made my skin crawl.

I couldn't even focus on what Kaylen was saying; I was trying to get through the dance without strangling her.

Something yanked at my chest, and I had no doubt that Briar had arrived. My reward for enduring this intolerable task was to finally look upon the woman who dominated my thoughts and dreams. As much as I hated my own weakness and how fast the connection had happened, I no longer wanted to pretend about my feelings for Briar, and I doubted I could hide my reactions to her. Fast or slow, Briar held my heart in her wild magicked hands. Maybe she could turn into a strange colored shadow beast, and maybe she was reckless. But she would be mine, and her heart was more pure than the refined gold in Fate's Sanctum.

All at once, the music changed. The steady rhythm of the crotalums and the pan flute ceased, and the tempo slowed to a contemplative waltz as rune harps, wood shawms, bodhrán drums, and bone flutes rose in a gentle layered harmony. When those first notes struck, I straightened, and the hairs on the back of my neck rose.

I knew this song. It was one of my mother's favorites at these events, "The Starlight Crown." She'd loved it because it was so easy to dance to. Whenever there were newcomers, she'd asked that it be played, and almost all found it easy to follow. When she'd taught Elara and me the basics of dance before we began our formal lessons, this was the song she had chosen.

I hadn't heard it in years. Yet I knew that rhythm, and I turned.

My shoulders sagged, and my heart nearly stopped. By Fate—what had chaos and

beauty wrought? I couldn't breathe as I saw her gliding across the floor with my father.

I faltered, my grip on Kaylen loosening even more as my heart quickened. I'd avoided looking at her because I'd known just how gorgeous she would be. There had been dozens and dozens of gowns readied for the candidates, but I'd picked the best one to be sent to her, selecting the one that would set her body off to its full advantage and frame those perfect breasts and that elegant waist.

Not even in my wildest dreams had I realized how stunning she would look. She was a vision in violet and ivory, the gold branches on the bodice and skirt representative of the golden aspens beyond the salt lakes and twilight mountains in the far north. She looked as if she had been blessed by Fate herself, and while I'd known she would be a sight to behold, nothing had prepared me for this.

"That little fiend," Kaylen started.

"Shush." I glared down at her and dragged her off the dance floor so fast my feet nearly tangled in her layered yellow skirts. Nothing was going to ruin this moment. My father was here in his full regal garb, all black and silvery gray. And he was dancing with the woman who meant the world to me. Nerves worked through me, and my mouth turned to cotton as I struggled to comprehend what had happened.

How was this possible?

"I must insist that, when this is finished, you dance with me again." Kaylen cut in front of me, vivid color streaking her cheeks. "After all, I am owed a full dance."

This harpy was getting in the way. Anger strung my patience to its thinnest point. Stepping away from her, I fixed my gaze once more on Briar and spoke to Kaylen with clipped words, "The actual rules of your reward are that you get to live and that I

would dance with you. I have danced with you. Nothing was said regarding the length of the song or that it would be a full song.”

Her breath hissed through her teeth. “You are being exceptionally discourteous, Your Highness. You should be wiser about those whom you alienate. It could have unfortunate consequences for you and those you love.”

Now she had my full attention. My wings bristled out. “I suggest you reconsider that statement,” I growled. “And understand this—if I learn that you or anyone associated with you is involved in harming someone I care about, I will see to it that every bone in your body is shattered or that you receive the closest painful equivalent. And to ensure there is no misunderstanding between us, that includes Briar.”

She paled even more as she drew back. “I meant no offense.” Her voice tightened, and her hands balled into fists. A trickle of red appeared between her fingers. “Forgive me, Your Highness.” She then turned on her heel and stormed away.

I spared her one more look just to ensure she was gone. Thalen was right. That bold yellow did not suit her in the slightest. I chuckled inwardly as I turned my gaze toward the sleek ballroom floor. As I did, Rhielle strode to the door, her midnight blue gown making her seem even more like a shadow. She halted when she saw Kaylen, and then she scanned the chamber. Her eyes met mine, and her eyebrow lifted. She looked pointedly from Briar to me, then mouthed, Be good to her .

I dipped my head forward in silent acknowledgment and mouthed back, Forever . I meant it with every bone and fiber in my body.

A smile spread over her face. Her hand rose to her throat, her fingertips brushing the livid scar. Then she disappeared into the sea of people. She really was a remarkable woman. Every inch the consummate Shadow Fae. But she wasn’t Briar.

No. Rhielle was someone the Shadow Fae Council might have arranged for me to wed. On paper, she made sense, though I suspected there was more of the wild in her than she let on. But she was not well suited to me. Briar, on the other hand, was all that I longed for, with her bright copper hair and jade green eyes that glowed with heart and passion, chaos and loyalty.

My focus returned to the dance floor as whispers spread. My father hadn't danced since Mother's death. He'd barely shown up. I could barely believe my eyes. Even from this distance, I could tell how much he liked Briar. The edges of his eyes were crinkled, and he seemed entranced by the animated way she spoke—the toss of her hair, the tip of her chin, the snap of her head—I had no doubt she was telling my father precisely what she thought about our kingdom, the trials, and whatever else he might ask. She was never one to be short of words.

His expressions were far more subtle—slight twitches at the mouth, minor tilts of the head, and murmured instructions—but he might as well be announcing to all who were watching that he was fond of Briar. I caught the movements of his lips enough to know that he was telling her the dance steps, instructing her as he had once instructed Elara.

With that thought, I scanned the crowd once more, searching for my sister. There. Across the room, clasping a glass of indigo moon wine in both black-gloved hands, secreted away in the shadows. Her face shone with happiness, her shoulders hunched as if she could scarcely bear the sight from sheer delight. Silus loomed near her, his expression stoic with hints of concern. He still couldn't see just how good Briar was. Or perhaps he feared what she represented. Regardless, he'd just have to deal with it. We would address the matter soon enough.

Thalen, for his part, did not seem to have any opinion on this whole situation. He was standing near Myantha. Another dark-haired fae came alongside and reached for her arm, and Thalen grabbed that fae's wrist and said something with a smile sharp



enough to cut glass.

I smirked. Turnabout would be fair play soon enough.

My gaze returned to Briar then stilled. Heat flared down my spine and through my wings. My father was guiding her to me through the dance. I took half a step forward, breath catching in my throat. He asked her something, and I thought I caught the sound of my name. But she stared up at him with eyes as wide as if he had told her he was going to turn into a pumpkin in three minutes.

She didn't answer, but a broad smile broke over his face.

The first I'd seen in years.

I firmed my jaw, my fingers and wings twitching. Then he looked at me and motioned for me to come closer, holding Briar's right hand in his, his thumb pressed to her palm. "Your mother would have loved her, Vad." The smile remained on his face as he drew her closer to me. "And I love her too. Sometimes, it really doesn't take long to determine this sort of thing. Please. Enjoy the rest of the ball. I will handle the remaining tasks."

"Are you certain?" More than anything, I wanted to sweep Briar away and have her all to myself. But I didn't want to abandon my father. He hadn't stayed at a social event for more than an hour in years. As much as this meant to me, I couldn't leave without checking once more.

He nodded, chuckling wryly. "Yes. Go. I'll send for you if I need you." He then placed her hand in mine and looked at her. "You are a remarkable young woman, Briar. May your heart always burn bright for those who cannot fight for themselves. You remind me so much of Valora." His voice broke a little as he said my mother's name; then he pressed her toward me.

I could scarcely believe that had happened, and then Briar was in my arms. I found myself pulling her close without even thinking about it. It was natural—the way it should be. The heat from her body reached mine, and the jolting warmth of her touch returned. My heart soared to hold her. Her right hand went to my shoulder, her left to my upturned palm. My wings tensed, and I held up my hand to signal the orchestra that it was time to transition to the song I'd chosen just for her. With that, I swept her into the center of the dance floor.

The lights, magical and soft, played over us, brightening her face, shining in her hair, and shimmering over the gold branches woven into her dress. Her hair came alive with hints of gold and ruby, wheat and strawberry, and her eyes glowed jade green with flecks of emerald, jet, and malachite. She followed my lead with seamless grace, her skirts rustling softly with each step and her heels clicking on the floor.

“I am honored to share the third dance with you,” I said.

Her brow wrinkled, and confusion danced on her face like the lights upon us both. “Well, first, this is the second dance, not the third.”

“Shush now.” I gave her a mock scowl. “You have both the second and third. The third dance is the most honored dance, and this song is ‘The Midnight Vow Beneath the Veil.’” The obsidian harp notes and pan flute both reminded me of her.

“Is it?” She lifted an eyebrow in a sharp arch, her eyes flashing. “You did dance with Kaylen first. Are you acting like I can’t count how many dances there’ve been? Are you dancing with me now because you got your father’s approval?”

A smile broke across my face. What an infuriating and beautiful woman she was. That spark of jealousy in her eyes delighted me. “The first dance is simply to begin. The focus is not on the dance itself. It’s a light pleasant encounter that summons the guests to the ballroom. The second dance is a little more important, and it’s often the

sign to finish drinks and food and prepare for the main event. And that is the third dance, especially if the prince signals through his choice of music that it does in fact mean something more. So far as my father, I had no idea he would be attending. His approval of you means a great deal to me, but I had already set my resolve before the music started.” I paused, curling her close to me, my hand splaying over the small of her back. “Will you join me in the observatory, Briar? There’s something important I need to ask you.”

She scrunched up her adorable nose at me, then frowned as we continued to dance. My heart clenched, waiting for her answer.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Vad

It felt like an eternity passed as I waited for her answer. A part of me had wanted her to say yes without thought, but I should've known better. Briar thought things through, unless someone's life was in danger. Even then, she still strategized, changing her moves as needed.

She nibbled on her bottom lip and then softly answered, "Yes."

She'd taken five seconds at most, but her hesitation alarmed me. I couldn't blame her, not really. I'd given her no real reason to want to say yes. Not yet, but that would soon change. I had to bare my heart to her.

Still, I didn't want to pressure her, but I desperately needed to talk to her. "Are you certain?"

"I am." She straightened more.

I led her away quickly, before she could change her mind. I needed a chance to explain.

We hurried off the dance floor, up the curving staircase to the landing, and into the main hall. The power this strange woman held over me might have been alarming if I hadn't given myself over to her so fully.

As the soft notes of the music faded, I led her to the royal family's private quarters and to my observatory. Her fingers curled tight over my hand, warming my blood.

Occasionally, she looked up at me with those green eyes. Did I see curiosity in them, or was it fear? No, surely not fear. Not when she had been so bold and courageous in the trials.

The familiar scent and the comforting silence of the observatory folded around us as I closed the door. The stars shone bright through the glass dome on the far side of the room. The tugging in my chest intensified, urging me to kiss her and stake my claim on her forever. But I had to take this slowly. Or at least as slowly as I could bear. And I had to give her a choice. It was the least I could do after the nightmare Fate and the councils had put her through.

Drawing in a deep breath, I steadied myself. Then I crossed over to the telescope and gestured to it. The cold metal grazed my fingertips. "I never knew my grandfather, but he adored the night skies, and he tracked the stars. It was something special he shared with my mother, and she, in turn, shared it with me. It was always a reminder that out there existed beauty and life and order beyond our understanding, and who knew what else?"

I tapped my hand on the green leatherbound books on the shelf nearest me, beside the liquor cabinet. "I've tracked the star paths and constellations for years now without her. Recently, I haven't had much time for it, but often, I look at the sky, and... well, what do you see?"

She stepped up and set her eye to the scope. "Is that star—is it changing colors and shapes?"

I leaned in beside her, breathing in her scent. "That is an echo star." Even without seeing it, I could imagine it: the black-violet center surrounded by flares of pink and

white light, beautiful and subtly changing. “As the hour passes, it will brighten along the center until you see a ring form. Eventually, the ring flashes outward. They say that if you look upon it when this happens, you can send a message to anyone who has passed from life to light.”

“Do they ever answer back?” Her hand curled over the telescope as she drew back to look at me, her expression contemplative.

“Perhaps. I like to think they do. Some say Fate writes in the stars, but I’ve never been able to read them. What I do see is beauty and a reminder that what happens here isn’t the only thing that matters. Recently, my focus has had to be on the kingdom and this realm, so much so that I’ve had time for neither peace nor joy. But now that you’re here, I feel joy at the thought of keeping my attention on this place in the world—or more specifically, on you. You are what makes me want to continue to focus on this world.”

I took her hand in mine, the jolt of energy so damn consuming. “You were brought here against your will and because of Fate, Briar. I cannot fix that. I also cannot change the fact that I...”

I stopped myself from trying to describe what I felt for her, but in this moment, I had no doubt. My heart ached with longing. More than anything, I wanted to tell her I loved her, despite having known her for mere days.

“I want you as my own. Choosing a bride before the end of the three trials, let alone one whom the councils have not recommended, goes against every tradition. But apparently, I am my father’s son, because as he flouted their will, so too will I. Fate guided my father to my mother, and she has guided me to you.

“But I cannot speak for you, nor am I binding you to anything.

“I give you my word that I will fight for you no matter what. I will find a way to protect you. If you accept me, then I will be yours as you will be mine. And I will cherish you until the end of your days and mine. If you do not wish to be mine—” My voice tightened, and I balled my hands into fists, fighting the urge to just kiss her. These words stung even to utter, but they had to be said. “If you do not want me, I will take you to whatever place you call home when all this is over.”

Her brow furrowed.

I cleared my throat, concerned at her lack of a response.

My hands tightened as I resisted the urge to touch her or step closer. “The third trial must continue, but I will find a way to protect you. I don’t yet know how, but I will. After tonight, I am certain my father will help me find a way. He chose a woman whom neither council approved of either, but I don’t think the trials were as vicious as these have been.

“Whether you say yes or no, I will protect you. And if you wish to return to your family and not make me yours, then...then I accept that as well. The thought of you dying or harmed shatters my soul.”

“Say yes or no to what?” she asked, her gaze meeting mine.

“What I am asking is... will you please accept my offer to be my queen? The one I choose above all others.”

Briar

I wanted to scream yes at the top of my lungs, but despite the way my wolf howled and my heart leapt in pure joy, two huge reasons held me back.

Vad's wings twitched, and his forehead lined. His hands clenched at his sides, and I could have sworn they were shaking.

My heart ached. I didn't want to be cruel, but he couldn't truly comprehend what he was asking of me.

There was one important question I needed addressed before I could give a truthful answer. "At the beginning, you were determined not to choose a queen. You vowed not to provide love and companionship, said that you were merely fulfilling your duty to the crown. I'm not okay with that, especially since I would essentially be giving up my life and family on Earth, leaving my sister and my pack behind to live in a land that, for the most part, despises me."

His brow furrowed, and his shoulders sagged. Then he straightened, as if he'd found the right words. "I did not want to love, because love makes one vulnerable. It destroyed my father. When my mother died, he became a shell of what he once was. He withered as the years passed, failing in many of his duties to our family. It's a harsh thing to say, but I did not want to follow in his footsteps and fail those who would depend on me in the same way.

"I also believed that love was part of what killed my mother. If she had not been blinded by her love for me, she would not have put herself at such risk." His eyes glistened, and I'd swear I glimpsed a part of his soul before he continued, "But it seems that love is not something that can be denied. I built walls within my own heart and swore no one would ever break through, yet somehow you have. All the fears and risks that come with that are present with you, but I don't give a feck anymore."

His hands shook harder, and the tips of his wings twitched. "I am already lost, Briar. When you are hurt, I hurt, and having to watch you suffer while I'm unable to help or alleviate the pain drives me nearly mad. If you die, then I will be shattered. Somehow, I knew this in my heart and soul the first time I saw you in that horrible



attire. All this time, I tried to protect my heart, but it was yours from the start.

“But whether or not your heart is mine, I will protect you from this point forward until my final breath. Because, Briar, I can and do promise you love, affection, loyalty, and companionship. I yearn to share all that and more with you. Even if tragedy strikes and you are taken from me, the pain will be worth it for having known you. And to be clear, I would burn the world down to save you, no matter what.”

My heart leaped with joy, and I wanted to kiss him and tell him I would be his all for eternity, but there was still one thing holding me back. “And my sister?”

“I will find a way for you to see your sister whenever you want.” He placed a hand on his chest over his heart. “I vow from this breath on to ensure you are happy and protected.”

A tear trailed down my cheek as all the excuses I had not to be with him faded away. The corners of my lips lifted. “Then yes, I’ll be your queen.”

He wrapped his arms around me with the most handsome smile I’d ever seen. His eyes lightened to a bright silver gray as he wiped the tear from my cheek. “Why are you crying?”

“Because I’m so happy.” The yanking in my chest intensified. “I’ve wanted you this entire time.”

“Thank Fate for that,” he murmured, then covered my mouth with his.

Heat burst through my body, and my wolf howled in approval. I pressed closer to him and grabbed the lapels of his surcoat.

His tongue demanded entrance, and I agreed. He tasted of blackberries and spice,

which was now officially my favorite flavor in the entire universe. He moaned and gripped my hips, and I could feel his hardness.

Holy shit. He was huge . How the hell was I supposed to take that into me? The thought was a little alarming, but the challenge sounded like a whole lot of fun.

He lifted me and flapped his wings, air whipping past. Soft leather hit my back as he set me gently on the couch.

He hovered over me, not putting all his weight on me, but my wolf surged forward, needing more of him. Our teeth grazed together as our kisses became desperate, and his hand cupped my breast.

My cells caught fire, and my hand traveled to his trousers just as his fingers slid under my bodice and caressed my breasts. He groaned, empowering me with his responses.

I palmed his dick, and his wings fluttered. He pulled away from my mouth, kissing down my jaw and neck. When his mouth hit the base of my neck, I gasped and threaded my fingers through his hair.

Everything inside me wanted him to bite me. To claim me. Make me his. I needed it more than oxygen, and something pinged inside me, reminding me of what Ember had told me about her and Ryker and their fated-mate bond. Was Vad my fated mate? Was that even possible with him being fae?

He raked his teeth against my skin, and I desperately slid my hand into his trousers. When I gripped his cock, he lost control. His mouth trailed down to the top of my dress, and his hand moved to lower my top

Then a loud knock came on the door, followed by it opening.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Vad

Heat and passion exploded in the frenzy of finally having Briar beneath me, her hand around my hardness. It all splintered into a cacophony of confusion as a dull rap beat at the door and then the hinged creaked. Dazed and drunk on the most beautiful woman who had ever walked, I lifted my head, only to see my so-called friend barging in. I quickly removed my hand from her dress as she pulled hers from my pants.

“Silus, what the feck are you doing here?” I roared. Blood thundered in my ears and my groin.

Silus canted his head, his expression as grim as if he’d walked into an execution. Not a trace of apology creased his features. “King Merrick is weary. He needs to retire, and he requests that you return to resume your duties as the officiator of the ball.”

Feck. I dragged a hand through my hair and stood. The floor tilted, rolling beneath my feet as I tried to steady myself and return to reality. “I’ll go to him directly.”

“I will wait for you.” Silus folded his arms and remained in the doorway.

Then wait he would. I repressed a growl as I returned my focus to Briar. She stared up at me, her lips parted and her beautiful breasts rising and falling as she fought to calm her breaths. I couldn’t wait to explore those further and make her pant even harder. Leaning closer, I took her hand and kissed it. “You can stay here as long as

you like or return to the ball, but, please, meet me in front of the Ascension Hall in two hours. The ball should be concluded by then, and there's someplace special I want to take you." And special things I wanted to do as well.

Her cheeks remained flushed and her eyes bright. The tip of her tongue flicked over her lips to moisten them, and my mouth went dry. Then her mouth curved into a crooked smile. "I'm going to go back to my room. These shoes are gorgeous, but I need to take them off. Even fae magic has its limits."

"Perhaps we'll find some better enchantments then." I cupped my hand beneath her ankle and lifted it, eyeing the violet shoes that cradled her perfect feet. "You should not ever feel any pain at all, my sweet."

Silus cleared his throat.

Glowering, I turned to face him.

One of his eyebrows ticked up.

I was not in the mood for Silus's skepticism, but I wasn't going to fight with him in front of Briar. Standing, I straightened my surcoat and tunic and willed my blood to calm. Scaffing void, this was unpleasant. I offered Briar my hand and helped her to her feet. "Let me take you to your room."

"I can find my own way." She smoothed her skirt. It rustled as it fell back over her shapely legs.

The memory of how incredible they'd felt wrapped around me clashed with my imaginings of how much more perfect it would be when I sank between them with her heels on my back as she drew me in tighter.

Feck.

This wasn't helping to cool my blood.

"Don't be ridiculous." I looped her arm through mine and pressed her hand into the crook of my elbow. "It's no trouble."

She bit her lower lip and cut her eyes up at me. "How about a compromise? You walk me to the guards at the start of the guest hall."

"Very well." I kissed her fingertips again.

Silus looked incredibly annoyed, but I ignored him and walked Briar down the hall like the queen she would be, with my hand over hers even as it rested in the crook of my elbow. The way she glanced up at me and smiled set my blood ablaze. There were so many things for us to share. And when we reached the start of the guest hall and the guards, my heart ached at the thought of releasing her, but I had to. I could have one more kiss though.

Leaning down, I pressed my lips to hers briefly. "The next two hours are going to be torture, but seeing you again will make it all worthwhile."

The smile she gave me could have made a statue melt. Unless that statue was Silus. He cleared his throat. I shot him a glare. When I returned my focus to Briar, she arched a brow at me. "No dancing with anyone else, got it? Well, Elara has a pass."

I chuckled and found myself smiling too. "Not even she will distract me from completing the duties required to get back to you." Under other circumstances, I might have teased Silus about ensuring Elara got to dance, but at the moment, I wasn't in the mood.

Briar placed her hands on my shoulders and gave me a small kiss on the cheek that practically made me dissolve. Then off she went, past the guards and down the hall. Soon, very soon, we would be together, and she would be back in my arms.

Silus's expression became crestfallen as if he'd let his own mask slip a little more. "Your family is as dear to me as my own, and I cannot in good conscience remain silent, Vad. I pray I am wrong. Just please...consider my warning."

I shoved past him, not acknowledging his words. There wasn't time to deal with this.

"Your father chose someone whom neither council approved of. Don't you think that perhaps your mother's death—"

I halted, every nerve in my body sharpening. A growl rose within me. "You need to stop before you say something we'll both regret."

"But if I'm right, and I don't speak my concerns, then I'm doing a disservice to all of us." He stomped his foot. "She's not made for this realm, Vad. And if you go through with this, you'll be putting your kingdom at risk. You need to tell her you were wrong—"

I pivoted toward him and gripped both of his shoulders. "I will marry Briar. She will be my queen. If the kingdom struggles with the decision, Briar and I will determine how best to address it together. I am not wrong, and if you speak against her again, the value I place in your words may be at risk. Do you understand?"

He didn't respond. Instead, he set his jaw and glared.

Well, at least I'd warned him of the repercussions.

I kept going and soon spotted my father on the landing of the ballroom. Mercifully,

no one was near him, and Silus disappeared into the crowd. My father had a contemplative smile on his face that I wasn't sure how to read. I approached him, the warmth of the ballroom and its myriad scents enveloping me. "Silus said you were ready to retire?"

He nodded, the shadows heavy over him. "Yes. I was going to retire for the night, but I think I'd like to walk in your mother's garden for a while. It feels right."

Tears pricked at the backs of my eyes, and a knot formed in my throat. Emotion pulled me into a gentler place, and my voice softened. "It is beautiful there." It was an hour till midnight, so the moon lilies would still be open. Those had been her favorites.

"Yes, it always was." His eyes became glassy. "Briar reminds me so much of her. So similar and yet distinct. I can see how she might fit within this family." He paused, his voice thickening. "It hurts so deeply to remember your mother that sometimes I still can't bear it. I never healed from the loss. I still can't say I even fully know how to exist without her. Over the years, I've tried so hard not to think about her because of the pain, but...there is still a measure of joy in the bittersweetness of remembering her. Briar is a rare gem and one you should treasure and protect at all costs."

He rubbed the spot over his heart. "Vad, I've tried so many times to tell you this, but I've never found the words until now. You shouldn't blame yourself for what happened that night. It wasn't your fault, and your mother wouldn't blame you either. It was her choice, and had I been in her shoes, I would have done the same. It's hard for me to see you sometimes, but not because you are a disappointment. It's because you remind me so much of her and that I wasn't there for her. Your eyes—they are so like hers." He turned his face away as tears rolled down his cheeks. He reached up and wiped them away. "I wish your mother could have been here tonight. Perhaps she was in spirit."

Silus's words rang in my ears as my father started toward the garden. "Father, did you...I don't know how to ask this." My hands balled into fists once more as I tried to swallow the thickness in my throat. "Did you ever regret not following the wishes of the councils? Do you think that...that..." I couldn't finish the question. That was enough. His answer wouldn't change what I did, but I needed to know.

Part of me expected my father to react with anger. I would have understood if he had.

But he simply looked back at me and shook his head. "The only people I blame are the ones who killed her, and my only regret is that I could not stop them or make them suffer more. I'd have defied the will of the councils and of Fate herself if it meant being with your mother. I can never regret choosing her. Loving Valora was the best choice I ever made in my life, and I would endure all the pain again just for another night with her." He dipped his head forward then and left.

As my father walked away, a strange sensation twinged within me like a warning.

Briar

The memory of Vad's smile stayed locked in my mind. My heart fluttered as I remembered how he'd made sure Silus saw that I was his and how Vad hadn't let our bodies separate until we'd had to part ways. I'd wanted to tease him about his hair being a little messy, but I hadn't wanted to risk him fixing it. It was a reminder of what we'd just promised each other, and I couldn't wait to mess it up more.

The buzzing that ran through me everywhere we touched had intensified and vibrated straight into my heart. I didn't understand how it was possible, but Vad being my fated mate made even more sense to me with every second.

Guards lined the hallways every ten feet, standing still as statues.



My heart pumped hard as I scurried toward my room. I couldn't believe that Vad felt the same way about me that I did for him, and for the first time since my parents' death, I feared I might combust with happiness. I couldn't wait for Vad and me to visit my sister and tell her everything.

Just as I reached my bedroom door, a soft thump strangled cry drifted out of Rhielle's room. My stomach dropped, and I spun around to view her door. She'd been feeling so ill; something worse must have happened. Maybe she had fallen.

I kicked off my heels and hurried to her door to find it unlocked. My skin crawled. It was dangerous to leave doors unlocked here. I threw the door open, thinking to run Rhielle to the healing chambers and physicians.

The room was set up like mine, but the décor was all shades of deep purple, indigo, and black. The wallpaper was embossed with a geometric pattern, and the curtains hung heavy as if weighted. I tugged at my wolf to see better in the darkness.

My blood froze. With a dark mist surrounding her, Rhielle lay pale and lifeless in her bed. I couldn't even see her chest rise.

Fate, no . I rushed inside, ready to lift her in my arms and run for the physicians while calling for help, when something dark moved in the corner of the room. I spun, preparing to scream and to fight, but a cloth with a sickly sweet scent covered my mouth and nose. I tried to hold my breath, but it was too late. My head spun, and my vision darkened; then my body went slack...and darkness consumed me.

Vad

I paced outside the Ascension Hall. The two remaining hours of the ball had passed with infuriating slowness and ever-increasing discomfort, but now I was here, and Briar wasn't.

Where was she? My boots squeaked on the marble each time I turned. My stomach churned, and my chest tightened, a strange fever descending upon me.

It had to be nerves. There was no reason for them though.

Briar would keep her word. If she were delayed, there would be a good reason. I paused as a cold fear cut through me and stiffened my spine. What if she'd changed her mind?

No . I shook that thought off and steadied myself, my hands fisting at my sides.

The way she'd looked at me set me alight all over. I could smell her cinnamon ginger scent already, and soon she'd be back in my arms. There had been no doubt in her response. Maybe she had fallen asleep?

That seemed likely.

But what if she were in trouble?

My wings itched, and my skin crawled as if insects were burrowing beneath my flesh. What was wrong with me?

I'd seen her to the guest hall myself, and all the guards had been present. But Kaylen might not have heeded my warning to leave her alone. One of the other contestants might have taken matters into her own hands too.

The tension in my gut twisted. I needed answers, and I needed to see her.

I started toward the guest hall, and then a scream tore through my heart and soul. Briar . But the scream hadn't come from the direction of the guest hall. From the garden? My mother's garden?

I spun around and surged forward, but a wave of nausea and disorientation crashed over me. I gagged and struggled to keep my feet, my wings drooping as if the ligaments had been cut. What was happening?

"Briar!" I called and lurched forward, grabbing onto the wall and fighting for balance. The world tilted and spun around me, and I wanted to vomit.

"Help!" Briar screamed. "The king needs help!"

Something was wrong with her voice. Her words sounded slurred.

Adrenaline pumped through me and helped me regain my footing. I stumbled down the hall and flung open the doors to the garden. Heavy footsteps sounded ahead of me. The guards were already here. The air smelled of blood, flowers, and something acrid and unsettling.

My boots scraped the black and gold mosaic-tiled path as I rushed to follow. Black lilies, lavender peonies, and silver roses intermingled beneath the paper-barked trees under the waning moon. Up ahead lay the fountain with the sculpture of the shadow beast and her cubs playing in the water. A dark form lay beside the pale stone, and two guards were hauling Briar to her feet. She was barefoot, and her elegant gown was covered in blood, the red streaking boldly across ivory and violet. Her hands

dripped with red liquid as she trembled, her gaze fixed on the king. A bloody dagger lay at her feet beside—beside my father.

"Save him," she sobbed. "Someone stabbed him. His heart is weakening. Save him, please!"

Another wave of nausea cut through me. I looked at my father, his pale face streaked with a line of liquid red and his tunic punctured and soaked with blood. A dark pool formed beneath him, filling the cracks and grooves of the marble.

He was gone.

I couldn't breathe. I lifted my gaze to Briar. The guards were taking her away. "Stop!" I shouted; then another wave of nausea struck me. I stumbled forward and fell to my knees. "Stop, let her go. Briar! Guards, unhand her now. Let her speak. Briar, what happened?"

The guards didn't stop though, and Briar's terrified gaze fell on me.

A Shadow Fae council member and an Aureline council member stepped out of the shadows of the trees in front of me, their dark gray and light gray robes looking eerily immaculate in the chaos and devastation.

The young-voiced Aureline councilor placed a hand on my shoulder. "The contestant has murdered a member of the royal family. Justice must be served, but not by you. This matter is out of your hands."

Rage boiled within me. I'd just lost my father. I wouldn't let them take Briar too. I roared and surged forward. If I had to set the world on fire and shatter their councils to get her back, I would. I was done complying with their rules. Fate be damned.