



# Shaedes of Power (Soul Magic #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** In a faerie hierarchy built upon one's ability to produce specific, color-driven magic, Opal is an outcast, and on the cusp of giving up on her future at court.

While visiting the human realm, she witnesses a dark magic shadow beast attack a human—a beast which should have been forever imprisoned in the Shadowlands. Upon her return home to the faerie realm, she finds the Shaede Palace in chaos, the vampiric Dark Princes ready to start a war over old wounds and court prejudices, and a revolving door of impossible choices.

Join Opal on her path to self-discovery and a quest to save her realm, all while she navigates a passionate romance with the charming human she manages to save from the shadow beast, and the seductive Dark Prince who captures her and wants to show her a whole new world in the shadows.

It will take everything Opal has to find her way through the darkness, but with the help of her friends and the histories of her people, she might just discover spells that can change the world.

**Total Pages (Source):** 28

## CHAPTER 1

When we first came to the human realm, I tried a lot harder to hide what we were. But with only two short months left, I'd grown lazy and even more disenchanted with my own appearance.

"Stop staring, Opal. We get it, you're beautiful," said Dru sarcastically, coming in from the back room carrying three large boxes of coffee beans and setting them on the counter like they carried the weight of balloons. She kept her almost neon-green hair cut rebelliously short, her matching eyes always glinting with the kind of energy only unnatural strength and agility could fuel. I forced my eyes to turn from the mirrored wall behind the counter and refocused on the open drawer of the register. I was already bored and today's shift hadn't even started yet.

"You know that is not why I keep looking," I said quietly, slowly counting dollars and putting them in their respective slots.

Leyanna chimed in from the front of the shop, her tone laden with insincerity, "Oh, I learned a new human phrase the other day." Her fire-red hair and crimson-colored eyes shone brightly, free from their usual glammers. "'A watched pot never boils.' It means stop checking if your hair is a tint darker and come help me wipe these tables down. Eew, I think there is gum under this one."

I could almost hear Dru roll her eyes as she turned to start all the coffee machines. We were very thankful for Dru because, in the almost two years we had been the sole operators of Espresso Yourself, a hip and trendy cookie cutter coffee shop in the epicenter of SoHo, neither me nor Leyanna had ever learned how to actually make

coffee. Dru seemed more interested in the technical aspect of things anyway, so I figured out the cash register and dealt with the people, and Leyanna mostly just complained about all the human-ick qualities of things and how much she missed home. We were only eighteen when we arrived in this city, sent to work and live and interact with humans. To better understand them. To learn how we could better protect them. We were supposed to be journaling every night—which Leyanna totally wasn't doing—and completing a list of assignments meant to put us in the heart of human activity.

I walked around the counter with a damp rag and set to cleaning, wondering if this was a glimpse into my future. In the faerie realm, those devoid of true color magic were servants. We called them Naturals, with the typical physical attributes of the common faerie. Blonde, brunette, or auburn, ethereally beautiful, perfect skin, and blessed by the Balance with the type of organic magic that kept the world healthy. They were the Tinkerbells of the faerie world, I figured after watching *Peter Pan* for the first time—whimsical beings of magical ability who served the faerie courts with their healing, their ability to grow plants and foods, and their interactions with magic on a very base level. They were the fixers, helpers, and domestics of the realm, and although I had just enough color magic to pass for a Shaede, I often figured I'd still end up just like one of them.

Everyone believed I would grow into my shaede eventually. But it never happened. Not fully anyway. No one knew if when a faerie was born, the shaede was already within them, planted by the all-knowing Balance, or if the shaede was attracted to the person one became. But in either scenario, I couldn't help wondering if something was wrong with me .

“You’ve been wiping that same spot for ten minutes, Opal. I think it’s clean,” said Dru gently from behind me. I allowed the smell of warm coffee brewing to bring me back from my self-loathing. “Is everything okay?” she asked, making a move to unlock the front doors. Outside the city was already alive, a limitless number of

working parts set in motion under the heat of a sizzling summer sun.

“She’s fine,” sneered Leyanna. “Probably just daydreaming of Astor back at court. Still keeping the dream alive that he’s been saving himself for you all this time?”

“Well, that’s not nice,” said Dru, forever on my side. “Of course he is loyal. Opal and him had been together for almost a year before we left.”

“A year is nothing to a faerie, especially an overly ambitious, high-energy green Shaede like Astor. No offense, Dru, but your kind easily bounce from thing to thing. You have the attention span of a human.”

“Okay, Leyanna, now that is really not nice. What is your problem today?” I asked.

Astor was overly vigorous as a warrior and a boyfriend, but what we had seemed like it could be special. He was one of the more handsome male faeries at court, always strutting around dressed as if ready for battle, in dark leather and shiny weapons at his belt. He had no problem with his future, he knew who he was, and he wasn’t afraid to tell people. He thought himself born to become a High Shaede, and I think a part of him believed he could will it to happen. I used to think his confidence was kind of sexy. Perhaps I was drawn to him because I admired his ability to manifest his future, whereas I was certainly on the cusp of giving up on mine.

“I don’t know,” Leyanna sighed, twirling one of her long braids around a finger. I saw her eyes flicker mischievously even from across the room. “A friend would warn you of the truth, wouldn’t she? You must know he is only courting you because your mother and father are both High Shaedes and he thinks he can become royal by association. I don’t mind being the bearer of bad news generally, but it brings me no joy in this instance.” She tried to hide a smile but failed. Dru and I just stood there like two stunned statues, the unveiled shock frozen on both our faces. It was just Leyanna being Leyanna, but this seemed extra spicy even for her. “Ugh, fine,” she

conceded, pulling at the black spandex shorts she was wearing. We all weren't the biggest fans of human clothes but were forced to dress the part. "Maybe I'm just missing home. Don't you feel the Balance? It's like something tangible is tied to me, pulling me back to court. It's starting to disturb my sleep, and resisting it is making me cranky." She pouted, and Dru and I reluctantly walked over to give her a hug.

I couldn't speak for Dru, but I always felt the Balance inside me. It was like walking around with an internal shadow. It made me sensitive to other faeries' shaedes. I couldn't draw some incredible power from it—I was no High Shaede—but it was always with me, making itself known. I kind of just assumed that it was a sensation that all faeries had, but seeing Leyanna in distress over feeling the Balance's pull gave me pause.

"Two more months, Leyanna. You can do it," Dru encouraged.

"If I never smell another coffee bean in my whole immortal life, Balance bless me," she said dramatically. Then something caught her eye outside the window. "Oh no, it's that human with the weird name again."

"You think all humans have weird names," Dru said. "Christopher, now that is a weird name," she said mockingly, doing her best Leyanna impression. "Alex is a weird name. Eew, Katie. What a weird name."

I tried not to laugh as we all moved to take our positions like little faerie robots and threw our glammers up fast and hard. I froze my ever-changing eye color to an unremarkable gray and made sure my pointed ears mimicked a human's. I allowed my long, wavy, opalescent hair to remain, but it was the spell I cast over my skin that was perhaps the most necessary. My body, which since birth sported a sort of pastel shine that picked up various shades of colors when in sun- or starlight, had become downright crystalline—freakish, really—even by faerie standards. So I dulled my skin to make sure it had that gritty, natural coloration that all humans had in one

shade or another in an effort to hide the weird iridescent sheen my body had really come into, just as the customer in question opened the front door, sending reflective shards of sunlight bouncing all over the walls and ceiling.

“Welcome to Espresso Yourself . Would you like to try our Iced French Vanilla Cappuccino this morning?” I recited like an overly enthusiastic coffee sycophant.

The stranger was not really a stranger. His name was Farris, last name unknown, and he had a masculine, no-nonsense way of ordering his coffee.

“Hello, Opal,” he said, shifting the heavy backpack to his front so he could reach his wallet. He pushed some stray damp tendrils behind his ear with the hand that had fished out his credit card. “I think I will just stick to the usual.” He smiled, a friendly half-smile. We’d done this so many times before. It was like a choreographed dance. He came in here almost every morning, eyes blue and bright, disheveled shoulder-length blond hair either tied up in a loose bun or hanging wet and wavy post shower. He couldn’t be more than twenty-five, but something about the handsome, sharp angles of his face made him look older and more mature. Like most of our patrons, he crossed the threshold into our shop with a busy, eager sort of energy. A little bit of caffeine, and that was all it took for humans like him to be industrious—to go out into their realm and do something of substance. To make an impact. To start a ripple. It wasn’t like that for faeries. We lived forever; all the big stuff had already been created, and most major conflicts had already been resolved. Over countless years, our lives had been made more and more easy. Every day had the potential to be such an adventure for this man, and he probably didn’t even realize it.

“So a large black coffee with a shot of espresso?” I started pressing buttons on the register without even looking at him. Behind me, Dru started making a machine whirl to life. The light in the room shifted again as two young high schoolers in private school uniforms came in, giggling about something on one of their phones, and got in line.

“Actually,” said Farris, a little too loudly, “I think I’ll have that Iced French Vanilla Cappuccino thing.”

“Really?” I raised an eyebrow. New choreography. He was looking a little more intently at me than usual, like he wanted to say more, but he had run out of all there was to say about coffee.

“Yes, but better still put a shot of espresso in it.” He laughed softly. “I need the energy to make it through some long research hours today.”

I smiled at him. Like a lot of the more extroverted humans that were always dropping little bits of their life onto the counter to make conversation, Farris wanted to be liked. People like him wanted other people to feel comfortable around them, so if there wasn’t anything remarkable about the weather, out tumbled self-deprecating quips about themselves, vague details about their day, or generic compliments that weren’t too forward.

From our little clips of conversations, I knew that Farris was actually not currently any kind of student. He was just on a personal crusade to learn. He loved history and spent most of his mornings reading books about past wars and countries far from here, all while putting off grad school or making any major decisions about his life. He hadn’t really divulged anything else other than that he liked rainstorms, he appreciated the smell of coffee more than he liked the taste, he was an only child—and was this just my faerie brain that managed to carefully catalogue a random human’s every thought dumping, or was I mildly interested in who this man was?

I took his money, and he brushed more wet hair from his face. He did that half-smile thing that really could be charming as Leyanna thrust a cup of sweet-smelling slush into his hands.

“Have a nice day,” she managed to say sarcastically. He took the cup, secured his heavy bag back on his back, and I watched him awkwardly wave goodbye as the next humans in line stared expectantly at me, awaiting to hear the day’s special.



## Page 2

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### CHAPTER 2

“The quiet of the Corewood,” said Leyanna, dreamily looking at some blue-gray clouds feathering the sunset.

“The taste of river fruit—the blue ones. Oh, and winterberries,” purred Dru. “I cannot believe you have us all doing it now.”

“Your turn, Opal. And don’t say Astor,” Leyanna spat. They had been playing this game for about ten city blocks as we made our way from closing up the coffee shop to the iconic Jefferson Market Public Library to complete an assignment.

“What do I miss most about the Shaede Court?” I asked myself aloud. My two friends had been rambling off a long list of coveted memories from home that ran the gamut from favorite snacks to loved ones. But her question hit me hard. I mean, I loved the Shaede Court and belonged there as much as any faerie did. I much preferred the sights and sounds of nature and magic to the loud, harsh, and ephemeral qualities of this realm. But when I thought of home, I thought of my parents. And when I thought of my parents, I drowned in the disappointment that was to follow once they realized that their daughter was still lacking a shaede.

Faeries were not blessed with offspring very frequently. Mating very rarely ever resulted in a child, but when it did, it was considered such favor by the Balance that the entire realm rejoiced. That should be pressure enough to want to live up to your parents’ expectations—their hopes and dreams. But my parents weren’t ordinary faeries. They each held seats of the High Shades, of which there were always only five. Mine were the first set of wedded, mated faeries to both hold seats at the same

time, and thus their blessed progeny must be destined for greatness, right? If being a Shaede gave you more access to the Balance and thus a deeper connection and control of magic, being selected as one of the Five was a level of access to power that no one had the capacity to understand. And just in case that wasn't pressure enough, there was still the fact that I was their second daughter. Amira, my sister, was their first, but she had disappeared during her conversancy in the human realm over fifty years ago. She had also been fair-haired and lacking in shaede before she disappeared. The only image I'd ever seen of her was a painting my mother had once made when I was a little girl. It sat on display on a small table in our sitting room at the Shaede Palace for years, until one day it too disappeared.

I don't think my father liked being reminded of the daughter he lost. I could not disappoint two of the five High Shaedes when they'd already lost so much.

I refocused on the sidewalk squares in front of me, side stepping garbage. Somewhere nearby, coffee cut through the scent of litter, sweat, and manufactured waste. The sun may have been setting, but it was still ninety degrees, and we weren't allowed to use magic in the human realm under any circumstances, least of all just to make our own body temperatures more comfortable.

"I suppose I miss swimming in the tide pools at Pellshaeven," I offered pathetically, but they took it.

"Oh, by the Balance, yes!" cooed Leyanna. "Blue fae might be a bunch of lame yawns, but they have some amazing swim spots. It is so unbearably hot here, and that is coming from a fire faerie." Dru and Leyanna were happy to exchange several cheery memories of favorite swimming locales, and it was just enough to carry us the rest of the way to the library.

The Jefferson Market Library was a larger-than-life gothic structure that more than mildly referenced a medieval church or castle. Its tallest spire was more of a clock

tower, and its bricks were a rich red and creamy color. New York City was interesting in its ability to blend the old with the new, but sometimes it was a little disorienting. You saw a building like that, and you never knew what you were going to get on the inside.

We walked in together and admired the arches of the doorways, some stained-glass windows, and the mixture of dark-carved woods among modern fixtures. Our sandaled feet shuffled into the cool, air-conditioned space that smelled overwhelmingly like every library in any realm, both in the Seam and out. Paper, ink, and wood in all stages of its existence. Knowledge lived here, and our assignment was to simply experience it.

“Shall we split up, or do this one together?” I asked, taking a small journal out of my bag.

“We might as well split up, more likely to find the meaning of life that way,” said Leyanna sardonically as she pushed past us and disappeared up a side stairwell.

“Is it just me, or is she getting worse?” Dru asked as we quietly walked into the open space on the main floor.

It was mostly white walls flanked by oakwood bookshelves and a sea of stark tables and chairs strewn about the middle. Any natural light was fading through some sky lights near the edge of the ceiling, making long fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling come to life.

“Definitely worse,” I agreed. “I think with the conversancy almost up, perhaps looking toward the future is a bit of a pressure point.”

“That’s generous of you. But how are you doing with it?” she asked, her electric green eyes locked on mine. I could see right through her glamour but I must also read

very transparently to her. She was my best friend since I took my first steps across the circular dais in the throne room, and we've been walking alongside each other ever since.

“You know when we were younger and the kids randomly started making fun of my name? Everyone hates it when parents name them after their shaede. It's kind of pretentious—kind of ‘look at me,’ in a way. ”

“Yes, you'd think in some millennia that trend would phase itself out,” she added.

“Exactly. But Opaline it was. And at age seven or eight, or whenever the other kids started getting really mean, you let it slip that your full name was Druleen, and it was all the mean faerielings laughed and talked about for months.”

“Leena was my grandmother's name, and all I heard that year was, need a bib, Drool-  
een ? Don't show that lemon cake to Drool-  
een. No one will ever want to kiss Drool-  
een . Now that I think about it, it wasn't exactly silver Shaede material, but boy did they laugh. It was mean and it was stupid, but what does that have to do with the future? It could have been worse; that really annoying purple Shaede named Glory was supposedly named after the morning glory flower. If I recall, she had it pretty hard too.”

“Yes, well, the point is that you protected me from those kids. You didn't hesitate to insert yourself as a shield and take endless weeks of really bad puns all for your friend, who still, as a full-grown faerie, has no clue who or what she is. Greens always protect. You're a warrior. Leyanna may be abrasive, but she is a fire faerie, an expert at destructive spells. That purple Shaede, Glory? Annoying as hell but can talk to animals and has dusklight magic. I am no closer to knowing what I am supposed to be doing for the realm or how I fit in than I was two years ago, or ten years ago, for that matter.” We had moved to an empty side of the room and leaned against some of the young adult fiction. Dru took my hand, and I felt her magic awaken mine, and I

wondered if she felt it too. It knew her, knew whatever she was going to say was going to be sincere and comforting. It knew that although Dru knew exactly what her role was going to be in the realm, she still felt like there was more she could do than just wave a sword and prevent a fight.

“Opal, none of us can be certain what the Balance had in mind for sure, but you are not your sister, or your parents, or only your shaede—whatever it is. Immortality is a long time; be patient with yourself.” I wrapped her in a hug because, for a moment, I thought she needed one too. “And don’t forget, Astor used to be one of those mean kids yelling ‘here come’s Drool-eeen,’ like all the rest. He is a green Shaede but still acted like a menace. And he grew out of it. Sort of.” She smiled, and I smiled back, thankful for our friendship. “Now, to business. I am going to go find something non-fiction to read and maybe chat it up with a librarian. I’m so behind in my journals; I need some fresh material.” I nodded and opted to stay among the first-floor shelves, absent mindedly picking up a book with a black cover and settling into an uncomfortable chair at an empty table.

Two hours into my highly unrealistic dystopian fantasy, I paused to look around. There were a couple of college age students doing just about anything but studying in the far corner of the room. There were several people who appeared to be listening to musical devices and reading at the same time, which must make them superhuman because that was a skill I’d never been able to master. And a few tables over, there was an older woman who had snuck some kind of food into the library and was repeatedly reaching in her bag, and then munching something behind a book, not as inconspicuously as she was hoping to be. Not exactly journal worthy observations.

I was about to go back to my book where everything was gray, only the children survived, and although there were robots—there was no electricity? When suddenly, a familiar voice said my name.

“Opal?” A full smile from Farris this time, as if he had made it to the end of a

grueling quest and had finally found me. He gestured to one of the open seats at the table, may he? Sure, why not? He set a stack of thick books down along with a Styrofoam cup of coffee with his name written in red on the side.

“Should I feel cheated on?” I said pointing to the cup, not knowing what else to talk to him about other than coffee. This was all so awkward. The city of New York was so large and so filled with people that you should never have to run into the same person twice in one day.

“Although your coffee is amazing, it is not magical,” he said playfully. “Most coffee drinkers need their caffeine in many doses throughout the day, and sadly, I am no different. I already visit your shop too often. I figure twice in one day, and you’d think I was stalking you.” The way he said it was provocative, like there was a question there. Did I want him to?

“And so that is not what this is?” I replied, trying to keep it light. His eyes smiled spiritedly.

“If I said this was fate, I think you’d think that was the worst pick up line in the world. So maybe I should just be honest.” He leaned in closer, as if to tell the world’s greatest truth. “The coffee shop where you work is almost six city blocks away from my apartment. To get there, I pass about seven other places with coffee far superior to yours, just to see your face. Just to hear the daily special from your lips. I don’t even mind the redhead who leers at me, or the long walk sometimes in the rain, sometimes in the snow. But I’ve never been able to come up with a way to tell you before now. Until now, it has been just coffee. But now there is coffee, and you and me, and this table in this library.” He stopped talking. It wasn’t even a question. It was just facts. I was stuck trying to regain some speech myself. This beautiful human was taking his chance on probably the one girl in the entire realm that wouldn’t—and couldn’t—accept his affection.

“I was always under the impression you did your reading at home, for some reason,” I began. Switching subjects was my cowardly attempt to avoid having to flat out reject him. But he was either too good natured or too confident to cower now.

“I am doing some reading on the wonders of the world. Not the typical seven, but the lesser known, and some with darker histories.” He flashed me a cover of a faded textbook with some psychedelic images of Egyptian artifacts overlapping themselves. “This library has some books others don’t.” He pointed to my book. “You never struck me as a zombie apocalypse fan.”

“Ugh, they all turn into zombies? I’m glad you saved me from that. I don’t normally read things like this. I just randomly picked this one out.”

“Well, that’s different. I don’t know anybody who does that—just randomly grab something and jump right in. What do you normally read?” He was probing. And it was working. There was something so easy about talking with him, that I became worried all my secrets were about to come spilling out.

“Nothing really, maybe fantasy,” I lied. This meet-cute or whatever it was needed to be over. I knew it was probably time to go find Leyanna and Dru anyway.

I stood up too quickly and my book fell out of my hands, knocking his hot coffee onto his arm. He flinched as the burn quickly bit into his skin and flashed red, the hot drink creating a small brown pool between us on the floor. Without thinking, I touched the burn and soothed it with my magic. The way any faerie could do without effort. It all happened so quickly, but touching him was a mistake. His forearm may have cooled, but it was as if the heat had traveled up to my cheeks. He was looking at me so ravenously that I was tempted for a moment to deliver myself on a silver plate. But instead, I ripped my hand back.

“I am so sorry,” I said, my throat suddenly dry.

“It’s no problem, really. It hurt for a second but feels fine now. In fact, it actually feels great.” He bent to wipe his damp arm on his jeans. If you looked, you could see his toned muscles contract under his T-shirt, and I was definitely looking. “Listen, I am sorry. I should go,” he said, gingerly gathering up his books. But he didn’t look like he was sorry. He still donned his little half-smile, the one that made him look like he knew me better than he did and was always thinking about his favorite parts. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.” He grinned, with what sounded more like a promise than a goodbye.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

### CHAPTER 3

The lady with the hidden food had seen the spill and miraculously produced a large stack of paper napkins from the depths of her bag. I cleaned up the mess and went to find the others, knowing now I had enough human interaction to journal about for days.

Leyanna and Dru were easily found on the next floor, thumbing aimlessly through titles they had never read, more than ready to go. We traded the stagnant library air for a humid night breeze. Anything was better than the sweaty heat of the day, so I welcomed its caress.

“Does anyone have any idea of what they are going to say to the High Shaedes when we get back?” asked Leyanna into the night. It wasn’t fully dark, and the city never sleeps anyway, so the streets were now a blur of headlights and shiny nightwear. “I’m not asking to compare notes or copy or anything; I’m just generally curious if either of you have a response ready for when they ask us what we have learned.”

We were walking slowly, in no hurry to get back to the tiny, third-floor walkup that was nothing more than three beds crammed on one side and a small kitchen and bathroom on the other.

“My bedroom,” I randomly offered, thinking about that game we were playing earlier. My thoughts had been scrambled since the library. “That is what I truly miss. I miss my bed, lying there watching the starlight, never being too cold or too hot. My drawings. My clothing. Magic. I guess I really do miss it all. And as for the High Shaedes, I am convincing myself that it doesn’t really matter what we say. We came,

we experienced, and we will serve the faerie courts and protect the human realm like every faerie before us. Our feelings about these humans hardly factor into what the Balance may call us to do.” I tried to keep the bitterness out of my voice. I was weirdly angry about the whole situation with Farris—angry that he was openly pursuing me, angry that I kind of liked it, and mostly angry because I had such little control over my magic and broke the rules. Maybe it wasn’t even anger, maybe it was shame.

“That sounds a little bleak, even for you,” said Dru. “And I want to go on record of stating that I, too, miss my bedroom. No offense, but sleeping next to you two is definitely something that made the journal—and not in a good way.”

“That’s fair,” allowed Leyanna.

We continued for a few more steps and then turned onto a less busy street, still blocks away from home. Although the sky was still a dusty periwinkle color, the buildings on this street cast dark shadows on the ground. Without looking up, you would have thought it was midnight. A couple passed us, obviously dressed for a romantic evening out, and a man on a bicycle blitzed by. But other than that, there were no other people out. The shade over the street caused the temperature to dip drastically, and for the first time in weeks, I actually felt a little chill—only it wasn’t a chill. It was something I had only felt once before. The others had suddenly stopped walking as well.

“What is that?” Leyanna asked intently.

“Dark magic,” I whispered, as if I didn’t want it to hear me. We took a few more steps down the street and peered into the nearest alley. There was nothing there, but the magic was getting stronger. It felt foreign, alien, wrong. It didn’t belong in the faerie realm, let alone the human realm, for it belonged to the darkness, to the dark fae of the Shadowlands. The only time I had ever experienced it before was when a

dark faerie emissary was allowed to visit the Shaede Court when I was maybe five? But the experience of being near a being of such unnatural coldness was a feeling I was never ever going to forget.

We kept close together and made it silently to the next alley. We could hear it before we could see it. At the back of the alley, among more litter and discarded furniture, we heard a panting noise. It was a winded, hungry, growling noise reverberating off the surrounding buildings' walls. We moved closer, slowly, Dru with her two small knives drawn that were always strapped somewhere hidden on her body. The sounds of grunting and panting quickly changed to the cracking of bones, the snapping of tendons, and sopping wet licking. Whatever it was, it was so intent on eating its prey that it was too late by the time it noticed we were upon it.

Dru lunged at it, a knife aimed with pinpoint precision directly at its spine. Its back arched in pure agony, flinging her back and smashing her on the ground, forcing her to roll away. Surrounded by so much concrete, Leyanna could only summon a small amount of fire in her palm. The creature, whose features we could barely make out in the shadows, most closely resembled a giant wolf, with a greasy coat and oily scales down its legs and snout. It opened its mouth wide to show off its many rows of tiny, jagged teeth and charged at Leyanna with renewed rage. She let it smack into her but pushed the fire deep into its chest, causing the beast to yelp and back off like it had been poked with a hot prod iron. It was just enough of a retreat for Dru to jump onto its back, grasp the lodged knife for balance, and lean over to slit the creature's throat with the other hand. The beast fell to the ground, burgundy blood flooding the street from its wounds.

I just stood there, incapable and in shock. Leyanna and Dru were assessing some scratches and healing each other, while I just stood there, staring at the animal that was the size of a small hippo, wondering what it was doing here and why I'd been born without any valuable skills. My gaze shifted from the mutilated carcass and drifted over toward what it had been eating.

On a pile of black garbage bags and newspapers lay a body, awkwardly sprawled over the heap. At the foot of the pile was a backpack, brutally torn in two, and a book with a swirly picture of pyramids and hieroglyphs spilling out the side.

“Farris!” I gasped and ran to his side. There wasn’t any time to assess his injuries, there were too many, the only glaringly obvious thing being that he’d lost a lot of blood. Too much. His right arm, which I had so clumsily burned with coffee no more than an hour ago, now wore the mangled markings of thousands of tiny teeth punctures. It was a miracle that his arm was still even intact. Each wound oozed with blood and whatever venomous drool that creature was cursed with. His chest shuddered and his breathing became labored, his lungs combatting every other body function for priority. Without hesitation, I laid my hands on him and thrust all the magic I had into healing power. But as soon as I felt the Balance touch him, my hands seized up like I had touched poison.

“The guy from the coffee shop? What was that thing? And why would it attack him?” asked Leyanna, coming over to survey the damage.

“It’s a shadow beast,” explained Dru, wiping off her knives on the side of her shorts. “We’ve learned about them in training, but I’ve never seen more than pictures. They are the creatures of the Shadowlands. They can have the traits of any animal or monster, as each one is basically a mutation of nature. They are most easily recognized by their dark color, their ever-wet complexion, their violent nature, and their lack of shadow. They don’t cast one—they are one.” She sounded like she was reciting from a textbook, but it still sounded ominous. “Most have toxic saliva, and because they are born from dark magic, these wounds will need a lot more magic than we will ever be able to muster here. We don’t even have enough magic for a portal.”

“We can’t let him die! We can’t!” I shouted. I was crying and didn’t know why. Although faeries live in a peaceful realm that would look like a utopia to most humans, we were still ruthless people. Dying is a part of life, a part of the Balance. In

particular, for humans whose lives are so short by comparison anyway. Older faeries tend to release their magic to the Balance when they choose to be done living. First, they turn white, and then, when they are ready to give up the rest of their magic, they die. When my grandmother, who was two thousand years old, went white, no one even shed a tear. I was taught to just accept these things as the circle of life. Her magic would feed the Balance, and we all just went on with our lives. But looking upon Farris's bruised and anguished face, I suppose I thought he deserved better. He had such a short life to begin with; it shouldn't end like this.

"It's weird, though." Dru stuck her face in to get a closer look at Farris's wounds. "Shadow beasts are known to eat just about anything but are mostly attracted to other magical creatures. Clearly, it was savoring and favoring this right arm. But Farris is about as magical as a toaster."

"How did it even get here?" asked Leyanna. "Only a dark faerie could portal something like this here, but this magic was never supposed to make it out of the Shadowlands, let alone the Seam itself." The Seam was a section of Earth hidden from humans, where all the magical realms dwelled.

"It's my fault," I said quietly. Both friends looked at me confused. "It's my fault," I repeated. "It has to be. By a cruel twist of fate, he was at the library this evening too. He spotted me, we talked a bit, I accidentally spilled his coffee on him, and then before I even knew I was doing it, I healed his burn."

"You broke the no magic rule before I did? Hmm, didn't see that one coming," mused Leyanna, slightly impressed.

"I did. It was practically involuntary, but I doubt my parents will see it that way. As for how it got here, we can try to figure out answers to questions like that later, but for now, we need to get him to a Master Healer—and fast. I don't think he is going to last much longer." Panic was strangling my voice making every word a painful act.

Suddenly, a wind picked up in the darkened alley, blowing dust, dirt, trash, and the smell of wet blood into our faces. A portal materialized in front of us, and through the glowing doorway to another realm, we could see the entrance way to the great hall of the Shaede Court.

“I’ve got him. Let’s go,” commanded Dru, who scooped up Farris like a broken doll and moved toward the portal with urgency. It was time to go home.

### CHAPTER 4

I couldn't stop staring at him. Farris, a human, was in my bed, in my bedchamber at the Shaede Palace. It was surreal—and not in a good way. The attack was still harrowingly fresh in my mind, and only the rise and fall of Farris's smooth, expansive chest and the faint sound of his heartbeat kept me from falling to pieces. Somehow, he had survived. He lay there, deathly still except for the steady breathing, in a deep sleep after being generously dosed with calming potions. The bruising was already fading from his face, and the shadow beast bite marks, though dangerously severe, had not been fatal.

Hours ago, we had crossed the portal into the great hall, into a vast room with dual sweeping staircases, white washed stone walls, and icy blue marble floors. The ceiling was nonexistent, apart from the massive, leafy Corewood trees that grew plentifully around the castle. They leaned over charitably to provide shade from the sun or protection from rain should the need arise. The great hall, which was always the traffic hub of the palace, felt electric. On this night, it was like everyone in court was also moving with a heightened sense of urgency. Servants were flitting to and fro, focused on their work, and not pausing to gossip. A stream of green Shaedes laden with sharp and dangerous weapons headed toward the front gates. The expressions of the courtiers passing us by ranged from focused, to worried, to angry.

As soon as we had crossed the threshold, the portal disappeared, and only my parents' servant and close friend Meridee seemed to be expecting us. The rest of the scene was such aflutter that we were hardly noticed all.

"Meridee, quick!" I called. "This human, his name is Farris. He was attacked by a

shadow beast and needs healing now!” Meridee was a lovely, brown-eyed faerie with long, thick, curly brown hair that she always wore loosely tied on one side with a glass clip in the shape of a daffodil. It was a gift from my mother after the birth of her son, Lydon. She snapped her fingers, and more Naturals appeared, taking Farris from Dru and heading toward the recovery wing of the palace.

“I am going with him. I cannot have him wake up in this realm after what happened to him. He needs to see a familiar face.” He will wake up, I tried to reassure myself. “Just tell my parents I will be there as soon as I can.” And before I gave them a chance to respond, I was already gone.

There was deep penetration of the shadow beast’s fangs, but the Master Healers, including Leyanna’s mother, who shot me some harsh looks over the operating table, were able to set his bones and draw out all the poison. I was allowed to watch, and even though it was brutal and fresh tears rolled down my cheeks each time Farris’s body violently spasmed in his unconsciousness, it was hardly punishment enough for putting his frail life in danger.

He didn’t look that frail, though, for a human. He was still wearing his coffee-stained jeans but had lost his socks and shoes somewhere along the way. He lay there shirtless, crisp white bandages wrapped deftly around his right arm, another set of bandages around the small of his waist. Even through the cloth, you could see the definition of his abdomen and the ridges of his hips that were disappearing into the loose waist of his jeans. Clearly, he was an active human who took care of his body. His blond hair lay in chaos across my pillow. What was I going to say when he woke up? How could I explain?

I looked around the empty room for a lifeline, but found little comfort. I was finally back in my bedroom. My safe, circular section of the castle with its oversized bed, navy velveteen coverlets, and rugs the vibrant colors of precious gems. The long white table along one wall was still home for all my neatly stacked sketchbooks, and



across the room was a matching white armoire filled with tunics and dresses. Faerie lamplights were lit on stands by the table and the bed, filling the room with soft, magically manipulated white light. The windows arched like the ones at the Jefferson Market Library, but instead of stained glass, these were just decorative holes in the stone. Ivy draping over the outside wall of the castle created natural curtains, and the ceiling was nothing but Corewood tree branches and the occasional Perryflower blossom—giant periwinkle-colored flowers whose petals were the size of dinner plates and whose scent was a perfect mixture of lavender and summer rain.

I waved my hand at the sky, and the branches listened and pulled back a little to reveal the deep dark of night. Millions of shining stars were telling me sleep was calling, but I ignored them. My adrenaline might have been running out, but my desire to see Farris through this traumatic ordeal was augmenting with every passing moment.

He stirred a little and winced in his sleep. Not only was the pain going to be awful when he regained consciousness, but he was in for quite the hangover as faerie sleep potions were very strong. He stirred a little more, and then, while I sat there on the edge of my bed holding my breath like I had been for hours, his eyes suddenly fluttered open.

“Farris,” I whispered, trying not to startle him. He blinked slowly, in and out of the dream realm, until he finally focused his eyes on the sky.

“The stars are never this bright in the city,” he said slowly, his voice husky and hoarse.

“We aren’t in the city,” I said, agonizing over every word I chose. How do you explain to someone that their fantasy world was your reality?

He made a move like he was going to sit up, but his upper body tensed with soreness,

and then came an exasperated, terse sound from his lips as the pain in his arm and his sides immediately caught up with him. He arched his head back to take a deep breath and closed his eyes while the tremor of pain shot through him. When he opened them again, they were centered on me, his long lashes lazily blinking as some essence of sleep potion still held its power over him.

“Three times in one day. Now who is the stalker?” He smiled. And it was a full smile. It was a full, dreamy, satisfied kind of smile that one would only wear after victory.

“Well, technically, it is after midnight, so not quite all in one day,” I said.

“I don’t know what kind of hospital this is or what kind of drugs they put me on, but did you know that you are shiny?” He lifted up his good arm, wincing only a little, and reached out to run a long index finger along my arm, instantly inviting goosebumps. Having dropped my glammers as soon as we crossed the portal, I had forgotten that he hadn’t ever seen me like this.

I arranged my long hair on one side of my body so he could clearly see my pointed ears, my hair, and my skin in the lamplight of the room. But these were the actions of a coward. I wondered if somehow his curious half-asleep human mind might just fill in the gaps for me and I could avoid the difficult conversation that was to come.

“You’re beautiful,” he said with a sigh of appreciation.

“You’re not quite conscious enough to be making those types of assertions.” I smiled. The hand that just traveled down my arm now rested on mine. I stared for a moment at the line between where the two contrasting tones of our skin met, thinking that a deeper chasm had never been drawn on any map. Then his body spasmed vigorously, like he was being repetitively stung by an unseen enemy, and his hand suddenly went quickly from my hand to his side. He panted through gritted teeth as the pain slowly passed and his eyes cleared.

“Okay, what happened to me?” he asked, still clutching his side. “I was walking down the street after checking my books out. I remember thinking about ordering Chinese food for dinner. And then something huge hit me from the side, and everything went black. Did I get hit by a car? And why are you here?” he asked, quickly adding, “Not that I mind one bit. ”

The questions were bound to really start flowing now, and even though there was a whole heap of trouble undoubtedly waiting for me in the throne room, he deserved the truth.

“You weren’t hit by a car, Farris. And we aren’t in the city anymore,” I said.

“Right, you said that. But then, where are we? What happened?” he repeated.

I fidgeted with my hair again, and this time he noticed my ears.

“Wait, what?” He didn’t even finish his thought. He just hyper-focused on my features, but it was torture watching his wheels spin. I needed to put him out of his misery; it was only fair.

“It’s incredibly hard to explain this, but you were painfully honest with me at the library, so I guess now it is my turn.” He squinted his eyes in concentration. “You were walking home from the library, like you said. And you were hit—but it wasn’t a car. It was a beast. A part wolf, part reptile, part monster type of beast, and it must have slammed you into an alley and then started eating you.” Farris tilted his head as much as he could while still lying on a pillow. His face went blank, divulging little emotion, so I continued. “I was with Leyanna, my red-haired friend, and Dru—you’ve seen her at the coffee shop, too. We were walking home when we found the beast tearing your arm apart. They killed it quite quickly, actually. And then we got you here as fast as we could so you could receive healing.”

“And where is here?” he asked again, hesitantly, though, like he wasn’t sure he wanted to know anymore.

“Here is the palace of the Shaede Court. It’s the highest court of the faerie realm and my home.” It took him a minute to process, but eventually came the smile, followed by laughter that visibly pained his wounded stomach.

“Faerie realm? And you are what, some sort of faerie queen?” That stole a peal of laughter from me.

“No.” I laughed heartily. “Not even close. In the Shaede Court there are no queens or kings. We are a species divided by colors, called shaedes. The shaedes define our powers. By having a shaede, you are a Shaede. In the simplest of terms, reds—fire. Like Leyanna and my father. My mother is a yellow Shaede, they have plant magic. Greens, battle magic. Blues are water faeries, oranges are mind readers, and purples have creature and dusklight magic. If you don’t have a shaede, then you are considered a Natural. They still possess common faerie magic but are extremely limited in their powers.” I paused, realizing that if I just kept going, I could avoid the incredulous response that was undoubtedly already hanging on Farris’s lips. So I continued.

“The faerie realm encompasses several courts: the Fire, Water, and Forest Courts, the Night Court, and the Shaede Court—the home of the Five. Five High Shaedes hold court here, and they are pretty much the leaders and advisors of all the faerie realm. My parents happen to hold two seats,” I added reluctantly. “And after what happened to you, I’m not all that eager to face them. This is all my fault.”

With his mouth opened slightly, he looked like a man frozen somewhere between fight and flight. He then bit his lip, exercising all the self-control that I seemed to be unable to muster in difficult situations, and slowly let out a shallow breath.

“And what happened to me?” he asked cautiously. “If I was bitten by that beast thing, how is that your fault?”

“Because shadow beasts don’t belong here. Not in this realm, and especially not in a non-magical realm like yours. To best understand, you need to know that faeries and humans used to live together—long before our histories became written works. Stories passed down for millennia depict a very wild planet, our Earth, bursting with life and magic, and beings that possessed it living alongside beings that didn’t. There were times of great cohesion and times of brutal war. Many of the nightmarish creatures of your childhood came from your elders retelling these histories. You give them different names, but they were just various types of ancient fae. Maleficent. Rumpelstiltskin. The Snow Queen. But the faeries of these earliest years, recognizing their superiority and their ability to wipe out the whole species of man, grew tired of warring among themselves. They summoned the Balance to shift in their favor. The Balance is the deep pool of magic that every living faerie is connected to. It is the Balance that gifts us shaedes, and it is the Balance that selects our leaders. It guides us and helps us find equilibrium in an ever-changing world.

“The Balance heard the cries of our ancestors and bore witness to the tumultuousness of the times; thus, it tore an invisible seam down the Earth and let all the magic flow from the world you’ve always known, to the world you have just discovered. All the magic became trapped in the Seam, and the old fae willingly left the rest of the Earth to the humans. The Seam was a magical haven for faeries and other magical creatures, and it had only one cost: to protect the realm of humans and not interfere.”

It had been a long time since I had thought of the old stories my parents and grandmother used to recite to me after dinner to soothe me to sleepiness as a child. Ironically, instead of lulling me to sleep, they always filled me with excitement, pride, and a stirring sense of duty. But looking at Farris’s bandages and remembering his damaged body sprawled under the jaws of the shadow beast, all I felt now was failure.

“Over the years, faeries have interceded in the affairs of humans when the Balance calls for it—or out of generosity. You have names for these faeries too—Santa Claus, for one. But only to provide peace or to counsel, never to harm. That is what me and my friends were doing—serving a period of time in the human realm—to learn more about your kind so we could grow to be better protectors. There is only one place in the Seam that was not directly created by the Balance, and it is called the Night Court, located in the Shadowlands. That is where the dark magic lives, trapped by ancient spells. Dark fae that only deal in death inhabit this place, and they breed and assert control over the type of beast that bit you. They should be unable to portal anywhere outside their lands. So, for that creature to have found itself in Greenwich Village means something is terribly wrong.” I looked up at the sky to see the stars departing, making way for swirls of warm-colored dawn light. I had pretty much abandoned my friends and my parents at this point and felt a growing twinge of guilt stabbing me in the stomach.

“It was the coffee,” I clarified. “The coffee I spilt burned your arm. I healed it, stupidly, without thinking. And then, against all quantifiable odds, that shadow beast smelled the magic on you and came to eat you. I’m sure of it.”

It felt about as bad as I had thought it would, spewing every hard to believe truth about the faerie realm at a human who used to think I was cute and worth flirting with. If the shadow beast hadn’t killed him, I was pretty sure this conversation might, but he just laid there, relaxed and attentive, a thousand questions churning behind his beautiful eyes.

“Show me magic,” he said. Of course, he wanted proof.

“Oh.” I held my palm out, only a little flustered by his request. I created a little flame in the palm of my hand and watched it come alive in the reflection of his irises. He was transfixed and immediately reached out to touch it.

“It’s real fire, Farris,” I said, closing my hand and causing the spell to dissipate immediately. “I don’t think the healers want to see any more of you tonight. Besides, a burn is what got you into this mess to begin with.”

He smiled sheepishly. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yep. I said, okay. ” He took his one good arm and stretched it up behind his head to prop himself up a little. He didn’t even grimace with the movement, meaning the healing was still succeeding in overtaking the poison.

“I’m sorry,” I said with an edge of disbelief to my voice. “But just to be clear, I just told you I am a faerie from a magical, invisible realm and that you just got bit by a monster that is supposed to be trapped in the shadows, and all you are going to say is... okay?”

“I’m not not shocked, Opal.” He smiled as he said my name. “I think I will just choose to believe it. Maybe it comes from living in a world without magic but always looking for it anyway. Who am I to ignore it, especially now when it’s sitting right in front of me with such a beautiful face?”

Not exactly the response I anticipated, and with the sun on the rise, the blush on my cheeks was undeniable.

“Do you have any other questions? I mean, very few humans have ever even seen the faerie realm. ”

“Just one. I think.” He paused to consider his wording, then asked, “If all faeries are either Naturals or Shaedes, which one are you?”

“That is the question, isn’t it?” I said, bitingly. How quickly my frustration and anger came bubbling to the surface about this one very basic problem in my life. “You are either born with your shaede, or you become one by around... well, now. It hasn’t happened for me for some unknown reason, but I’m no Natural either. When my parents see that I have not yet transformed and when they hear, if they haven’t already, that my misstep in the library was the catalyst that summoned dark magic to harm a human, dreams of their legacy will die.”

“I’m sure they love you. They should be able to get past it,” he offered kindly. But I shook my head.

“They are definitely past it. I had a sister that disappeared years ago, so all I have to do is basically exist to have their love, but what I want—what I need—is their approval. I have grown up watching them be so impactful, so significant. To me, they have always been larger than life. And now, once they see me today, I know I will always be their daughter—but as a member of their court, I will be irrelevant. Inconsequential. Nothing.”

“When I look at you, I don’t see nothing.” He reached for my hand again, and I let him intertwine his strong fingers with mine. For a moment, all I wanted to hear was what he did see in me. I wanted to leave my perch on the edge of despair and join him where everything was light, fun, and undemanding. But this was the Shaede Court, and although life could be very easy for a faerie, being an anomaly was always going to be arduous.

“You are very kind for saying that. And for listening to me complain. And for not seeming to hold a horrible grudge against me for what happened to you.”

“If getting hurt means I get to have you take care of me, then show me some stairs I can throw myself down.”



“You’ve got to stop saying things like that,” I said but smiled wide despite myself. “Save it for the next pretty girl who pours your coffee.”

He grabbed one of the many pillows that surrounded him and whacked me in the head with it, wincing a tad as his abdominal muscles stretched against the wounds. “I’ll save nothing and take my chances, thank you very much.” His eyes were shining, full of playfulness and promise, and I didn’t have the heart or the energy to argue.

“Well, I should leave you to get some rest. It should only be a few days until you are healed enough to portal home. I need to go report to the High Shaedes, but in the meantime, would you like some more sleep potion? To help you relax?”

He tilted his gaze back to the brightening sky and settled a little deeper into the bed. “Opal, I walk those perilous extra city blocks for you on the daily but would easily cross a hundred portals across a thousand realms to wake up in your bed. So, no. I am going to lie here and wait for you with my eyes wide open, because I don’t want to miss a thing.”

There really wasn’t any way I could respond to that, so I reluctantly released his fingers from mine and left the room to face my fate.

### CHAPTER 5

What awaited me in the throne room was not what I was expecting. I wasn't sure what exactly I was expecting, but as I walked through the gilded doors, the great room was spilling over with faeries. It would seem everyone from court was clustered into the space, their whispers bouncing off the walls, their nervousness palpable.

The throne room was an intimidating space even without the crowd. It was a large rectangular room with all the most powerful elements of nature on display. The walls and floor were white stone, and the ceiling was an intricate and artistic weaving of Corewood tree branches that formed a perfect dome at its center. At night, it glowed a luminescent blue, but in the light of day, it broke the sunlight into a million different shapes, now cast upon the anxious onlookers' faces. There were giant torches as thick as tree trunks burning eternal flames in each shadowy corner of the room. A large freshwater moat encircled the raised dais where the five empty thrones of the High Shaedes sat gleaming, a small stone bridge the only access to the dais from the main floor.

I scanned the crowd quickly, catching many probing glances aimed my way. I was still dressed in my human clothes, but I was certain that was not the reason for their stares. I tried to keep my chin up as I finally located Dru's froth of green hair toward the front of the room.

"Where have you been?" She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward where she and Leyanna had found some breathing room near the front of the dais.

"Is the human still alive?" asked Leyanna, trying desperately to sound disinterested.

“He is; he is healing. Your mom was incredible, Leyanna. Though she didn’t look too pleased with me. Everything is fine for now, but what is this all about? Have you spoken to the High Shaedes yet?”

Dru shook her head. “People have been portaling in here for hours from all over the place. I heard a few faeries from Water Court talking, and apparently the human realm was not the only one assaulted by shadow beasts. Everyone is waiting to hear what the High Shaedes might know, but no one seems to have answers. All the faeries on conversancy have been called back. That’s all we know.” A flood of shadow beasts was awful news, but a part of me was thankful for the distraction from my own personal problems.

“Opal? Is that you?” came a familiar voice from behind me.

“Astor!” I exclaimed, turning to wrap my arms around the six-foot-six warrior. He had obviously not changed at all physically while I was away—we stop aging noticeably around age twenty. But his was a face too pretty for battle. With a shaede so green that his lips held a touch of the color, even his arms were now showing veins tinted just slightly with a greenish hue. He wore the traditional tunic of the green soldiers, pale leather pants, and knee-high boots. His sword glimmered from where it was strapped behind his back, a weapon that looked gigantic even against his towering frame. Faerie men were not very muscular; they didn’t have to be. Their strength came from their magic, unlike humans’, who had to build their bodies from scratch. But Astor always seemed a little more toned than the average faerie.

Embracing Astor felt remarkably comfortable and familiar. When I eventually released him from my arms, I gave him the best smile I could muster while Dru and Leyanna pretended not to be standing right next to us eavesdropping on every word that was spoken.

“So, can you believe all this? Shadow beasts all over the courts. Do you know

anything about it? It cut our conversancy short.” What a stupid thing to say. I hadn’t seen this man for two years, and all I could do was state the obvious?

“Opal,” he repeated my name, taking both my hands in his and awkwardly looking me over. “Your hair.”

“Yes, I know. I think the Balance has a sick sense of humor or something. My shaede never came in.” More of the obvious.

“You know, I’m sure there will still be a special place at court for you.” He said the word special like it was a dirty thing. “I’ve been very busy, you know? Lots of patrolling. Even had to force a troll out of the Gaylenswood and back to its realm. They are prone to wander, you know, but also get easily agitated.” I nodded mechanically. He adjusted his sword a little, glancing around us, then said loudly, “I’m glad you are safely back home, Opal. But I think we should go back to being friends instead of lovers. Two years is a long time, and who really knows what the future has in store?”

Faeries of every shaede turned to look at us. On any other day, I might have even agreed with his assessment, but the way he was staring at my hair, the twinge of disgust in his eyes paired with the public rejection, all pointed to something more sinister.

“Are you actually breaking up with me because I have no shaede?” I asked, refusing to succumb to an outburst of emotion.

Astor held his hands out, as if he had said all that needed to be said. Dru and Leyanna were now obvious participants in our discussion.

“Astor, you better slither to some other corner of this room out of my line of sight, or I will char you beyond recognition. Starting with your smallest parts,” Leyanna said

to the room, dramatically pretending to scan his body with her finger and stopping right between his legs.

It would take a lot more than public emasculation to put even the tiniest dent in an ego the size of Astor's, but he was ready to be done with me and wanted the world to know. He kept his empty hands outstretched in an effort to feign innocence as he disappeared back through the crowd.

"What an absolute ass. I am so sorry, Opal," Dru said, putting an arm around me.

"I guess Leyanna was right after all, but isn't it terrible that deep down I'm not all that surprised. That was the reaction I expected from everyone else—why wouldn't it be his as well?"

"There is nothing wrong with having high expectations," stated Leyanna. "But someone like Astor will always disappoint. His favorite person in the world will always be himself. He probably could only make love in front of a mirror. Tell me I'm wrong. But I'm not wrong, am I?" Dru looked at Leyanna with renewed horror. I hadn't really given our mating much thought these past two years since there really wasn't much to ruminate about. We had courted a long while before mating after the Summer Solstice festival, and then it was only a few months before I had left on conversancy. I guess it never really felt like it was going to be forever with Astor, but I hadn't imagined that it would end this way.

A door opened unexpectedly toward the left of the throne room, and all musings of my short, intimate life with Astor were erased in an instant. The five High Shaedes entered silently, one in front of the other, crossing the stone bridge right in front of us and taking their respective seats on their thrones. Each wore an ornate circlet of silver that peeked out of their long, hooded robes. My father in crimson, my mother in saffron. The other Shaedes also wore their corresponding colors: green, blue, and orange. All five looked over the crowd with weariness in their eyes.

The orange Shaede, a man named Lorspire, spoke first in a low, deep voice filled with warning. "I sense in all your minds a curiosity and a fear that this realm has not known for ages. We wish we could bring comfort and understanding to the faerie courts that have been invaded these past forty hours by the dark magic of shadow beasts, but alas, there is little to tell and lots still to learn." My eyes flashed to my parents, stoic and imperial-looking on their thrones. Their flawless features were shadowed by their hoods, their eyes showing signs of deep fatigue.

"We call Leyanna, Dru, and Opal before the seat," commanded the blue Shaede called Betta.

There was nowhere to hide now, so we crossed the bridge to the dais and stood timidly before the Five. Dressed in human clothes, exhausted from the whole ordeal with the shadow beast, and staying up all night, I thought I might collapse at their feet. Dru, without hesitancy, flung herself into her father's arms. The green Shaede, Brilan, welcomed her warmly, clearly relieved that she was back unscathed and perhaps even a little impressed. He was proud of his daughter, who had taken on a beast and lived to tell the tale. A twinge of jealousy, followed by the heat of shame, made my cheeks burn.

Leyanna and I knelt before the thrones and stayed there until we were spoken to.

"Opal," came my mother's voice. I looked up at her slowly, ready for pity, bracing myself for disappointment, but saw in her golden eyes only relief as well. She held out her hand to me, and I took it, noticing her fingers felt cold as she pulled me to my feet and into an embrace. "I am so glad you are back," she whispered against my hair. "There is darkness coming for us, and we are all stronger together."

My father was suddenly there beside us, his firm hand on my head, stroking my hair, and echoing my mother's warm words of welcome. It was a touching scene, this homecoming. Our audience made soft, empathetic noises, and as I turned to join

Leyanna, I even witnessed a few tears.

“We are glad you are home safely,” continued Betta. She was a whisper of a woman. So short and thin that her cerulean robes looked like they might be trying to swallow her. She was one of the oldest faeries at the Shaede Court and one of my parents’ best friends. “It would be helpful to hear your account of what happened in the human world. We understand you witnessed a shadow beast attack a human unprovoked.”

“We didn’t see the attack happen, or not—at least not how it started. We arrived at the scene when the human was unconscious and about to be eaten by the beast,” explained Dru. I hoped she would just keep doing all the talking, she was good at sounding official and was definitely more involved in the attack than I was.

“Do you have any idea why the dark creature targeted this particular human?” Betta asked.

Dru and Leyanna fell silent. I guessed no one was going to sell me down the river but me on this one.

“It’s this one,” said Lorspire, pointing directly at me without even giving me a chance to confess. “She thinks she is the reason that he was attacked.”

“It was me,” I admitted, directing my response to my parents. “I had accidentally used magic to heal him earlier that evening—the shadow beast seemed to almost smell my magic on him.” I shuddered, remembering the wet sucking noises of the beast over Farris’s limp body.

If the High Shaedes were upset at my mistake, they didn’t show it. Betta leaned over to whisper something to my father, and Dru’s father spoke quietly to Lorspire.

Betta nodded and began again. “You were right to kill the beast; they are insatiable

creatures that feast on fear and magic. But three such young fae are lucky to still be alive. What you encountered was one of the smaller, less intelligent breeds, where there are some the size of dragons. Others often seem impossible to kill with impenetrable flesh or supernatural speed and strength. This realm has not seen active dark magic cross its threshold in many millennia. The human realm is ours to protect, thus they have experienced even less of its evils. Shadow beasts are the creatures of the Night Court, forever imprisoned in the realm of shadows, as we know. They cannot portal out. But it wasn't just a shadow beast attack. Seven fae have died, and twelve still remain missing. Fearing the worst, we had to send our soldiers to hunt the beasts, unsure of what other dark magic might be at play. But our warriors needed to be better prepared to effectively eradicate these creatures and defend against unknown threats." She paused for a moment and exchanged a serious look with my father. My mother was looking at me, and I swore I could see a tear running down her cheek.

All five Shaedes stood up simultaneously and removed their hoods. My mother's gorgeous goldenrod ringlets had turned stark white, as had every head of the other High Shaedes.

There was a collective gasp in the court.

Emotions ran so high that the room rippled with magic. The fire torches plumed erratically in their respective corners. The moat started to boil and steam. Perryflower petals rained down on the crowd as if the trees were crying. Even without explaining the strange change in their appearances, we all knew. In an effort to better equip our armies, the High Shaedes had done what many of their predecessors had been forced to do in times of uncertainty—they had released most of their magic into those in need.

Dru collapsed to her knees by my side, sobbing. Leyanna knelt down to console her. I tried not to look at my parents like they were already gone. Plenty of Shaedes still



live for hundreds of years even after releasing most of their magic, but something about seeing them all standing there, so quickly and irrevocably changed—it seemed dangerous. Risky. The five most powerful faeries our people knew had just become our most vulnerable.

“Mother, why?” I squeaked. My voice sounded broken, easily drowned out by the wails of the court.

“The power of the Five is not really ours to possess, Opal. We had no choice. It is as Betta said, the shadow beasts were overpowering. They were killing our people, tearing through villages. It is our duty and our destiny to protect the realms. I am so sorry.”

The fact that she was apologizing to me, as if in this moment she should waste her breath on such a sentiment, absolutely broke my heart. I wanted to run to her, to throw myself at both of them and find a way to put them in a bubble. To protect them from any kind of harm in their weakened state. But Betta remained standing, urging the crowd to still, and gestured for me and Leyanna to take Dru off the dais. I stole a glance at Brilan, who smiled sympathetically at his daughter.

“Although it is difficult, my friends,” Brilan began, “there is no better way to spend a life than to serve the Balance and partake in its blessings. I think I speak for all of the High Shaedes, that to know we spelled our magic to end this invasion of beasts is a high honor indeed.” He looked to his right and left, and all the High Shaedes nodded their assent. “Of course we will be holding a renewal ceremony, since you deserve leaders who are at their best. Luckily, tomorrow night is a celestial event, so the Balance can be summoned to select five successors to these thrones among our strongest and most capable Shaedes. But for now, to better understand how these beasts escaped their confinements and why they might be hunting our magic, we must entertain the princes of the Night Court. We must have answers.”

The thought of a renewal ceremony was bittersweet. On one hand, the thought of anyone taking my parents' seats made me ill. Looking up at them on the dais was the only childhood I'd ever known. They were always conducting ceremonies, throwing palace parties, meeting with high fae from other courts, and having serious conversations behind closed doors. I'd grown up splashing in the moat and climbing on the thrones. But on the other hand, they had served for almost two hundred years. I was so worried about my own shortcomings all the time. Maybe it would be a sort of reprieve to get to worry about them for a while. Once another faerie took their seat, I imagined a role that I actually could play in this life. Maybe I would even move them to the Gaylenswood to dwell with the forest faeries or Langbone Pass, the Fire Court.

"How is this happening?" whispered Dru hoarsely. "And now we are inviting the Dark Princes to court? I wish there was a shadow beast somewhere nearby to stab."

"Well, it's at least nice to see your grief has moved on to anger," mumbled Leyanna.

Meridee appeared at my father's side. He gave her some instructions, and she went to stand to the right of the dais. Most likely because the High Shaedes couldn't afford to expend any more power, Meridee set about making a portal in a shadowy part of the room. I didn't know much about the Dark Princes other than their origin story and their banishments—the most important detail being that they were trapped inside their realm, unable to portal anywhere the sun touches. If they were invited, they were allowed to portal out, but even then, they were confined to the shadows.

I scanned the room quickly, noticing that the portal was taking form right on the edge of where the Corewood tree coverage was giving the greatest shade.

"They are some of the oldest known faeries, you know. I wonder if they look as demonic as they are depicted in books," said Leyanna.

"Living without sunlight probably does something to the complexion," I mused,

trying to focus on the portal and not my parents' tense figures sitting on the edge of their seats.

The portal jumped to life, and Meridee stood aside, allowing the High Shaedes a clean line of sight to the supernatural doorway. The crowd of fae had never been so quiet, holding some sort of collective breath for the unwanted guests' arrival.

The first man that stepped through was medium height and pale, even against the crisp white shirt he wore, which was tucked into black leather pants. He wore a long, floor-length, black vest that was lined with crimson and made of a fabric that looked almost liquid when he moved. He had long, night-black hair that fell past his waist, and his facial features were graphically drawn, every line with a severe edge.

The second man who entered the space was clearly related to the first. Perhaps an inch or two taller, but the same porcelain skin, the same raven-colored hair—although his was cut in short wavy curls that framed his rectangular face. He wore a red leather jacket that also dusted the floor, but with nothing underneath, exposing his pale, naked chest and abdomen, which contrasted harshly against his black pants and leather boots. His eyes were haunting, wide and deep jade, outlined by thick lashes that gave him a strangely effeminate quality despite the sharp, masculine edge of his jaw.

There were two other men who crossed the portal behind them that were armed to the hilt, a battle axe drawn in one hand while the other carried a sword of dark, gleaming metal. They were also dark-haired, but darker skinned. I could see scars on their faces even from where I stood on the other side of the room. Faeries with any sort of markings were a rare thing since our healing powers usually restored our bodies back to their original flawless forms. Whatever had cut these men must be dark magic, indeed.

The last to cross into the shadows was a smaller figure hidden beneath a dark cloak

made from the same fluid material as the Dark Prince's vest. The hooded guest floated over to stand with the princes, and I heard Lorspire say to the other Shaedes that he wasn't able to hear any of the newcomers' thoughts. Apparently, he was locked out of their minds.

My father arose, and I grabbed Dru's hand out of sheer anxiety. He walked nearer to the edge of the dais to address the mysteriously looking group. "Welcome to the Shaede Court. Thank you for coming. Ciaran, Edmyn, it is an honor to meet you."

The long-haired faerie stepped forward, the toe of his boot inches away from the cascading sunlight. He smiled wickedly, as if the taste of danger delighted him. The portal remained open behind them, a blurry frame of darkness.

"And not a day too soon, I should think." He winked at no one in particular. "It's only been certain millennia ago that I graced these holy halls of great magic. I can only imagine what has kept the Shaede Court so distant for so long, without as much as a Summer Solstice greeting or even a wellness check. For all you know, we could all have been dying or dead." He smiled like the thought gave him secret pleasure. "I am Ciaran, Prince of the Night Court. This"—he gestured gallantly toward his taller, curly-haired equal—"is Prince Edmyn, my brother. We have come at your request, but the pleasure, I assure you, is all ours."

"That is a clever turn of phrase and a bold step to accept an invitation to a realm that you have undoubtedly been attacking with your Balance-forsaken monsters," said Betta angrily.

"Perhaps it was a bold step to invite someone to your court who you accuse of attacking your realm. By the way, white is a beautiful color on you, Betta. You wear it well." Ciaran smiled sweetly, and this time I could see that several of his back teeth came to points as sharp as tacks. Betta looked like she was going to lash out, but my father continued speaking.

“How did you do it?” he commanded, his tone impatient. Ciaran glanced behind him, where Edmyn stood impassive, looking almost bored, whereas the entire crowd of fae was leaning in to listen, fear and anticipation causing a stirring of my own magic inside.

“Oh, I don’t know,” lamented Ciaran dramatically. He obviously loved the attention. “Perhaps the better question is why did I do it?”

“So you admit it?” asked Brilan. “You admit to releasing wild shadow beasts into the realms?”

“Oh I’ll admit to more than that,” Ciaran crooned. “I portaled my pets to cause a little mischief, yes. And I might have even borrowed some of your faeries, just for a little while. But really, my greatest offense is this.” He took one glorious step into the sunlight, to the horror of all present. At first, everyone turned away or covered the eyes of their children, bracing themselves for his consequential bursting into flames. But when there were no flames and no hysterical screams, everyone just gaped in disbelief that the ancient dark faerie of legend had somehow broken his curse and could now walk freely among them.

“What is this kind of magic?” Betta asked. Then, addressing the other High Shaedes, she stated the obvious. “If he can walk in the sun, then he can step out of the Shadowlands and portal anywhere he chooses. The beasts answer only to him, so they can be called to go anywhere now.”

Ciaran looked maniacally happy, as if he had been waiting an eternity for this moment, and he pretty much had. “But wait, my dear High Shaedes, there is more. Something of particular interest to the red and yellow of you.” My parents looked confused. Ciaran was building up to something. He closed his eyes and appeared to be basking in the warmth of the sun on his face for one long moment before reaching out his hand to the small, cloaked stranger. Edmyn’s eyes became laser-focused on

the High Shædes now, and when his face was concentrated on something, all his features came alive and were really quite beautiful .

The cloaked figure reached out a slender hand and allowed themselves to be led into the sunlight, right before the dais.

“I would not show up to your court without a gift of sorts,” said Ciaran. He threw back the hood of his companion to reveal a faerie who I had never met but whose face I had memorized from hours of staring at its portrait. Amira. My sister. My lost sister.

### CHAPTER 6

Without even blinking, I was suddenly up on the dais next to my father. I had to get a closer look. She was radiant, as iridescent as myself, with long, wavy sherbet-colored hair. Her nose was a little longer than mine, echoing our father's, but we both shared our mother's expressive oval eyes. They were twinkling back at me, perhaps with the same sort of mischief that was in Ciaran's. I knew she knew who I was. She had to. Ciaran, on the other hand, was relishing his surprise.

"Amira, darling. You didn't say you had a sister!" He lifted her hand and pressed it to his lips. "What a lovely little family reunion. Is it not?"

"It is," my sister said, beaming. Apparently, this was her moment to shine as well. "Hello, Mother. Father. And sister, I suppose." My mind quickly tried to weave together how my sister might have left her conversancy and ended up in the good graces of the Night Court prince, but there was no thread long enough, smooth enough, for it to make sense. I just stared at her, trying not to be afraid of her. Almost hoping that she was some sort of prisoner or under a dark magic spell that forced her to be there, batting her eyelashes at the Dark Prince and smirking at my parents, whom she abandoned .

"Amira," my mother whispered. She and my father looked destroyed.

"As you are all so infatuated with the ' how , ' allow me to indulge you," said Ciaran excitedly. "Amira's love has turned me from a shadow prince to a daywalker. While you all are so concerned with your precious Balance and its connection to only a select few, this beautiful angel saw what all of you are blind to—that there is

something worth refining in just about everything. Even a dark old soul like me.”

“There has not been refinement magic in this realm since the dragons left,” sputtered Betta indignantly.

Ciaran was triumphant, standing there and showing off his prize. He could not be dismissed. Edmyn might have been smirking, but otherwise just lazily gazed about the crowd. For a moment, our eyes met, and I refused to let him see my pain. My sadness and surprise transformed into anger, and my attention turned to Amira.

“Why, Amira?” I demanded, to the astonishment of the court. “Why would you willingly leave this family, this court that was your home, to settle with something like him ?”

“Oh, dear sister, you do ask the only question that really matters.” She stepped before the whole of the throne room, addressing all the concerned fae. “This was my home. It was where I lived, dreamed, learned, and grew as a faerie. But you five...” She looked over her shoulder with disgust. “You sit up on your high seats and perpetuate the same hierarchal garbage that our ancestors and the ones before them did, squeezing all the juice out of the fruit that is this realm for your divine purposes, and then casting the seeds and the rind into the trash. Naturals are slaves to this system, and Shaedes line up to accept all the glory.

“I crossed the Seam on my conversancy and observed the human plight. I saw their weaknesses and bought into the duty that was ours to protect them. But I also saw them thrive. I witnessed them overcome diversity and pivot when obstacles blocked their path. I started to wonder if they needed us as much as we think they do—as much as all the High Shaedes say they do. We, who are so puffed up by the endless ego that comes with being of magical descent. But when my shaede never formed, I was at a crossroads. Go back home to the disappointment of my parents and receive the looks I’m sure you, sister, have undoubtedly received; go about my business



doing whatever menial tasks the court would find for me to preserve the Balance for all eternity; or I could adventure. Make my own path. I could take a sabbatical of sorts and search out what great evils they've been shielding us from. If the humans don't seem as helpless as we've been taught, perhaps the dangers that had been hidden from me my entire life weren't as perilous as we'd been told.

“So, I slipped back in the Seam and headed north to lands we are normally not welcome in. From the shores of the Gaylen Sea, I could see Jovii's island, but a portal would not open for me there. I begged for a ride from a few talking lemurs that were sailing back after a storm had shored them on our beaches. They were happy to take me, even though the Court of Beasts doesn't really interact with faeries. I spent a year, there learning their ways and trying to understand their magic. But after the year passed, they asked me to leave. By then, I understood that faeries do not belong among the talking beastfolk, and that was the whole point of Jovii creating their realm in the first place. So I sailed further north and was dropped off in Corynthia.”

“You dared step foot in the lands of the Dragon Court?!” my father erupted.

“Yes,” Amira said, jutting up her chin. “What did I have to gain if there was nothing to lose but knowledge? Better magic? A good story? The dragons, however, would not receive me. They actually were quite uninterested in the fact that I was even there at all. So I just hung around the castle, if you could call it that. It was more like a giant mountain with a cave system so vast that I'm pretty sure I was lost once for about a week. I stayed mute and just observed, learning that most dragons were still the same dragons from the beginning of time. The ones that our ancestors harnessed and rode in war against the realms of man. They have long memories, and although they prefer to live in peace, they do not care much for faerie folk or the humans that used to hunt them. I stayed a year there too, give or take, and then traveled further.”

It was hard to believe my sister had only lived a few more decades than I but had already seen more of the world than I would probably in my entire immortal

existence. I, too, had been at a crossroads. I just don't think I realized it at the time. And now, as horrified as I was by her choices, I felt a mix of jealousy and awe that she was able to persevere so much with so little.

“Over the next many years, I saw bits of all the faerie courts,” she continued. “Sliding in and out undetected as the daughter of a High Shaede. Then I spent a few more years with tribes of shapeshifters and trolls, centaurs, and a realm of wizards in the south that was particularly fun. But one day, when I was milling around the vastness that is the Gaylenswood—I went as far west as I could go. The edge of the forest there opens up to a golden field of yellow daisies, and the scent of strawberries permeates the area. It was like ambrosia to the nose. The sun was so warm and vibrant, even though winter was knocking. It was like there was a spell on the meadow to freeze the perfect day on an endless loop. Because there was a spell. There was a spell and a curse, we all know the story. I walked until I found myself at the very edge of the Gaylenswood meadow, at the foot of the darkest hills in the faerie realm.”

She paused for effect and then continued, “It was as we have called it in stories over time—Death's Door. Others call it Death's Haeven, and the oldest among us refer to it as Draku's Lair. The Shadowlands stretched wide before me, in both directions, hills of black dust and a sky that was forever clouded. Dark and angry-looking. The nightmarish things these dark fae have done, their sins against faeries and humans alike, are too numerous to count. We all grow up learning the fear, and fear I had. But so much had surprised me in my travels that there was no going back now. I had to face it. So I climbed the tallest hill to the windowless castle of the Night Court and spent years getting to know the dark ones our kind have chosen to forget.”

Ciaran voraciously rolled his eyes up and down my sister, and I felt ill. She went back to stand beside him, a stark contrast to him in every way.

“You see, High Shaedes, my lovely Amira is a freethinker, an intellectual. She, at

twenty, was more enlightened than any of you at two hundred or two thousand. At first, I was a little skeptical.” He chuckled a little with my sister. “A high-born faerie from the Shaede Court just happens to wander into the Shadowlands alone? It seemed like some sort of trap at first. But unlike you all, who would never dare entertain a dark faerie in your homes had the situation been reversed, we invested the time to get to know her. Edmyn took the longest to warm up to her, of course, but he isn’t much of a conversationalist, and Amira was ravenous with her questions.”

“I eventually grew to know him and his court well,” Amira explained. “And to know Ciaran was to love him. I couldn’t help myself. Something awoke inside of me, and when we mated, my magic somehow overturned some of his curse. The invasion of the shadow beasts was to get your attention, and now”—she turned toward Ciaran and put a loving hand on his face—“I think they are ready to listen, my love.”

The whole thing was very unreal. It seemed plausible that she was driven to run, I could identify with her desire to flee the pressures and expectations of the Shaede Court. I could understand the traveling and the exploring, who didn’t dream of seeing dragons someday? Maybe, if I really sat awhile, in the depths of my soul I could visualize crossing into the Shadowlands. She was right there, it was the last great adventure, maybe she had a death wish. Maybe. But this grotesque love affair with the Prince of Night was enough to make me want to hurl the contents of my near-empty stomach across the dais. It was the ultimate betrayal of her family and her people. Ciaran and Edmyn were not bad-looking, or poorly mannered for what little we knew of them, but the dark fae were murderers. They only dealt in dark magic and death. They were practically the living dead themselves. It was abhorrent.

“This leads me to the real topic at hand.” Ciaran’s over-the-top, sickening charm had suddenly dried up and his voice held a serious edge. “It has been too long that we dark fae have been imprisoned for the sins of our ancestors.”

“Your ancestors?” repeated Betta. “You have just admitted to attacking and

kidnapping; you hold plenty of crimes of your own.”

“Perhaps,” he mused. “But what I have accomplished the past few nights is nothing compared to the suffering and fear I can and will expose your realm to if my demands are not met.”

“Your demands?” repeated Father.

“Yes. First, you must create a seat for me at the court,” Ciaran said matter-of-factly. “We are part of the realms of faeries; I deserve a say in the affairs of our kind. Second, you must require a host of your faeries to mate with our court. In the spirit of freedom, Amira willingly bedded Edmyn in hopes of bestowing the same daywalking gifts upon him.” Edmyn’s face remained passive, but my sister’s face betrayed her. Sleeping with Ciaran’s brother was not something she did too willingly. “Alas, it was a phenomenon that could not be recreated. We don’t really understand this magic. But if it was possible once, it is likely that with the right spell and circumstances, it can happen again. Thus, in good faith, if we are to work together, we should be blended together. This should be a common goal. There has to be more of this refinement magic in the realm, and your Shaedes must be willing to do their part to help us find it. Perhaps we start with this one.” He was pointing at me.

My father quickly moved to stand in front of me, a corporal shield from Ciaran’s hungry eyes.

“Edmyn and our other loyal subjects deserve their day in the sun too,” Ciaran persisted. “Amira agrees that there is more to the Night Court than a history of blood and violence. And I think if others conceded, your magic might heal ours over time. In return for the respect and privilege that we deserve, we will maintain a strong peace between our courts. The shadow beasts will mind their manners, and we will return to you your stolen people. But a word of warning,” he advised. “This portal will close, and another can and will open in any realm of my choosing. And the

attacks that will ensue will leave your people begging at the foot of our hills, praying to the darkness for mercy. We will give you three days to decide.”

“There will never be a day that this court, or any other, will beg at your doorstep,” growled my father. “You and your kind are an unkillable parasite, and the very thought that you think your demonic progeny have some sort of claim to the men and women of this realm or our highest leadership makes it clear that the same disease that has taken hold of your magic and your bodies has also taken hold of your minds. I’m sorry, Amira”—he gazed woefully at his daughter—“but you are forsaken.”

There was a rush of wind, and the fire pillars that framed that side of the room fell over to intersect and create a cross of fire, blocking Ciaran and his entourage from everything else in the room. I fell to the ground as water from the moat and an even more violent wind ran over me rampantly, pelting the dark fae with such force that their cloaks tore and their faces contorted with pressure that was otherworldly. Face-down on the dais, I could still see the faces of my parents seriously engaged with a rush of magic that no normal faerie could ever accommodate. So much magic. Lorspire moved to put his hand on Betta, gifting her whatever power he had left, and then his eyes went full white before he fell lifeless to the ground. Over near the portal, Ciaran was using some sort of his own magic to stay rooted in his spot, but the winds overpowered Amira, and she went flying violently back through the portal and back into the Shadowlands.

“No!” I shouted. Brilan was the next to go limp and fall. Even through the howling winds, I could hear Dru’s screams as the entire court watched her lose her father. I cranked my neck to look back at the portal. The guards were gone, forced back to their court. Edmyn was also holding firm but seemed indifferent to either side’s gross show of power and simply turned to exit through the portal of his own accord.

Ciaran grimaced against the force of the remaining Shaedes; perhaps it had been his plan all along to drain them. His boots started skirting backward, and he was losing

ground at an excruciatingly slow pace, but he was still losing nonetheless. He raised a hand against the winds, trying to cast something dark, but then it all happened simultaneously. I felt an enormous blast of magic go soaring over my head. Ciaran used his magic to fling Meridee into his arms. He disappeared into the portal with her as the magic slammed him into submission, and the portal disintegrated just as the final three High Shaedes dropped dead on the dais.

### CHAPTER 7

When I was a child, I hated storms. It didn't matter that I knew where they came from or that the Corewood trees could sense a storm brewing miles away and would quickly weave together their great branches to provide an impassable canopy from the wind and rain. As soon as the thunder rolled throughout the halls of the palace bedchambers, I was out of bed and running quickly down the hall to my parents' room. When I was very young, I would be whimpering. They would hear me, throw back the covers, and allow me a safe, warm haven between them. My own little nest of comfort, while the winds howled and the rains pounded out a spirited symphony against the protection of the Corewood leaves. My mother would smooth my long hair back while my father would say, "You know, Opal, it's just the blue faeries doing their job," or "Did you hear that thunder? Someone must have made Betta extra grouchy tonight."

As a slightly older child, sometimes when it stormed, I would still find myself at the side of my parents' bed. I didn't really need them to hold me; I was no longer pushed to tears so I could enter undetected. Sometimes it was only the sight of them there, lying wrapped up together, breathing steadily and calmly, that was enough to give me courage. If they were lying there that peacefully, then I could rest too. But now they were gone. Violently stripped away from me. And I feared I would never find rest again.

So many images railed through me in the few minutes just after the portal closed. Meridee's final stunned expression as Ciaran hijacked her into the Shadowlands; several older fae quickly moving to spell the castle against anyone portaling in or out of the court; Leyanna's tear-stained face after finally releasing the death grip she'd

had on Dru, who flew to her father's body in a green blur, screaming his name and cursing the Night Court with such raw rage I could almost feel it in the air; her mother quickly coming to her side and silently weeping next to her inconsolable daughter.

I could feel the dust and dirt that the winds had kicked up clinging to my skin. Many of the court had also lowered themselves or cowered away from the battle magic that had been waged, and now everyone was kind of emerging from some sort of nightmare, unsure if they were truly awake yet.

I slowly pushed my body up and stood up, sore from inadvertently keeping muscles tensed for the majority of Ciaran's visit. Now I felt like every bit of fight had been knocked out of me. It was everything I could do not to collapse again to the floor. My stomach groaned in hunger, which seemed almost comical. What strange creatures we are that even in the midst of death, destruction, and sorrow, our basic needs remained oblivious.

I glanced at my parents, at their bodies crumpled in unusual poses. I had much larger fears now than a thunderstorm, but the sight of them brought no comfort. Only sadness. Regret. And anger.

Amira was to blame for this. It was hard to wrap my head around it at first, but in the aftermath of it all, her betrayal was the catalyst for all this waste of magic and life. And I committed right then and there to pledge whatever magic I had to the Balance and to serve whoever the next High Shaedes would be, with fervent allegiance in an effort to avenge my sister for what she had done—it was all I could do in the face of such loss.

A small faerie with blond curls mounted the dais. It was Brilan's head manservant, Alisand. He was clearly in mourning but moved with purpose to get to a position where everyone in the room might hear his words.



“This is a grave night for the Shaede Court,” he began. Everyone shifted their gaze in his direction, trying to focus on something other than their heartache. “I think that I speak for all of us in saying that what happened here was an abomination. The Balance will not have it; of that, I am certain. That said, Jupiter’s Opposition is still tomorrow night. There will be enough ambient magic to summon the Balance for the renewal ceremony, which is now even more of a necessity than it was before. Let us mourn and let us recover, but then let us reconvene tomorrow night under a very powerful night sky, and pray that the Balance delivers us leaders that will mark out a path for us in this wilderness. A path that ultimately will lead to the destruction of the Night Court once and for all!” There were several angry shouts of approval but many others that were somewhat lackluster. Brilan would have wanted us to rally. He was a strong leader and would never back down from a fight. But the thought of a renewal ceremony for five new High Shaedes was a little overwhelming, not to mention that the task of trying to terminate the Dark Princes was one I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.

Leyanna approached me slowly from the spot I was apparently frozen to. I just couldn’t seem to make myself move.

“I’m so sorry, Opal,” she said. Several Naturals arrived at the dais to start clearing the bodies. “Why don’t I walk you to your room?”

“Thanks, but no. I think I just want to be alone.” We weren’t ever taught how to mourn, but death seemed like it should be a lonely business.

“Well, that’s going to be hard.” She put her hand on my shoulder and pushed me gently forward toward the doors. “Did you forget you had a certain human visitor waiting for you?”

“Oh my stars,” I gasped. “I completely forgot about Farris. I just left him sleeping in my bed.”

“Don’t worry, I just saw my mom, and she said that once he is fully healed, they are going to glamour his memories and portal him back home. ”

“Leyanna, they can’t glamour his memories! I know he has to go back, but he worked hard for those scars, so he deserves to know where they came from.”

She gave me a weird look, like I wasn’t making sense, and then surprised me by giving me a very big hug. “You are not alone. Remember that,” she whispered. I pressed hard into her embrace. “Now go get some food and a bath. You look like shit.” She smirked. That was one thing she had enjoyed learning in the human realm—how to swear like a sailor.

“Have you looked in a mirror lately?” I asked gloomily. She let me go and I headed for my room, my lip quivering but not allowing one tear to fall.

I was a different person than I was when I left him, and he could see it. Farris sat up in my bed once he saw me cross the threshold, clearly feeling loads better.

“What’s happened?” he asked worriedly. It was weird to see any side of him other than his carefree, flirtatious side.

“They’re dead.” Saying it out loud didn’t make it feel any more real.

“Who?” he asked, concern washing anew over his face.

“My parents,” I said. “All the other High Shaedes, probably Meridee...” My voice trailed off as I involuntarily replayed each of their untimely ends.

“Opal,” he said softly. I hated that I loved the way he said my name. “Come here.”

I crawled across the bed and curled into a ball next to him on my side. He made his

body form a little cocoon of warmth around me. I wondered if it pained him to turn on his side, but I didn't care. It was my turn to heal. He stroked my hair until I was ready to tell him everything, and when my recount of the day's events had finally stopped spilling out of my mouth along with a few rogue tears, only then did he speak

.

"That must have been awful." I was glad I couldn't see his face. I couldn't handle anyone else's pain. "And these dark fae really can't be killed?"

"It seems hopeless, right?" I laughed half-heartedly. "Our magic and that of the dark fae are like oil and water. Ours is blessed by the Balance, we breathe new life into the already very thriving Earth. Dark magic comes from the opposite of that. It interacts only with death. Dark faeries, in order to have access to that kind of magic, have to be dead themselves. And you can't kill something that is already dead. Trust me, I've read the gruesome histories of the futile attempts made by our ancestors."

"Wait. How are they dead, but still living, breathing, and using magic to kill people?"

"I don't really know about the breathing part, but the origin of the dark fae is a dreadful one. Do you know there used to be black Shaedes?"

"No," he said and moved to wrap his good arm around me.

"Black faeries were not all that rare, but their magic was not inherently useful to the realms. Characteristically speaking, they were said to have black hair and dark, deceptive eyes. Their teeth and nails were sharpened to a deadly point. They were prone to wreak havoc and mischief at court. They were pranksters and pot-stirrers, and their kind were never chosen for a seat of the Five. For that reason alone, they were marginalized at court, their only real redeeming quality being how quickly and effectively they could kill. Cunning and, according to some, without a conscience, black fae were employed to do the shady work that our elders liked to hide."

“Like assassins?”

“Maybe, but more like mercenaries. They traveled with armies of green warriors and crossed the line when it needed to be crossed. I imagine many ancient battles were won by a single black faerie, but all the glory would of course go to the valiant green armies.”

“That would be a hard life.” Farris sounded pensive. “Being looked down on for the very skills that others exploited.”

“Yes, well, one particular black faerie grew tired of the stares and glares of the court. His name was Draku, and he had committed many sins on behalf of the realm but did not understand why he and his other dark colleagues were not allowed more magic—or at the very least respect for the heroes they were. At that time, there were a few silver Shaedes at court. One actually held a High Shaede seat. Her name was Fayonir. A silver Shaede’s magic manifested itself as wisdom, but it was the rarest shaede of all. There hasn’t been one at court for over a thousand years.

"One day, Draku tricked Fayonir to get her alone, and he trapped her, torturing her for days for knowledge about his shaede and all the other colors. ‘Why are we different?’ ‘What makes everyone else more special?’ He demanded to know. ‘Why are the black faeries never gifted seats by the Balance?’ ‘What other secrets do the Shaedes keep from the dark ones?’ He had become paranoid. He lost control. He had tortured her for so long and so brutally that he ended up killing her. His anger and despair for what he had done quickly turned to a blind rage, and his magic became uninhibited. He began bludgeoning her still warm corpse with heavy fists filled with self-loathing and hate.

“But in between blows, some of Fayonir’s blood splattered into Draku’s mouth, and he began to choke. It burned him. It was like drinking poison. And he gasped for air, as if he were drowning. There was a part of him that felt like he deserved this,

whatever it was. It got so bad that he couldn't stand the pain of the burning in his throat or the reality of what he had done, so he ended his life in a brutal way. Shortly after his death, he awoke a dark faerie. The first dark faerie, actually."

"Wait. He came back from the dead?" asked Farris.

"He did. We faeries live forever unless we are killed or we release all our magic. Draku awoke from death to a hellish surprise. The fire that burned in his throat wasn't just still there—it had amplified exponentially. It now was not just pain he was experiencing, but an insatiable thirst that made his very bones feel like they were drying up inside. He instantly tried to kill himself again and again, and soon he had tried to end his life in a hundred different ways, but he would just reanimate, and his agony perpetuated. He had somehow become immortal in a different, darker way. So he went before the High Shaede Court and confessed to his actions, begging for their mercy. He wanted to die. They tried to kill him another hundred different ways, to no avail.

"They feared him. And he feared himself, destined to feel like he was dying for an eternity, feeling powerful magic bubble beneath his paling skin and being too weak to do anything with it. He knew he'd been cursed. He hid away from the world and suffered alone, occasionally visiting various courts to see if there had been any new answers as to what was happening to him. Hundreds of years passed. Eventually, he found himself at Pellshaeven, the Water Court. He would beg an audience with the Lady of the River, their leader, and perhaps learn something new about his condition. Unfortunately for them, a human tribe had been allowed to enter the Seam. Their village had been plagued by creatures crawling from their lakes and rivers and devastating their crops. They began praying ceaselessly for intercession, and the fae of Pellshaeven were moved by the Balance to provide.

"Draku was overwhelmed in the presence of these humans. He could sense their heartbeats and smell the sweet nectar of their blood pumping in their veins from

across the great hall.

“Nothing could get in his way. His throat clenched, and without ceremony, he threw himself at one of the humans, sinking his teeth—which seemed to be getting sharper by the day—deep into the human’s flesh. When he drained that human, he grabbed another, and another. The whole of the Water Court was horrified. Dark power saturated the air. Everyone fled from him, as they had never seen such a beast. Something so imbalanced, so evil.”

“Oh my god,” Farris interrupted and sat up quickly, eyes wide. His blond hair fell over his shoulder and tickled mine as he hung over my face. “The dark fae are vampires?”

“Well, yes... and no. They are immortal and drink blood, but nothing kills them. In your human stories, they are easily picked off with garlic, crosses, and wooden stakes. It is true that the shapeshifters in the north don’t like the dark fae, but no one does. And a werewolf has never successfully killed one.”

Farris, somewhat bewildered, fell back onto the pillows behind me and let me continue.

“All the courts heard of what Draku had done. The High Shaedes decided the only thing they could do to protect all the realms was to create a prison for this rogue faerie and curse him to remain isolated there. Pooling all of their magic together, they were able to create another realm within the Seam with the Balance’s blessing. All five High Shaedes went white that day. It was a realm cursed to eternal darkness. Barren. Nothing would ever grow there. They provided a small castle and several types of animals that could survive in this space. Most of the realm was dust and swampland, but Draku didn’t mind. He welcomed the land. He had finally quenched Fayonir’s Revenge—what faerie’s often call bloodlust—and found that animal blood also satiated him since the sweet human blood was off limits. He entered his new

lands, and the High Shaedes spelled the region, encircling the Shadowlands with a meadow to be forever sunny and fair. His new curse was that portals did not work going out of the Shadowlands, and he was never able to set foot in the sun. If he did, he would burst into flames and die.”

“This may be a stupid question, but if that was the case, why didn’t the Shaedes use sunlight to kill him in the first place?” asked Farris.

“Because it was a stipulation of the spell. The most powerful spells are very give-and-take. Very balanced. In order to create and wield sunlight powerful enough to burn through his dark magic, the spell needed an extra element from the soul. In this case, it was willingness. The only way the sun would ever truly harm him is if he sought it out himself.”

“Why didn’t he just commit suicide then? He’d tried so many times before.”

“I think he had more to live for now. He had a home; he had magic; he had sustenance. And he had penance. He would live out his sentence, and maybe it did bring him peace to know he could end it anytime he liked—I don’t know. He found solace sitting in the crooks of droopy swamp trees, and without the constant pain and depression, he was able to focus on his magic. He became a little more industrious, making improvements to his castle and knitting together new creatures and shadow beasts. He wrote letters to the Shaede Court documenting all this, attempting to create a role for himself—keeper of the Night Court.

“And that brings us to Ciaran. Ciaran was a Natural faerie who was disgruntled and bored at court. He was young and handsome, but the girls he liked were all after Shaedes—and he didn’t blame them. His task at court was to apprentice the mapmakers, which couldn’t have been a more tedious and undesirable job. The only part he liked was the traveling, and one day he was tasked with visiting and documenting the boundaries of the Gaylenswood. Some trees had decided they

wanted to move south, and it was causing some discrepancies with the maps and certain forest spells to rebound. Ciaran did his due diligence, collected his data, and, out of sheer curiosity and desire to make the trip last as long as it could, he took the long way back to the Shaede Court so he could cross the enchanted meadows that butted up against Death's Door.

“Draku happened to be sitting out alongside his swamp when he spotted Ciaran in the distance and called to him. Ciaran had always been more interested than afraid of Draku. He had heard the stories and always wondered what the inside of the Dark One's castle looked like. They stood across from each other, one in the light, one in the darkness, sharing hours of conversation. Ciaran had nothing nice to say about the Shaedes, or the court, or his job, and Draku did not appear to be the savage demon he'd been instructed to fear. So when Draku offered him a cup of wine and a tour of his castle, Ciaran couldn't come up with a reason why not. If anything, no one had ever charted anything special about the Shadowlands. They were just a large, dark splotch on the maps. Maybe a closer look might earn him some prestige among his colleagues.

“He spent the rest of the day with Draku. From the highest tower balcony of the castle, he was able to quickly sketch out a bunch of topographical details. He politely sipped Draku's wine while he worked. Only it wasn't wine. It was Draku's blood. Draku had many years in the Shadowlands to go through different scenarios. The only thing he was really missing in this dark world was a companion. By the time Ciaran registered what he had just ingested, it was too late. Draku gave Ciaran a swift push off the balcony, and he fell to a certain death on the dusty ground below. When Ciaran awoke with a burning throat and hysterical screams, Draku cared for him like a tender lover. He filled Ciaran's stomach with creature blood and sang him songs about death that he had composed over his long years alone. Ciaran despised him. But this prison wasn't built for Ciaran—it was only ever meant to imprison Draku. So one day, while he was out hunting shadow beasts, Ciaran moved toward a section of the meadow and tested his hypothesis. He stuck his hand in the sunlight, expecting it to



set afire, but instead nothing happened. He stepped fully into the meadow, and nothing happened. Then he had a devious idea. He flew up to the castle to get Draku and led his master to the edge of the Shadowlands. Ciaran danced in the sunbeams saying, ‘Look, Draku! Come into the light! We have been forgiven by the Balance, our sins are forgotten. Come, join me in the meadow!’ And surprisingly, Draku’s hope for redemption must have grown larger than his darker desires, because he didn’t hesitate to cross the magical barrier and promptly burst into flames.”

“Wow” was all Farris could muster. This was such a tragic story, and in its own sad way, it seemed a fitting one for a day like today.

“It was impossible to know what time of day it was at the Shaede Court, caught between the polarizing endless night and endless day. So Ciaran hiked all the way there, waiting till true night fell so he could portal into the palace. He found his brother, Edmyn, asleep in his bed. Edmyn had returned from his conversancy while Ciaran had been stuck with Draku, and now he lay there—in Ciaran’s mind, just another Natural awaiting enslavement. Ciaran slit his own wrist, right by his brother’s bedside, and let his fresh blood run from his wrist, right over his sleeping brother’s mouth. Edmyn woke up, choking on his own brother’s blood, shocked to see his missing brother suddenly there, looking so alert and mischievous. Ciaran then slit Edmyn’s throat with a small knife. He portaled them both back to the edge of the Gaylenswood meadow, close to their new home as the Dark Princes of the Shadowlands. Obviously, when the High Shaedes learned of this, they cursed the brothers anew. But this time, having learned of their wicked new ability to turn other fae into their kind, this new curse bound any life force that relied on Fayonir’s Revenge to be imprisoned there forever. The casting of that kind of spell killed all five High Shaedes, just like tonight.”

“And they’ve made more dark fae, haven’t they?” asked Farris. “The warriors you saw with your sister in the throne room? There must be more of them.”

“Most of the remaining black Shaedes eventually came to serve under the Dark Princes. Of course, Ciaran promised them the literal moon, I’m sure. A life unencumbered by the Balance and its rules. Who knows what goes on in that forsaken place. I shudder at the thought.”

“And now their leader is free to roam the realms, and if his magic doesn’t play by the rules, I shudder at the thought of what might soon happen here.”

“Well, I know all portaling magic is closed off, so he will not be able to break through those wards. But eventually, he will come for what he thinks he deserves. And my sister. I’m sure she is helping him navigate our every weakness.”

His arm around me tightened. “I’m sorry. Talking about all this must be very difficult. Especially in light of everything that has happened. The historian and the gamer in me can’t resist a good backstory.”

I twirled in bed to face him, becoming very aware of how close we had become in such a short period of time.

“It’s okay, really. I think talking about all this was a good reminder of what we are up against. If you do not know your history today, you will relive it.” That caused him to smile, he was all teeth. “What?” I asked.

“Nothing. It’s just that we have a very similar expression in the human realm. See, we are not so different, you and I.” He lifted a hand to my ear and asked, “May I?” I nodded, and he ran a finger slowly around its pointed edge. The feeling was both calming and electrifying at the same time. Had I never been touched in such a way before? “Beautiful,” he said.

I rolled gracefully off the bed.

“You mean filthy. I am a mess and you need to get some sleep.”

He sat up. “If anyone is tired, it must be you. I’ve slept all day; you must be exhausted.” He wasn’t wrong.

“With Ciaran on the loose, I don’t know if I will ever sleep again. But before I even try, I need a meal and a bath.”

“Great. Let’s eat; I’m starving. And one of those healing faeries came to check on me while you were gone and said I needed to clean these wounds with something called harpissberry leaves?”

“Harpishberry,” I corrected. Farris was certainly hard to get away from, and I was surprised I hadn’t been able to scare him off yet. He got up slowly from the bed, only showing a little bit of stiffness, and we headed for the kitchens together.

### CHAPTER 8

Although I might have eaten enough grapes, spiced nuts, and speckled grouse to feed a small army of green faeries, there was still a pit in my stomach—and it didn't have anything to do with hunger. Farris was also happy to consume anything that was put in front of him, making light jokes about faerie wine and magical mushrooms in an effort to coax out my smile. He had cut back on the incessant flattery; I had cut back on being so resistant, which had left us somewhere in the easy realm of friendship.

We walked in step, the night sky exposed by the Corewood trees in a light purple strip above the long hall that led to the bathhouses. We had stopped by my room to pick up my robe and the clean clothes the healers had left for Farris. Our conversation evolved around light topics, mostly just him asking questions about the architecture of the sprawling palace and its history. We passed two young blue Shaedes, and then a cluster of Naturals, their faces full of pity and sorrow. It made me long for the days where stares were only because of my coloring and not for the cloud of loss that hung over my head. But then it hit me how selfish that thought was, as I was not the only one feeling loss or fear at court. Every faerie was carrying their fair share tonight.

We turned the corner, and I wondered why it didn't dawn on me until we were standing before the large wooden bathhouse doors that this was a public place. By nature, faeries are not shy about their bodies. There were private baths in personal residences, and of course the High Shaedes had an entire private wing of the castle to themselves, but most of us just jumped in a river if we wanted to bathe, or more conveniently, visited one of the bathhouses on site.

Farris held the door open for me, and I walked into the fire lit room. Tall pillar

candles were stationed every couple feet along the rectangular space, their fire enchanted to glow bigger and brighter than any normal candle ever could. Even in the pale darkness of early night, the room itself was an illusion. Instead of actual walls framing the space, rows of thick Corewood trees bounced shadows off their trunks from the fire light and sent them disappearing into the dark depths of the forest. The ground was warm and soft. It was covered in bright green moss and the occasional burst of liriop flowers in white and purple. There were a dozen individual, organically shaped pools set in the ground, a few feet from one another, steam hovering over their still, natural waters. The humid, floral scent wrapped itself around us as the two Natural attendants spoke their greetings and guided us to two of the baths.

“Would you like any additives to your bath water?” the brunette faerie asked politely. She didn’t offer me condolences or ask about my parents, and for that I was grateful.

“Yes, please. We’ll both have some harpishberry leaves and lotus flowers.”

She went to grab a tray of ingredients and the second Natural set lavender scented towels at our feet near where I had lain our clean clothes. When the first faerie returned, she carefully sprinkled the red leaves and lotus essence on top of the two pools, and then they bowed a little and headed back to their stations by the front doors.

“Okay, this is amazing. Are those lightning bugs?” Farris was looking around the room and squinting at the darkness between the trees.

“Yes. There are some beautiful night creatures that inhabit this part of the Corewood. The fireflies are not the only things that light up. There are these lizards whose scales are bioluminescent but are so fast they sometimes look like little glowing blurred lines drawn on the trees.” I watched Farris watch the woods and found it hard not to fall in love with his enthusiasm for anything new. When he caught me staring, I felt a

deep blush creep onto my cheeks that I hoped could be disguised as a side effect from the damp warmth of the room.

“The healer told me I needed to remove the bandages to bathe. Do you think you could help?” he asked. I quickly moved behind him, happy to hide my face, and carefully undid the little metal pin holding his bandages in place on both his arm, and then another on his lower back. Without further invitation, I started with his arm, slowly and carefully unwrapping the gauzy cloth, feeling his eyes on my hands go round and round. There was no magic that could restore a human’s flesh completely after a toxic bite from a dark magic shadow beast, but it was an absolute transformation from the gory, chewed up arm from the day of the attack and now. I softly ran my hand down his muscled arm, its texture forever changed by the hundreds of tiny indentations that the beast’s teeth had felled. They were barely even red anymore—only a shadow of the trauma they had endured remained.

Farris watched next as I began unraveling the bandage around his stomach. It was slightly awkward, reaching my arms around his thick trunk and pressing my cheek against his bare back to reach a spot of bandage that was sticking to another piece. His skin was so smooth and warm that I allowed myself only a second to revel in its comfort. When the final piece of bandage fell, I stood back so he could inspect his own body. The side of his stomach still looked a little angry, but I knew the harpishberry would help.

“Your healers certainly know what they are doing.” He smiled. He twisted his arm in different directions to get the full scope of the bite, and in doing so, his biceps and forearm muscles flexed into life.

“So it would seem,” I said, wondering if he was distracted enough not to notice if I took off all my clothes and jumped into the pool really fast. I started rapidly fumbling with the button of my shorts.

“So how do we do this?” He caught me. I walked back around the edge to my pool and smiled sheepishly .

“We take a bath,” I said.

His jeans were stained with both his blood and shadow beast saliva. Undoubtedly, his other clothes had been torn to shreds. In a moment of bravado, I turned away from him and took off my stained T-shirt and then the little camisole I wore underneath. I heard water displacing itself behind me and was thankful to be spared the sight of him nude. Unbuttoning my denim shorts and slipping off my underwear, I was careful not to make eye contact as I turned and slipped into the water myself. I quickly plunged under the fragrant, warm water and lost myself for a few moments in the quiet depths of the little hot spring. Water faeries say that they can actually hear things in the water: whispers of encouragement, blessings, songs. I stayed beneath the water a long time, straining my ears for reassurance or inspiration, but nothing came. When I reemerged, I looked over at Farris, who had swum to the back of his pool. He had his arms resting on the edge and was staring off into the darkness again.

“It really is beautiful here,” he said finally. I swam to the back of my pool and mimicked his body. It felt so good to be weightless and clean.

“It is, but there is beauty to be found in all the realms—including yours,” I said.

“Yes, but not like here. Magic is a different kind of beautiful.” He laid his head sideways on his arms and looked at me, his damp hair begging to curl in the humidity. “So, what’s the story behind your tattoo?”

I touched my shoulder that was capped with a black-and-blue image of a Perryflower blossom and surrounded by tiny stars. I’d had it for so long, I often forgot it was even there. “I think I have told you enough stories today.” I smiled. “It’s your turn. Tell me something about you, something I don’t already know.”

“What do you already know?” His eyes twinkled—he liked this line of dialogue.

“I know you like to rise early, have an unhealthy coffee dependency, and study history. You love to read, to learn, and to play video games. And you live in New York. That is about it. Not exactly a fair exchange for the amount you know about my life.”

“Well, life isn’t fair.” He chuckled, but then repositioned himself at the edge of the pool closest to mine. Against my better judgment, I swam to him, resting my chin on my arms, putting only a foot or two of mossy earth between us.

“Have you always lived in New York?” I prompted.

“Not the city, but the state. I grew up mostly in Amherst, which is a suburb of Buffalo. I didn’t move to the city till I was in college.”

“And your parents?” I asked, but my question caused a hardness to cross over his face.

“I was raised by a single mother. Sort of. She was a partier, into drugs and alcohol and toxic men that smelled like weed. She was very young when she had me. She swore my father was some sort of professional football player, but I’m not even sure that is true. All I know is that she wasn’t around much when I was growing up. So, I guess I am just a different kind of orphan.”

It was hard to think of anyone ignoring Farris. Even as a child, with that blond hair and cheeky smile, adorable with that charismatic personality, it was impossible to imagine. But not even a neglectful upbringing had managed to dim his light.

“Do you still see your mom? She must be proud of you for graduating at least and of your dreams of becoming a historian,” I encouraged. But the hardness in his eyes



steeled.

“She left me when I was fourteen. Pretty much the worst time of my life,” he said quietly.

I didn’t want to pry—it was clear he had gone somewhere dark in his memories—but I also wanted to be there for him and to listen if he wanted to share. He was close enough that I could reach out and lay my dripping-wet hand on his shoulder. He just stared for a long while at a spot of dewy moss between us, eventually making the decision to tell his story.

“By the time I was fourteen, I was huge compared to other kids. My mom supported me in weight training and football, and that was about it. ‘Bulk up like your dad,’ she would say. ‘He was hot.’ It was weird but I would have done anything to impress her, and I remember she would always sober up for my games so I worked to become the player of her dreams. I was faster and stronger than anyone else. She liked bragging to all the other parents about how I was going to get a scholarship and eventually play in the NFL like my dad. It was horrifically embarrassing, but it could have been so much worse with how high she was most other times. We were super poor, like turn-your-socks-inside-out-to-wear-them-again kind of poor. The idea of going to college was a fantasy, but the idea of playing football and earning money that way somehow seemed tangible.” He stopped to push some warm water onto his face and hair, and then continued.

“My freshman year, we were both psyched for high school tryouts. She was overconfident, but sober for almost the entire second half of that summer, relentless in pushing me to train. I slayed tryouts, made varsity, and came home triumphant. I couldn’t wait to tell her. But when I got home, I noticed a strange black Cadillac in the driveway of our apartment. Apparently, she had met this woman named Evangeline Winston through a friend of a friend of a friend at some nightclub. And when I walked in, Evangeline was signing papers at my kitchen table to take

permanent custody of me. She was sixty or so but had enough money to keep her skin and body looking frozen in time. Her husband had passed recently, and they had never had any children, so my mother, for lack of a better word, sold me to this woman for 3.5 million dollars.”

“I’m sorry, what?” My mouth involuntarily hung open. This could not be a real story of an actual human childhood. Not in the modern human world anyway.

Farris just smiled sadly. “I was fourteen. I had no idea if I had any rights, and if I did, I had no means with which to fight this decision. So after lots of yelling and screaming and slamming doors, my mother packed my entire life in a back pack and put me in the back of that Cadillac, and that was the last time I ever saw her.”

“Farris, I am so sorry.” I breathed. I almost couldn’t formulate the words.

“In some ways, I wonder what life would have been like if I had been allowed to stay with my mother. If I would have developed her bad habits, if either of us would ever have eventually been happy. But I didn’t find happiness for a long time. Evangeline spoiled me with lavish toys, video games, and clothes. I lived on one of the nicest estates in upstate New York. A mansion with twenty bedrooms and an indoor pool. I went to a private school with no football team and never really made any friends because it was too hard to explain why I lived with Evangeline. But when I was about sixteen and a half, everything changed. I don’t know if she had sinister intent the day she signed those papers with my mom, but I was swimming alone in the pool one day, and Evangeline came in and made some very aggressive advances on me.”

Now that he had started, he couldn’t stop. Farris was baring his very soul to me, and I wanted to shield it; I wanted to build a shelter around it and protect it forever.

“I was old enough to say no. And I did. I was old enough to know it was wrong. But there was always a part of me that felt like Evangeline’s property, like I didn’t really

have the power to say no and mean it? If that makes any sense. In some ways, I think I was still just that little boy trying to impress his absent mother, and if this is where my mom said I needed to be, then this was my life. I was Evangeline Winston's plaything."

"Farris, faeries have a word for predatory creatures like that—we call them shadow beasts."

"Well, then I guess I am unlucky enough in this life to have been attacked by not one, but two." He examined his arm bite for a quick moment. "It went on for about two years. I used to hide from her in her dead husband's library. He was an antique book collector and that is when I really fell in love with history. I used to read and reread his first edition copy of War and Peace over and over, praying that dementia would set in and Evangeline would forget about the boy she bought, cowering in the library."

"What happened after the two years?" I asked reluctantly.

"She died. The coroner said it was an accidental drug interaction that stopped her heart. Valium mixed with a few other things, I don't know. But I was finally free, legally an adult, and ready to make my own decisions. In a bizarre twist of fate, Evangeline left me almost the entirety of her estate. I donated a bunch of it to charities she hated, invested some, and paid for my college in full."

"And now you spend your days drowning in coffee and bleeding Manhattan libraries of all their historical knowledge." He nodded, then spontaneously submerged while I silently prayed that the water would tell him something healing, something sweet and true. When he came back up, the hardness had left his eyes. He did his little half-smile laced with mischief. "That's not all I do." He smirked.

"Stop," I said, but it was a half-assed attempt.

“Opal, I don’t pretend that my childhood wasn’t a total bust and that my adolescence didn’t absolutely screw me up in some serious ways, but I just prefer to look forward. It’s the only way we are going after all. That said, I make my decisions carefully, which is why I haven’t chosen my next step yet. When I’m not pouring over the books, I fill other parts of my day volunteering as a professor at a Jiu Jitsu academy and play Dungeons and Dragons with my fake online friends where, ironically, my current character is a faerie.”

I laughed. “No way! What color is your shaede?”

“There aren’t any colors; I just do all kinds of magic. I have wings and can fly too. And I have maxed-out Charisma, so the ladies fall faint as I pass by.”

I splashed him across the moss. It was just a jerk reaction to his goofy, charming swagger that made me both irritated and scintillated against my will. In retaliation, he sent a small wave over into my pool, sending water cascading down my face. We splashed back and forth until we were sufficiently exhausted, like it wasn’t the end of the world, like we weren’t two broken people that had been shattered and remade.

### CHAPTER 9

Sufficiently clean and with sleep finally coming to call, our bathhouse diversions had to come to an end. Farris politely turned around without asking so I could slip on my buttercream-colored robe and secure its belt around my waist. He was going to head back to the room while I went to check on Dru.

It had to be creeping toward midnight by the time I found myself at Dru's door. She lived no more than two hallways down from me in the set of rooms secured for the families of the High Shaelles. We were in one wing of the castle dormitories, while other faeries at court were housed in another large, multi-tiered wing on the other side of the palace.

I knocked quietly, as I didn't want to wake her. But the door opened with magic, and I walked in to a scene I knew all too well. Dru was still in her human clothes, her face filthy from crying and covered in debris from the throne room, lying unresponsive on the bed.

"Dru?" I said softly. It was no use asking her if she was okay. I knew. Whereas Farris and I were in the stage of getting to know each other better, Dru and I had been best friends for our whole lives. There was nothing really necessary to say in that moment.

I quietly grabbed a lime-colored nightdress from her wardrobe and used magic to move my friend into a sitting position. There was a tiny struggle to get the soiled clothes off her body, but I was patient and creative, so in ten minutes or so, she was sitting there in her nightdress, staring at a spot on the far wall of her room. I grabbed a towel that was folded on a chest of drawers by the wardrobe and looked to the sky. I

called the Balance to deliver a little rain, and when I held out the cloth, the cloudless night sky gifted a small trickle of water directly onto the cloth, leaving everywhere else untouched.

I sat next to Dru and wiped her face gently, then her neck, her arms, and her hands. I rubbed her head with the damp towel and made her short hair stand in a thousand different directions. There was an ornate comb on her bedside table—an ivory comb with emeralds embedded into the handle. It was a gift from her parents to her on her eighteenth birthday. I remember she hadn't brought it on conversancy because she was too afraid to lose it.

I combed her hair slowly, for longer than needed, because I noticed her eyes close and her head roll back a little. I didn't need my magic to get her back into bed. She lied down willingly. Then I covered her up with the covers and extinguished her lamplights.

"I will have the kitchens leave you something outside your door," I said softly in the darkness.

There was no response at first, but then Dru's voice whispered in the night, "That sister of yours has to die."

"I know," I replied.

On my way back from the kitchens, my heart stayed with Dru, but my head was busy replaying everything that Farris had disclosed. If there were still High Shadies to report to post-conversancy, I would have definitely talked about Farris and how much resilience he showed in the face of such a hard life. I would have recalled how he was always looking for magic in a world that wouldn't provide it and how, in the helpless throes of evil, he prevailed. It was inspiring, to say the least, and filled me with a sort of resolve. One that would at least get me through the night.

I opened the door of my bedchamber, and at first, I thought Farris was asleep. His breathing was quiet and even. A few fireflies were the only light in the place. We hadn't discussed sleeping arrangements prior, but my instinct said that he wouldn't object to sharing my bed. I decided to sleep in my robe instead of changing into night clothes, fatigue setting in fast. When I pulled back the covers and lay down, he stirred, and like a magnet, he was suddenly there. His warm body smelled like the sweet and exotic harpishberry, and as his arm wrapped around me, my eyes closed in peace.

Morning came and went with its futile attempts to wake us from our slumber. First came the bird song, and then the blinding dawn light. When the entirety of the court awoke, voices and footsteps filled the halls. Busy preparations for the great renewal ceremony had begun. There was surely something I could contribute, but instead I just burrowed deep into Farris's warm embrace. I could not be bothered.

Eventually, the sky showed evidence of the noon sun just as Leyanna came barging into the room without knocking.

"I'm worried about you, Opal. I didn't see you at breakfast. The court energy out there is freaking me out, and I'm having a fashion emerg—" She stopped as Farris's tussled blonde locks poked out from my covers. "Oh," she said.

I squinted hard through the daylight, trying to glimpse Leyanna's face. It was nearly impossible to startle or embarrass her, and I thought I had managed to accidentally accomplish both.

"Relax," I said groggily. "He's still healing. I wasn't going to make him sleep on the floor."

"So how are you feeling this morning, Farris?" Leyanna smiled smugly.

“Fantastic.” He grinned. Then he collapsed back into the pillows.

“All right, you two party animals, I will have a servant bring you some daphweed tea and some breakfast. But before I go, Opal, that tunic with the rubies or the embroidered gown my mom had made for Summer Solstice a few years ago?”

I had turned my face and buried it in the pillow but was still able to muffle out a reply. “Whatever makes you feel the most powerful, Ley.”

“Rubies are the second strongest gemstone.” She pondered it for a moment and then shut the door quickly behind her.

I turned my body to face Farris, who was as handsome in noon light as he had been in moon light. It wasn’t even cool outside, but my body had learned to crave his warmth overnight, and I didn’t want to leave this safe space. There were lots and lots of problems outside this room.

“She’s delightful,” he said sarcastically, blinking his eyes open. “Please tell me daphweed tea in some way resembles coffee.”

“Perhaps in the same way a squirrel resembles a tiger.” I laughed, and without thinking, I placed my hand near his heart. “It’ll certainly put some hair on your chest, so watch out.”

To prove he was no squirrel, he was suddenly on top of me. He had my wrists in his hands above my head before I could register what was happening, and the length of him pinned my body to the mattress hard. His hair dangled about his face, and framed by the bright sunlight, he looked like an angel. The desire in his eyes held me captive even more than his body as my magic swirled around deep inside me, enjoying something undiscovered about him. And then there was a knock on the door, and a Natural walked in with a large tray displaying tea and a hearty breakfast.



Farris released me immediately, while I thanked the servant and set the tray by the windows. We sat down and enjoyed a quiet meal, both lost deep in thought. I wondered if his thoughts were along the same lines as my own. What were we doing? There was undoubtedly some attraction here, but he was not an appropriate, nor a realistic option for me in any way. My magic might be curious, and my heart might be too, but he was probably leaving tomorrow morning. And there was war on the horizon. Being close to the Shaede Court was dangerous right now. We had a target on our backs, and he had already been wounded in the crossfire. Farris barely survived that shadow beast attack. Keeping him here would be like keeping a pet, one that was vulnerable and easily susceptible to collateral damage. Not to mention, my focus needed to be elsewhere. Dru needed her friend, and the court needed my sister avenged.

The daphweed tea put Farris in great spirits. He wanted to know more about Leyanna and Dru and their magic. He made me laugh several times at his own expense as he told me stories about some of his misadventures in the city. I saw a different sort of passion in his eyes when he described the nuances of Jiu Jitsu in contrast to other martial art forms he'd studied over the years.

I described to him the general customs of the renewal ceremony, even though I had never been to one. There would be a celestial event, accompanied by lots of drumming and spelling from all the court. The Balance would be summoned and select the next to claim the High Seats from the Shaedes. My parents described this all very blandly, without much detail. But apparently the magic of the Balance literally raises the bodies of the chosen Shaedes from the ground and physically places them before their thrones. It all seemed a little too deliberate. The Balance was something we could all feel in some way or another, but it was still this very ominous, very mystical being or force with which few fae have ever directly interacted. And when they did, it was at great cost—like when the High Shaedes cursed the Shadowlands.

A part of me was both excited and dreading the whole scene, yet hopeful that the court held worthy leaders that the Balance somehow knew would fix this whole mess. It hadn't failed us yet.

Because it was such a sacred and rare occurrence, everyone dressed over the top in their most regal attire. Thus, Leyanna's frantic outburst this morning. Trying hard not to become overwhelmed with emotion, I let myself into my parents' room. After digging through my father's entire wardrobe, I selected a cream-colored tunic with gold embroidery and a corded detail along the shoulders, for Farris. I also found a pair of dark brown pants and boots that would probably fit.

We took turns getting dressed in my room. Farris went first while I waited in the hallway. But when he opened the door, my heart was conflicted. He looked so attractive in faerie clothes, the high collar opening in a deep V over his chest. The long sleeves covered his scars, and the pants stretched a little stringently against his well-defined thigh muscles, but overall, he was a vision and would blend in quite well. He was even more handsome than my father, who had worn this tunic long enough for the memory to blend too seamlessly with the new reality.

Then it was my turn. I tried to hurry, but it was a difficult decision. Part of the point of dressing up was to show off your shaede. Those faeries who felt that they were of the caliber to be considered by the Balance as High Shaede material would undoubtedly be dressed in bold and bright representations of the color of their power. But since I had no shaede, nor any demented intention of winning favor with the Balance, I finally settled on my mother's favorite dress. It was a dream of a gown, strapless with a shiny gold bodice that clung tightly to my lean frame. At the hips, a gauzy, layered skirt began, cascading to the floor. It would have been completely see-through if it weren't for the layers and layers of sparkly white gauze that caused my legs to become nothing more than shadows.

My hair was quickly untangled and combed into its natural state—long, waist-length

opalescent waves falling down my back. There was a mirror angled toward the wall by the window. I never really used it—I didn't ever want a reminder of all the ways my appearance illuminated my shortcomings. But today, there was no hiding. If I didn't have a shaede of my own, I might as well match Farris. And a part of me wanted to see the way I would look in his eyes.

I swiveled the mirror around and stood back. In the gold, I looked like my mother.

It would have been so easy to cry. To barricade myself in my room, to avoid the court at the ceremony, to declare myself too in mourning to deal with anything that was plaguing the realm right now. But that was not what the daughter of a High Shaede would do. If high magic was never my destiny, I could still support my parents' legacy by doing this—by facing myself and the problems facing the realm with my people with my head held high.

I waved the door to open, and Farris stood in the doorway. He folded his arms and leaned against the threshold, the tiniest smile on his lips .

“Well, what do you think?” I asked. I fanned out the dress a little, naively thinking that was the focus of his surveying eyes.

“I think you look like a fantasy,” he said. “I also think that if I take another step into this room, you and that dress are never going to make it to the ceremony.”

Like so often with Farris, I found myself without a response. But I was thankful for the compliment. It gave me the confidence I needed to brush by him in the doorway and start heading down the hall.

“So where are we headed if the ceremony doesn't start till dusk?” he asked, reaching for my hand.

“I figured we might spend some time with Dru. Usually, with big ceremonies, there are tons of festivities. All day, there would be dancing, music, and delicious feasts. But I’m guessing that with everything that happened with the Night Court hanging over our heads, no one is feeling all that festive. The renewal ceremony is a necessity now, not a celebration. There will be the usual dinner held in the dining hall, and then we can all go to the ceremony after that.”

It didn’t take us long to arrive at Dru’s room. I knocked quietly, hoping to find her in better spirits than the night before, but was momentarily surprised when Leyanna was the one to open the door.

“Wow, he almost looks fae,” she said, moving to the side to let us in. She was dressed in a rose-red silk dress with her fire-red hair piled high on her head, spindly curls tumbling about and cascading down. She was dripping in rubies, from the bejeweled headband nestled in her curls to the earrings and the gem encrusted bodice of her dress. She was dazzling.

Dru got up from her perch on the side of her bed and gave me a long hug. She had on a dark green leather dress with long sleeves that started off the shoulder. It was a sheath of a dress, hugging the line of her body all the way to the floor, with two long slits on either side, so it was possible to walk.

“How are you today, my friend?” I asked as I pulled back to look at her face. Her eyes looked clearer than yesterday. Still haunted, but present.

“I spent a lot of time with my mother this morning. If she can sojourn on, so can I, I suppose. Besides, I need to exhibit strength if I am to be chosen among the warriors the next High Shaedes will eventually be sending to deal with Ciaran and his court.”

“Be careful what you wish for, honey,” said Leyanna, throwing herself in a green velvet chair by the window. “Unless the new Shaedes are blessed with magic and

knowledge no one else has ever had, it doesn't seem likely that even our strongest battalion of green killers is going to be much of a match for the Night Princes."

"Always a ray of sunshine," I said sarcastically in Leyanna's direction. "But I'm still not convinced that Dru isn't going to get called by the Balance herself. Her father was a High Shaede, and with the current unsettled political climate, you know there will be need of a green on a seat."

"That is worth a good laugh," Dru scorned, not laughing one bit. "My father was one of the most powerful green Shaedes this court has seen in centuries. And that was before he was bestowed with the Balance's direct power. The only green getting that seat that should get that seat is one with magic that can deliver."

"I'm sure Astor is drooling his pretty little face off this morning. You know that idiot thinks the seat is his," said Leyanna.

"Well, he is just that, an idiot," I said. "I refuse to believe the Balance would ever trust that narcissist with powerful magic."

"Well said," agreed Leyanna, then turning her attention to Farris, who was hovering behind us and listening intently. "So, Farris, how do you find the realm of faeries? Does it satisfy your human imaginations of such a place?"

"First, I don't think the human imagination is really capable of imagining the beauty of such a place. But if I ever did dream of faeries, all fantasies have been thoroughly surpassed." He made sure to smile roguishly at me, and I blushed on cue.

Leyanna, not missing a beat, took the opportunity to embarrass me further. "Opal looks lovely today, does she not? You two make a stunning pair." I glowered at her, but I knew she meant no real harm. It was just that Farris needed no extra encouragement.

“She is always a vision,” he agreed. “And you ladies also look stunning this afternoon. If I were allowed to escort all three of you to dinner this evening, I might be able to die the luckiest human in the realm.”

Leyanna approved; I could see it on her face. Dru, on the other hand, was not so easily flattered. “So how are your injuries, Farris? The effects of the poison have clearly subsided. One might say that avoiding certain death by shadow beast venom might already make you the luckiest human in the realm.”

“I am forever indebted to you all for saving my life,” he said, suddenly very solemn. “That interaction with the shadow beast was indeed certain death, if it weren’t for your actions.”

“It is our duty,” replied Dru.

“Besides, it was worth it if only to see how much you make our Opal smile,” teased Leyanna.

“I think it’s time to head to dinner,” I said, looking for any other topic of conversation as long as it didn’t concern the effect Farris had on me.

The dining hall was a somber sight. Normally filled with the sights and sounds of an animated court gossiping, drinking, and merrily socializing over colorful, fragrant meals shared across long banquet tables stretching the length of the room, today’s dining hall was eerily quiet. Filled with the most exquisitely dressed fae in every shade of color imaginable, the room still seemed covered in a shadow of anxiety and anticipation. Darkening expressions and hushed whispers floated from table to table and stirred up nervous magic.

Farris led us into the hall, receiving attention from only a few courtiers as most of the faeries were deep into their own thoughts and conversations. We sat together and

partook in a long meal, barely eating anything and mostly just listening to Leyanna ask Farris superficial questions about his life in the city. The open sky above us eventually went pink, evidence that the sunset had begun. Jupiter was very close, and magic prickled along the skin of my arms and back. I looked around to see if anyone else could feel it, but if they could, they didn't show it.

We had managed to kill a few hours, and now was the time we had all been expecting. Chairs shuffled around as the court began their exodus to the throne room, while plates along the tables started to magically dematerialize.

We arrived in the throne room en masse just as the drums started their rhythmic thumping. No description I provided Farris of the absolute raw energy that transcended upon the crowd forming before the empty thrones of the Five could have done it justice. I was inhaling and exhaling magic. We shuffled forward to make room for others, and it was like the room was growing to make room for all the extra faeries that were in attendance—all the strongest and best of us. The ones who believed themselves worthy. I grabbed Farris's hand, partially because I didn't want to lose him in the sea of bodies, but also to steady myself. I could feel a shift in the magic. We were calling the Balance involuntarily, the drums harnessing some ancient power that was pulling the magic from us and pushing it back in. The ceremony was revving up quickly.

Night crawled across the sky and the stars came into focus above us. Without instruction, somehow I knew I was supposed to gaze on Jupiter, along with all the other fae. I lost track of time. The drums maintained their steady beats, banging out the seconds, but there were too many to count. Locked on to Jupiter, Farris's hand warm in my own, I knew it was time to open up to the Balance. Along with all my fellow faeries, each of us began sharing an intimate glimpse of our special magic with the entity that made it possible for us to even possess it in the first place. I didn't know what kind of magic the Balance could sense in me. Perhaps it would pass by me as if I were a Natural—bland and organic, with no real gifts. Or maybe it would

recognize something significant that I and everyone else in my life had overlooked. Whatever was there, it had access.

That was when there came a small sound of surprise from my left. Leyanna's body contorted suddenly, not violently, but as if she were no longer in control of it. We were all kind of frozen in place, rooted in our connection with the Balance, and exchanging magic in droves. Leyanna's eyes were wide as they stared up at the sky ceiling, magic lifting her up in the air above the crowd and floating her slowly to the dais. She was placed gently in front of the first throne as the drums pounded on.

I was no longer drawn to Jupiter, but to the faces and heads in the crowd that scanned nervously all around for the next selection of Shaedes. In a far corner, near where one of the fire pillars blazed, a lanky blue faerie that I didn't recognize was lifted above us and headed on another wave of power to the dais. He had electric blue hair that was feathered and short. As he passed above me, I could see that his eyes were a very pale blue and that they held a mixture of shock and uncertainty. He was positioned before the throne to the right of Leyanna, just as the Balance chose another willing servant.

This time a purple Shaede, who looked vaguely familiar. It wasn't until she was placed before the throne farthest to the right that I recognized her face. It was Glory, the purple faerie whose parents practically manifested her becoming a High Shaede. Growing up, she outdid all of us in our studies and was always chosen first for any errands or special assignments the Shaedes might have had for courtiers. She completed her conversancy four years ago, and we were all forced to sit through her dissertation on what she had learned in the human realm because her insight had been that enlightening in the eyes of the Five. Two hours of hearing her talk was approximately one hundred and nineteen minutes too many. But the most annoying part of being in her general vicinity was the eventuality that at any given moment in a conversation she was destined to interject with "well, my parents say" followed by a parroting of something inane that her parents had told her—usually something that



made it glaringly apparent that she had not lived much beyond their over-dominating umbrella. I couldn't be the only one conflicted about this choice of High Shaede.

But before my thoughts turned even more critical, there was more movement to my left. More to her surprise than my own, Dru was taken up. The leather fabric of her dress rippled in an invisible wind. And just like that, my best friend was made to stand upright to the left of Glory as my new High Shaede, my leader. The resolution on her face was undeniable. The Balance's power had given her the strength to take on the darkness and she was radiant. I was so happy for her .

The drum beats grew louder, but their rhythm was unwavering. The magic had become so thick that it was visible to me in the air. It pulled at me, pushed at me, almost threatened to put me in a chokehold, but I denied it. I just kept my hand entwined with Farris's, grounding me to the moment. I stayed present, watching the faerie court sway with the drumming and the intermittent surges of magic. The four Shaeides awaited their final counterpart, searching the crowd with anticipation. I caught a glimpse of Astor, petulant and disgruntled, along the side of the room, daggers in his eyes for Dru. It was impossible not to feel a little satisfaction at that.

My concentration in that moment was instantly shattered. My hand released Farris's as electricity coursed rapidly through my body, causing my extremities to flail and my back to bend awkwardly. There was a moment when I was worried, when I was wondering what was happening to me and if I was having some sort of mental or physical breakdown. But then my body ascended into the air, and my thoughts were no longer on worries but on the certainty that some terrible, devastating mistake had been made. There was no overwhelming feeling of transference, but on the contrary, as I floated toward the center throne, it was like I was hemorrhaging magic. Things deep inside unlocked. Doors were flung wide open. Chains came off. And when I stood on the dais, in the middle of the other four High Shaeides, I was suddenly very free.

### CHAPTER 10

The drums silenced. The five of us stood there while the rest of the faerie court bowed low. Even Farris ceremonially dipped his blonde head. My hands were visibly trembling as I turned with my fellow High Shaedes and managed to grasp the ornamental circlet that was resting on the throne and placed it on my head. It was such a delicate thing, but it held the heavy weight of a thousand promises.

Somehow, I knew the ceremony wouldn't truly be complete until we took our respective seats. We lowered ourselves in unison while the crowd rose and erupted in applause and praises for the Balance. Although there were many faces in the crowd that looked reluctant to cheer, it was hard to distinguish if it was because they doubted our abilities as the next generation of High Shaedes or if they just believed that the problems facing the Shaede court were unsolvable no matter who had taken the seats.

Farris was misty-eyed and clapping as loudly as the next faerie, and I knew what he was thinking. Having shared with him so much of my angst and anxiety about my lack of shaede, this new development must resonate some confidence in me. It must calm some of my fears. I've surely made my family proud. But that was not the case. My body might be alight with access to some very powerful magic, but my mind was freaking out with what I was supposed to actually do with it.

What is happening? I asked myself. What am I doing here? The Balance was not about to answer me. I was so confused, so conflicted, and I knew I couldn't be alone. We had to be the youngest group of High Shaedes in the history of the realm, for one thing. And I knew most of these Shaedes very well. They were brilliant and

powerful—but not save-the-world powerful. Dru was on the verge of a mental breakdown after losing her Father. Leyanna was like a nuclear reactor, ready to blow up at any moment, and should never be trusted with this kind of power. Glory was just going to incessantly annoy the court to the point where they'd be begging the Night Court to come take them. And I was nothing. My magic had no focus. I wasn't a fighter. I would be the heaviest deadweight in a battle meant for titans.

Even my parents would have thought this was some sort of cruel joke.

The throne was hard and cold against my nearly bare back. The audience had started to settle, awaiting some sort of wise words to come flowing out of us. Their desire for reassurance was palpable. We had reached the apex of their fears. Now, with the new High Shaedes selected, the bleak realities of the future were setting in, and they were ready for us to have some answers. Sadly, I knew we were still drowning in more questions than answers.

I was both nervous and thankful when Leyanna opened her mouth to speak.

“Thank you all for this night and for being such an important part of the process of selecting your new leaders,” she began. “I, er, think it is time for the High Shaedes to discuss our approach to the recent, um, developments with the Shadowlands. So, maybe you all could just go. So we could, you know, eh—do that.” Well, at least she started strong. And the whole of the court got the hint. A prismatic river of faeries exited through the main doors, leaving only a few on the main floor waiting for a quick audience with the Five.

The pretty blue faerie rushed toward another smaller blue faerie of about six years of age, whose royal-blue ringlets bounced when he was embraced and lifted into the air. They appeared to be brothers. Dru left the dais to give her mother a hug and to undoubtedly receive some encouragement—some assurance that her father would have been so proud. Leyanna's parents were also there. They looked worried for their

daughter, but cried happy tears and I overheard them encouraging her to ‘Give those dark ones hell.’ Glory’s parents were fawning over her, straightening her circlet, and bombarding her with loads of advice as if she had no original thoughts of her own. They talked so quickly and so animatedly that I almost felt bad for her. I think we all deserved a minute to think and catch our breaths after what just happened.

And then there were Astor and Farris. Both waiting for me. They didn’t seem to be acknowledging one another, but as the rest of the families left, I didn’t think it really appropriate for either of them to stay. I crossed the stone bridge to the main floor and clasped my arms around Farris, giving him a long squeeze.

“Who is this?” cut Astor, his face incredulous. I reluctantly turned to him.

“What do you even want, Astor?” I asked impatiently. There was nothing he had to say that I wanted to hear.

“Oh, this is Astor,” said Farris smugly. He folded his arms and appraisingly looked the warrior up and down. As much as I would love to see Farris most likely win in a battle of fists, I didn’t have time for this.

“Go away, Astor,” I said.

“I just wanted to congratulate you on becoming High Shaede and pledge to you my sword and my time. If you wanted to maybe get together later—” He never got to finish his sentence because Leyanna had spotted him and was angrily stomping over, suddenly in his face.

“You are so disliked, Astor, that even the Balance decided to bless me with enough power to end you and erase your memory from court. It is literally all that I’ve been praying for. Don’t even look at Opal again, you toad. I dare you to test me.” He actually looked mildly afraid. Without another word, he turned on his heels and

disappeared from the room.

Leyanna went back to the dais, and Farris took my hands in his .

“I don’t know what to say about all this, Opal, or really what you must be going through. All I know is that you all are headed toward some really tough decisions. But I wanted to share with you one thing.” His face was so earnest, his eyes so clear. “The Chickcharney,” he said with significance.

“What?” I laughed. I don’t know why, but I needed to laugh. This whole situation was becoming more and more absurd by the moment. The peals of my laughter echoed throughout the hall and startled the other High Shaedes, but it was my last defense against going a little insane, and I was thankful to Farris for his ability to distract me from even the most serious affairs of the moment.

“The Chickcharney”—he laughed a little with me—“is a bird of prey that is supposed to be extinct. They are tall birds with red eyes that see through the night and can twist their heads in any direction, which makes them hard to sneak up on and difficult predators to evade.”

“Do they eat dark faeries by any chance?” I asked teasingly. I didn’t know where he was going with this, but appreciated it nonetheless.

“No,” he said with an air of seriousness. “They supposedly have been sighted in the Bahamas and are an ornithological anomaly that’s thought to be extinct for hundreds of years.” I looked at him confused, trying to understand the point he was so desperately trying to make. “Opal, do not doubt yourself. I think you are like the Chickcharney. Maybe your magic is an anomaly that everyone thought was extinct, when in reality you’ve always possessed it all along. And like the Chickcharney, maybe you are the perfect predator. You just don’t know it yet.” I thought I was going to laugh again, but the look of sincerity in his eyes made me stop myself.

“I suppose we need to have faith that the Balance knows some things we do not, but it would be nice if someone told me I have any predator in me at this point in the game. Red eyes would be cool.” He squeezed my hands and embraced me once more before leaving me with my new High Shaede companions and with little hope that there might be a perfect predator among us at all.

The five of us all stood awkwardly before our thrones, the reality sinking in differently in each of our minds. Sitting on the thrones was fine for receiving court, but sitting in a line facing an empty room was not conducive to collaboration with one another or discussion. So we just stood in a clumsy circle, Leyanna fiddling with her circlet, Glory thinking hard and whispering to herself, Dru staring at me, almost willing me to say something.

It was a long time before anyone broke the heavy silence.

“So let’s see. We’ve got three friends, a nobody, and a know-it-all,” said Leyanna. “Yup, that should be plenty against the Dark Princes. Anyone else feeling underwhelmed by the Balance’s power boost? Or are one of you feeling capable of setting the Shadowlands on fire? Anyone?”

“I am not a nobody,” said the blue faerie with a stern but not unkind glance toward Leyanna. “My name is Lennyx. I think I am the only one not originally from this court. Obviously, I’m from Pellshaeven. My brother Nolken and I were advised to come here after our parents went white fighting one of the shadow beasts.”

“Did you think you’d be selected by the Balance?” asked Dru.

“No—did any of us? I thought we might be a little safer here, because the Water Court is not built for defense—or offense, for that matter. But when Ciaran and Edmyn arrived the other night, I could see we had made the wrong assumption. Nowhere is safe.”

“My parents say Pellshaeven was visited by the largest of all the shadow beasts released. They say it is likely Ciaran hasn’t even shown near his full hand and that larger, even darker forces might soon be used against us,” said Glory ominously.

“Well, my parents say, ‘shut the hell up, Glory,’” spat Leyanna. I could sense the heat radiating off her even from across the circle.

“Okay, Ley. That is enough.” I looked at Glory pointedly. “Perhaps we should start with what we do know about the Night Court. Speculation can wait till later.”

“We know only one of them can daywalk,” offered Lennyx. Waves of calm rolled off of him, and I wondered if anyone else was being affected by his magic. Blue Shaedes tended to be peacemakers and mediators. Water faeries could also call on all forms of precipitation and weather so whole wars might have been ended or avoided by their influence over the atmosphere. But their kind were always hesitant to use their power and slow to react to conflict the way a red or a High Shaede would never be.

“Glory, do you have any control over the shadow beasts? Does creature magic even work against beasts from the Night Court?” I asked. Purple faeries were kind of rare. Sometimes they could shapeshift, but their real power was in talking to animals. Most of the animals that all faeries could communicate with lived on Jovii’s Isle and chose to interact only with each other. But purple Shaedes could talk to all animals, even the wild ones with no discernible voice. Animals seemed loyal to the purple fae in ways the rest of us couldn’t understand, so they carried their messages, their instructions, and their needs out into the wild. Some could be called on to sacrifice themselves for food or perform any purple Shaede’s wish really. As for the purple Shaede’s penchant for dusklight magic, that was still a mystery to me.

Glory was trying to remain unfazed by being snapped at by Leyanna, but her voice was growing unsteady. “An hour ago, I would have said no. Now I am not so sure. I don’t think control is the right word—I might be able to understand them?

Communicate with them? Maybe even influence them? They would still, ultimately, be under Ciaran's command. But I don't know—maybe enough to make a small difference. Is that why there is a purple High Shaede now, you think?"

It was weird to hear her sound so unsure. She always had all the answers. Her round face became pinched in her efforts to outthink our problems. She fidgeted nervously with a few strands of her long, straight, dark-violet hair.

"Well, if we are taking inventory, I now feel like I could thoroughly mess some faeries the fuck up," said Dru. "But even if I could snap my fingers and make Ciaran's head explode, you know he would just regenerate and reanimate. The freaking worm. "

"I would set him and his entire court on fire. Every inch of my body says it would be delightful and easy, but our magic doesn't work in the Shadowlands. That's why the water boy over here and I are useless," Leyanna said matter-of-factly.

Everybody looked at me.

"If you two are useless, I don't know where that leaves any room for me on the spectrum. At the very least, I've grown more sensitive to magic. Whatever magic I had feels heavy and amplified. I definitely feel touched by the Balance, but there are no real secrets unlocked here. No defining quality to my magic I can identify as even minutely helpful. I'm so sorry." By the looks on their faces, I think they had all thought as much already. I was just confirming it.

"So we have a ton of power that we can't really use against our enemy. We've got maybe some defense to the shadow beasts, but we aren't really prepared for dark magic attacks beyond that. So, what do we do?" asked Dru.

"What about consulting the whites?" suggested Lennyx. "The oldest among us might



have some insight of how best to tackle this kind of conflict.”

“My parents told me,” started Glory, who looked nervously at Leyanna for a moment, “that when the former High Shaedes fought Ciaran and pushed him through the portal, they didn’t just drain themselves. They pulled what magic they could from the white fae across the courts, essentially ending the lives of all our eldest courtiers.”

That quieted us all for a moment. To think that the High Shaedes had been put in a position where they had to choose to sacrifice the few for the many was sobering. Would we have done the same? Would we have to do the same someday? I was fine with playing fire with my own life, but being bound to the rest of the realm had more responsibilities than any one faerie should ever desire. It made the stakes of the game seem that much higher, that much costlier.

“So if all the oldies are deadsies, where does that leave us?” asked Leyanna, her lack of respect of the dead causing all of our mouths to hang open.

“Leyanna,” I implored. “Those were people’s fathers, mothers, and grandparents. Those were faeries that have served the realm for centuries upon centuries. We can’t just dismiss them like that.” Alas, she seemed unencumbered.

“Look, has it ever struck you that maybe this group needs someone who isn’t going to get stuck mourning the dead or crying over the consequences of bad decisions. It’s time to make some. Maybe the Balance picked me because it knew I’d keep our eyes on the prize. Collateral damage be damned. So I will ask again, where does this leave us?”

“Is mediation off the table?” asked Lennyx boldly. “I mean, we really have only heard from Ciaran and Amira. Maybe there are other innocents at their court. Does Ciaran really speak for all the dark fae? We know that most of the remaining black faeries flocked to them long ago. Begged to be changed into dark faeries and join his

court. But perhaps they weren't all willing, or perhaps thousands of years under his regime have soured their loyalty?"

"That is such wishful thinking; now I know we're screwed," said Leyanna. "Ciaran is promising his people power, mating rights, access to dark and Balance magic. If there is anyone at the Night Court sympathetic to our realm, it wouldn't be anyone powerful enough to help overthrow him." Lennyx conceded with a little bow of his head, but he kept his eyes on Leyanna as if he were trying to figure her out. As if there were more to her than just blind rage and beauty.

"We will never be able to bring a fight to the Night Court," mused Dru, talking as much to herself as she was to any of us. "If we cross into the Shadowlands, we will be annihilated by dark magic. If he brings the fight to us, at the very least it will be a string of shadow beast attacks that may or may not end up causing us to go white in defense of the realm. A repeat of what the former Five experienced. We need something new, a new angle. A new set of circumstances. Ciaran wants the daywalking ability for his court. If he was unable to achieve it, if we could prove this was an empty promise, maybe we could sway his court. Or at least cause enough unrest that there might be some negotiating room."

"But is he unable to achieve it?" I asked. "I mean, we know what he thinks happened with my sister. I'm loathe to acknowledge something higher level transpired between them, but that curse was reknit. What did Betta call it? Refinement magic?"

"Refinement magic is the essence of removing impurities or adding virtuous properties on a being, place, or object," said Glory, putting her photographic memory to use. "Its history lies in the ancient magic of the Nymphs. Although often superficial in nature, refinement magic is not illusionary but changes the core or foundation of its focus."

"The Nymphs? I don't recall anything hardcore about the Nymphs other than that

they used to sex up all the humans back in the day and make them do foolish and terrible things. Before the Seam was created, of course,” said Leyanna.

Lennyx rolled his eyes a little, but smiled. “Nymphs were some of the first blue faeries. They were so beautiful and had such subtle, capable power that our people gave them a special name. They were guardians of special waterways and reservoirs and often served the realm as fierce protectors. Sometimes they would get bored, yes, and use their beauty to charm and enchant the passersby, but that’s the only part that most people remember. Through some sort of refinement magic, they were able to create demigods from humans, mutations of creatures—some even say they were the mothers of dragons. Scaled lizards with wings, too large to live peaceably with any other living thing, definitely a defiance of all things in nature. But the Nymphs eventually died out. They used their magic too lightly and wildly. Some say the Balance came for them, which sounds to me like a cautionary tale that the elders might pass on to children to scare them into always being responsible with their magic. But if what happened to Ciaran was refinement magic, Amira may or may not have even known she wielded it. We might be able to figure out the spell and expose the components. Make them unattainable. And maybe even get the Balance to help us block it or curse it from happening or reoccurring.”

“I know of a white faerie that may still be alive,” said Glory. “But he isn’t in this realm, and he is very old. Not necessarily around-for- the-Nymphs kind of old, but old enough he might know more than we do about refinement magic.”

“Not in this realm?” asked Leyanna. “Then where is he?”

“I’m not exactly sure. I just know he’s not at court. My parents—” Glory caught herself. “I’ll have the registrars search for his last known location. The court tries to keep track somewhat of where our most well-known faeries reside. It’s Jovii. The registrars should know where he is,” she said.

“Jovii? Like Jovii’s Isle—Jovii?” asked Lennyx. Glory nodded, and we were all sufficiently impressed.

“Growing up, once my shaede revealed itself, I started studying all the ancient purple faeries. Jovii was my favorite. A key defender of the talking animals, blessed by the Balance to create a whole new realm. He was obsessed with learning about all the other non-faerie creatures. Had an affinity for humans too. When his wife and son died, one in a war and one in a flood, he cast almost all his magic to the High Shaedes. He kept just enough to keep himself going. He left court to live alone and study. Occasionally, he would send his writings and findings to the court if he thought they’d hold any interest, but it was never made public where he went.”

“I guess if you live long enough, you are bound to experience a certain amount of loss,” Lennyx said. “And you earn the right to live however you wish.”

“Yeah,” we echoed.

“Okay, well, that is at least a bit of a plan,” I said, trying to sound optimistic. “Glory will find out where Jovii is hiding, and maybe tomorrow we go see what he might know about this refinement magic. We still have two more days before Ciaran attacks. Until then, do we tell the court anything?”

“I don’t think we can afford to get their hopes up,” Dru cautioned. “I think it better to avoid talking to anyone about it and just reassure them that we are working on it and will deal with Ciaran and the Night Court with a firm hand.”

Everybody nodded in agreement .

“Should we get some sleep and meet back here for breakfast in the morning?” asked Glory, clearly happy to have a task.

“Not so fast,” said Leyanna. “We still have to figure out what Opal is going to do with Farris.”

“Who is Farris?” asked Lennyx, confused.

“My parents say he is that human that survived a shadow beast attack in the human realm,” sputtered Glory, unable to help herself.

My eyes narrowed, and I immediately felt the need to be on the defensive. “What is there to figure out? He’s healing,” I replied, completely unprepared to have a group discussion about this.

“He looks pretty healthy to me,” said Leyanna, her eyes alight with mischief. “Look, I know he is pretty to look at, and he is obviously obsessed with you, but he doesn’t belong here. And we are going to need you to be focused.” As much as she liked to mess with everyone, she did have the right intentions, and I didn’t know why I wanted to fight them.

“We can glamour him for you if it is too difficult to do it yourself,” offered Lennyx, correctly sensing that yes, stealing away his memories would be incredibly difficult for me. In fact, even the idea that there would be a world where we didn’t know of each other seemed too bleak in which to even exist.

“He took all of this in stride—the shadow beast attack, the faerie realm, all of it. He understands the importance of secrecy. He wouldn’t cross the Seam and go blabbering to anyone that would listen about magic and faeries and beasts. He just wouldn’t. I know he wouldn’t.” I couldn’t hide the pleading in my voice.

“Why is it so important to you?” asked Dru. “You’ll most likely never see each other again anyway.” She absolutely did not mean that insensitively—I knew my friend—but her words cut me in half. My parents’ deaths hadn’t reduced me to a

puddle of tears, but this conversation was causing my eyes to well and my hands to shake. I was moments away from losing it completely.

“Let the man keep his fantasy.” Leyanna smirked, waving them all away dismissively with a hand. She started this discussion as my enemy but now rode in to finish it on a white horse—my hero—and I wanted to throw myself at her feet in gratitude. “I just think we need him out of here. He’s a liability. And everyone knows dark faeries are attracted to human blood.”

They all consented. A pit lodged itself in my stomach with the knowledge that, at dawn, I would be saying goodbye to Farris. But at least he would remember us. At least he could move forward in his life knowing that magic is real and that he had gotten to be a part of it.

Glory shapeshifted into a bird and flew out the ceiling into the night, headed to the registrars’ wing, where the scholars, mapmakers, and records dwelled. Leyanna rolled her eyes and headed to the kitchens in search of food because she was starving. Lennyx offered to accompany her and almost had to run to catch up to her. But Dru stayed behind and turned to me.

“What a day, huh?” she said and went to slump awkwardly in her throne. “Drooling Druleen is now a High Shaede.”

“Not nearly as shocking as Opal the Shaedeless Wonder being handed a throne.” I walked near my throne but didn’t sit. It was all still too surreal. “Your father was an amazing leader. You will be too, Dru. You already are.”

“If I said the same to you, would you believe me?” she asked.

I shook my head sadly in reply. We stayed together for a little while in silence. Just dwelling a little bit in the life-changing realities that the throne room had dealt us in

such a short amount of time.

“Go,” she said suddenly. “Go spend some time with Farris, and say your goodbyes. The night is long, but it’s not forever.” I nodded and hurried out, for truer words had never been spoken.

### CHAPTER 11

Farris was sitting by the windows near the lamplight, squinting over one of my large sketchbooks, when I opened the door to my room. He got up quickly, setting the book on the chair and wrapped me in his arms.

“So how did it go? Did you save the world?” he said into my hair.

“Not today,” I replied, refusing to be the first to pull away. “But I do think we have sort of a plan. A direction at the very least. By the Balance, I can only hope it is the right direction.”

“How is everyone holding up? I imagine none of your friends were expecting the ceremony to go that way today.”

“Dru is determined to avenge her father. Leyanna is somehow taking everything too seriously and yet not seriously enough at the same time. I have whiplash from watching her moods swing lately. Lennyx is a calming presence. He seems rational, helpful, and appropriately confused by Leyanna. And Glory is... trying.” There wasn’t a better way to describe our little band of misfits. We were on shaky ground at best.

“And you?” he asked, pulling me to look at his expectant face.

“Lack of glowing red eyes aside”—I smirked—“I think I’m okay. It helps that I don’t think I’m the only one in over my head. ”



“Are you tired?” he asked. “Do you want to go to sleep?” I looked up at the sky; it had to be about nine or ten o’clock. Having slept so late, there was no way either of us were tired, and I was still riding the adrenaline of the renewal ceremony and had plenty of energy to spare.

“Not even close. Want to go for a walk?” Without answering, he grabbed my hand, and we headed for the door.

I led us to the far end of the hallway and up a tower of white stone stairs. It wound and wound upward, presenting doors every so often to other hallways on other floors. The palace was a sprawling citadel built deep within the Corewood Forest. If it weren’t for fear of Ciaran’s ability to portal anywhere outside the castle grounds, I would have loved to take Farris into the heart of the Corewood. Faerie magic is one thing, but naturally occurring forest magic is a sight to behold. Alas, I settled for the sky bridge.

The stairway came to an end at the top of the tower, and the stone steps stopped abruptly, giving way to a woven path of vines and tree branches that came together to make a maze of wiry bridges that crossed over various parts of the castle. Nothing over the living quarters, the bathhouses, or the throne room, but from this high up, we could see a few hallways, a courtyard, and a sitting room far below. Across an open courtyard, we could see the dome of the throne room glowing blue. Even the great entrance hall where we first carried Farris’s lifeless body across the Seam was framed by the Corewood branches beneath our feet.

“This is an architectural feat.” Farris breathed. The pathways were wide, but there were no railings, so it was probably a little unsettling for someone who couldn’t fly.

We walked a little farther, Jupiter large and low in the sky, competing with a pregnant moon. He relaxed a little next to me. From our height, we looked out at the rambling woods, a canopy of thick leaves that went on and on for what looked like an

eternity in every direction around the palace and then faded into the night.

“You’ve been here many times before; I’ve seen the sketches,” said Farris.

“Dru and I used to come up here when our parents were in long meetings and pretend we were spies of the court. As I got older, it remained a favorite place, but mostly just to escape court all together. No one ever comes up here.”

“Why? Because they prefer the intrigues of the court?”

“No.” I smiled. “Because faeries can fly and easily obtain this view whenever they like.” He nodded his golden head and accepted this information like he had accepted everything else, with grace.

“It’s a Perryflower,” I said quietly, pointing at my shoulder tattoo. “You’ve discovered all my sketchbooks—without permission, I might add. But I draw so I can tattoo. I did this myself, and a couple other smaller ones you haven’t seen. The Perryflower grows in abundance around here, and there are always ridiculous arguments that pop up from time to time about whether it is blue or purple. Like it matters. Sometimes the fact that something so beautiful exists at all should just be enough. You know?”

He gazed down at me, moonlight reflected in his fair eyes, and said, “I do know.”

“Tattoos are also small acts of rebellion,” I said, continuing to walk. “Much like the human realm. We have to use a special tool called an inkspire to magically fuse the ink to our skin because our magic forces us to heal so fast. My parents were not too happy with me for this, but it’s my shoulder. And in such a visible location, it attracted a lot of attention. I secretly tattooed a lot of friends that year until the High Shaedes caught wind and spelled the castle to remove any inkspires on site.”

“So is that your dream? To be an artist?”

I laughed a little, but then realized he was being serious.

“Oh Farris, faeries don’t have dreams, we have duties. We aren’t humans, with all your freedoms and passions and desires. Tattooing was a hobby at best, but was always just a time filler until I was told what my role at court would be. And whatever that role was would become my eternity.”

I didn’t mean for it to come out so bitter, but it did.

“That’s really sad,” he said.

“What’s your dream?” I asked, quickly changing subjects. We were crossing over a darkened library, shelves of embossed covers glimmering in the moonlight.

“My dream is still in the developing stages. I spent so many years trying to detach from life, living inside books, tagging along to other people’s dreams. I think I’m still searching for who I want to be. And I’m okay with that. I mean, look at you. Your destiny found you pretty quick, whether you were ready or not.”

I don’t know what made me do it, but I was suddenly reaching up and resting Farris’s face in my hands. His cheeks felt smooth and cool, kissed by the night air. My moments with him were waning, and it seemed unfair that he didn’t really even know it. He certainly deserved to.

“You have to return to the human realm tomorrow morning. You’ve healed so well, and I think you will agree that when Ciaran’s time allotment is up, it is not safe for you here.”

“If I recall, I wasn’t all that safe in the human world, either.” He smiled, but it did not

reach his eyes.

“I pleaded for more time. They wanted to adapt your memories so you wouldn’t remember the faerie realm.”

His brow furled. “But then I wouldn’t have memory of you.”

“It might have been easier that way,” I admitted, “but I talked them out of it.” Even as I said it, it felt selfish.

A tiny purple bird with velvet wings and a gray beak floated up through one of the ceilings, chirping wildly with a thin wisp of paper in its little claw. It landed nearby in the middle of our path and seamlessly transitioned from a little bird to Glory, who seemed slightly frazzled and a little out of breath.

“Opal, I am so glad you are still up. After the throne room, I went right to the Room of Records. The registrar on duty had no problem pulling up Jovii’s last known location, but in typical Jovii fashion, it is a riddle. About animals. And using words and images I’ve never heard of. I tried to find the others but they have all gone to bed already.”

I had released Farris and accepted the piece of parchment.

The script was in small, uniform uppercase letters, the riddle a little longer than I would have imagined .

“THOSE THAT SURROUND ME, FIND THEY COMPETE

WITH EIGHT HARDENED RINGS, A CELESTIAL FEAT.

BEARS COLORED WHITE, WALK ON THE CROWN

THIS DIRECTION MEANS DARKNESS, THE SUN ALWAYS DOWN.

TREASURE FOR SQUIRRELS, TREE CREATURES AWOKE

AMBER RAIN IN THE AUTUMN, I FALL FROM THE OAK.

WHERE A BEAR SKATES ON ICE, YOU WILL FIND ME,

REVERE IS MY NEIGHBOR, THERE'S TEA IN THE SEA."

I looked up from reading and saw Glory still traumatized by not being able to immediately figure something out. Farris, however, was just standing there with his arms folded, wearing his signature half-smile.

"The first part is clearly Saturn," blurted Glory. "But that is not helpful because he is obviously not living there. But all this talk of bears, ice bears—is that even in this realm? I know some of Pellshaeven is snow and ice, so maybe we ask Lennyx? But 'revere is my neighbor'? Like admiration? Is he in some type of temple or something?" She was spinning out of control.

"I do think the first part is about Saturn, but not the planet itself. 'Those that surround me.' Saturn has 146 moons. I think he's talking about the moons," I said with only slight confidence.

"We don't have time to search 146 moons!" Glory exclaimed, clearly not making any sense.

"It's an address," said Farris quietly. "He's in the human realm."

Glory stared at him skeptically. "And how would you know that? And don't say because you are human."

“Well, being human helps,” he continued, smiling. “But these lines all pertain to different parts of an address in the human realm. I know exactly where this is actually.”

“Well, Farris, out with it,” I said. “We need to get there soon before Ciaran takes our lack of action as an invitation to attack.”

“I will give you the address on one condition. You let me come with you. I know you all decided for me that I needed to return home, but if I help with this, I want to see it through.”

I glanced at Glory, who was considering the confidently half-smiling man in front of us. She didn’t like being manipulated any more than she liked being outsmarted. It was killing her that he had knowledge she didn’t, but she wasn’t hard-hearted like Leyanna. She sighed her concession. “Oh fine. But Opal has to defend this decision to the others if they don’t like it. And we can’t promise that we will be able to protect you if anything goes awry.”

“Then it is a good thing that I can take care of myself.” He beamed triumphantly. He snatched the paper from me with a flourish and looked at the fine print. “So 146, the moons of Saturn. The direction where the white bears walk the crown and it’s always dark—that’s polar night. The direction is North. Treasure for squirrels, amber rain from oak trees, that’s acorns. Acorn, to be exact. And the only bear I’ve ever seen skate on ice is the mascot for the Bruins, a hockey team in Boston. Boston, you know, where Paul Revere lived and the historic Boston Tea Party took place.” His smile somehow grew even more smug. “There you have it, 146 North Acorn St, Boston, Massachusetts. Human realm. Let’s go.”

### CHAPTER 12

The other Shaedes were not that hard to wake up, light sleep being an unwanted byproduct of your realm being on the verge of destruction. We figured there was no time to lose since all our eggs were in this one basket and that it might be wise to travel under cover of midnight since Farris said Acorn Street is in a populated part of Boston and none of us had access to our clothes from the human realm anymore.

Lennyx let Farris borrow a billowy light blue shirt to swap with his heavily embroidered tunic, and Lennyx wore something similar in a darker shade. The girls and myself all opted for boots, suede leggings in various shades of brown, and long-sleeved tunics that were cut short to the hip and fit snug to the body. They had little detail on them so as not to attract too much attention.

No one questioned Farris coming along once they heard he was the one to decipher Jovii's riddle, and we all arrived in the throne room on a fresh wave of adrenaline.

"Is it wise that we are all going?" asked Glory. "Obviously, I want to go. I know the most about Jovii, and I'm dying to meet him. But shouldn't someone stay here and protect the realm?"

"I thought the whole point was that we were supposed to be stronger together," said Leyanna. "The other High Shaedes left court all the time together."

"Yeah, but that was not during times of war," said Dru, pondering it over.

"I'd be happy to stay. Then the majority of power will be in the field and someone

will still be here to at least make the court feel safe,” offered Lennyx.

“No offense, Lennyx,” Leyanna said, “but if we want the court to feel safe, you wouldn’t be my first choice.” Dru smacked Leyanna in the shoulder and mouthed the words be nice . But Lennyx just laughed.

“Don’t worry, no offense taken. You don’t know me well enough, so naturally you underestimate my abilities.”

Leyanna looked confused; she knew how to get a rise out of just about anyone, but Lennyx didn’t take the bait.

“Fine,” said Dru exasperatedly. “Glory will go as the resident expert on all things Jovii, I will go for protection, Farris will go in case we need a human for something, and Opal will go because she and Farris are pretty much a package deal. You and Lennyx can stay here and keep an eye on the realm.”

“What? Why do I have to stay behind with him?” Leyanna whined. Lennyx, instead of being offended, actually looked highly entertained by the whole thing.

“Weren’t you the one who just said you didn’t trust him to stay alone?” Dru asked.

Leyanna made an exasperated sound and stomped in the direction of the great entrance hall, Lennyx chuckling quietly to himself and the rest of us following close behind.

The entrance hall with its sweeping staircases was mostly deserted, save for a few Natural servants quietly going about their nightly chores. Opening a portal in the palace was still unwise, so we paraded out into the night, waiting only until we were outside the protections of the castle to travel. The substantial and ornate doorways led out to a large white stone bridge completely canopied by spindly trees and dripping



with fuchsias and lobelia flowers. We crossed the bridge with purpose and stopped about fifty yards into the woods. Night was very dark away from the paths of the Corewood. Glowing lizards scattered and birds flew away as we startled the wildlife, invading the cool, untouched spaces of the night. Clouds of fireflies circled, and the cool scent of juniper, pine, and damp moss tickled our noses. I looked at Farris, who was in clear awe of it all.

Leyanna, without being asked, made quick work of a portal—146 North Acorn Street did not resemble the modern, dirty, metallic streets of New York City. From what I could glimpse through the portal, Acorn Street looked frozen in time. It had a cobblestone road and was too narrow for busy city traffic. Rows of brick residential buildings flanked both sides of the road, the only nature present being the baskets hanging with carefully manicured plants from people's windows. It was all very picturesque and currently devoid of any passersby, which made it the perfect time to cross.

“Bye,” Leyanna said snidely. And with one step forward, we crossed the Seam.

Boston was bathed in the soft glow of an army of streetlamps that were so subtle they could have almost passed for faerie lamplight. A quick survey of the area confirmed that we were, in fact, alone. We started scanning the doorways for numbers indicating the exact address. For such uniform buildings, each doorway was entirely unique—painted, arched, or bordered with elaborate moldings. The address numbers were never in the same place, so it took us a few minutes to find the right door.

“That’s 146,” I read aloud. It was a little way away from where we portaled, but it was a purple door with a tiger head for a knocker, and somehow that seemed just right. The others gathered around behind me, and I knocked. It was so late, and Jovii was most likely asleep, but knocking seemed less rude than magically forcing our way in and scaring him half to death.

For a moment, I thought I heard a chair move across wood floors inside, so we waited patiently for him to come to the door. But no one ever came. Then there were loud scraping sounds on the floor, some banging noises, and then a man shouting in pain.

All of us instinctively spelled the door to open at once, causing the very fibers of the wood to disintegrate before us. What looked like sawdust blew around us as we stormed into the foyer, the sounds of a fight rebounding off the walls and definitely coming from upstairs.

A shadow beast resembling an anaconda came slithering down the narrow staircase, but when it opened its mouth to greet us, a long black tongue with glinting spikes came shooting out. It waved its head wildly around the foyer, knocking over a small entryway table with a lamp, shattering a mirror, and brutalizing some picture frames. It was happy to impale itself with some of the debris from the broken items, as the sharp shards of glass and splinters of wood adhered to its long, weaponized tongue and only added to its arsenal.

Dru was dagger-ready and sliced off chunk after chunk of the beast's tongue with the help of Glory, who was channeling some sort of calming power over the beast to keep it still. I used my magic to throw a shield over Farris, and once Dru finished beheading the creature, she pushed her way up the stairs.

Glory shapeshifted into a massive violet wolf. With fangs barred and claws clicking noisily, she galloped up the wooden stairs after Dru. Farris stole one look at my tense face. I was waiting for him to tell me to wait there, and I would have hated him for it, but instead he stood aside so I could reach the stairwell first. I felt him close behind me all the way up.

At the top of the stairs was madness. The sounds of a brawl were deafening in the small loft. On one end of the room, near the stairs and the windows of the front of the house, was a small sitting area where Glory was pinning a black-haired female with

heavy eyeliner to a tattered brown leather sofa. The far end of the room was made up as an office or study, with long tables along the walls covered in papers and books and sketches strewn about. In the center of the room, Dru was confronting three dark-haired warriors dressed in black leather from head to toe. One with knives, one with an axe, and one with nothing but two very strong-looking fists .

Farris jumped to Dru's side, taking a defensive position that I'd never seen him do with his body. His face said, try me , but my heart was screaming, don't anyone dare ! Glory managed to shapeshift again, still holding the girl down by the throat.

"They're humans!" she yelled, breathless. "We can't use magic, or we'll kill them."

Suddenly the weaponless fighter walked over to one of the wooden tables, picked it up like it was a frisbee, and threw it at Dru. She ducked gracefully, her reflexes quicker than any of ours ever could be but causing me to receive the full velocity of the blow to my left shoulder. Surely the bones just shattered into dust. I saw stars, moons, and colors that hadn't even been invented yet. I was that disoriented by the pain. But the hit had spun me around so fast that it gave me the perfect view of Glory's prey pulling a knife from her boot and awkwardly but effectively slashing Glory's arm in one long, deep ribbon.

"These are not ordinary humans," Farris said through gritted teeth. The three warriors lunged at him and Dru, and I fell to my knees, trying to remember how to breathe. Glory shapeshifted again, and before the girl could take one more stab at her with her knife, Glory peeled the girl's neck open in one deliberate bloody bite.

The fight ensued on the other side of the room, and Glory was suddenly there in human form, with warm blood cascading from her chin down her chest and dripping onto the floor. From my position on the ground, behind the scuffle, I caught a glimpse of white under one of the tables.

“It’s Jovii!” I yelled, atop the kicking and the grunting and the sound of thudding against the wood floors. Farris was so fast that he looked fluid delivering a punch to the neck, then finding himself behind his assailant and landing blows with his knee, then forcing his opponent’s body to contort a certain way and proceeding to kick the shit out of it. I wondered if he ever imagined himself actually using any of the fighting techniques that he’d studied over the years in real life. But whatever he had studied, he had certainly mastered.

I crawled on the floor along the side of the room on three limbs, my injured shoulder sending waves of agony over me with every few inches of movement. I reached Jovii’s body scrunched up on his side. His skin was cold, and his long white hair was matted with some blood from a large cut above his eye. “He’s dead!” I shouted.

“Oh fuck this!” Dru sighed with irritation as she threw her knife with frustration and watched it embed itself directly in one of the eyes of her adversary. She stomped once, and I felt a lick of green magic pass by. She stomped a second time, and it was like a bomb went off. I’ve never witnessed such a show of energy coming from one faerie. It was like a sonic wave exploded from her and went right into the three remaining targets, rattling the walls and floorboards, breaking the windows, kicking up an invisible wind, and causing the warriors’ bodies to implode.

Blood and bone shards sprayed the walls, the ceiling, and the floor. Not an inch was spared, not even our own bodies. The leather that they had been wearing was reduced to liquid, along with everything else that had once been solid about them. This was the battle magic of the Balance.

Glory, to her credit, remained focused and came running to my side, pulling Jovii out from under the table and placing a healing hand on my shoulder. The feeling of my bones knitting themselves back together was always a strange one, but one I was thankful for. There was no knitting Jovii back together, however; he was gone.

I went to Farris, who was only a few steps away, but it felt like miles. We embraced, even though the gore that covered us was like paste on the skin.

“I think it is safe to say that did not go as expected,” Farris said.

“You, human, can definitely hold your own in a fight. Well done.” Dru came up and held out a hand, which Farris shook with vigor. Then she looked around the room, gesturing to all the carnage. “I’m really sorry about all this. It’s embarrassing to admit that I did not mean to create this much... violence. But Farris is right; those were not ordinary humans.”

Glory left Jovii on the floor and walked over to the girl lying open-mouthed and dead on the sofa. She inspected the girl’s mouth and then lifted her limp arm up to get a closer look at her hands .

“I thought I was hallucinating at first; she jumped on me so fast. But she had no magic, I could feel that. Yet she had filed down her teeth and her nails to a point. Why go to such lengths to imitate a dark faerie?” Glory took a few more scans of her kill and then went over and started rummaging through some of the papers and books now scattered about the room in disarray.

“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” said Farris. “These wouldn’t be the first humans to worship demons. And if you hadn’t killed them, they would have been hell-bent on killing us. Not to mention if they are working for Ciaran somehow, it is best that anything they learned from Jovii stay here and not with him.”

“Opal, are you all right?” asked Dru. “I saw you take that table with your shoulder. What made these humans so fast and so strong?”

“I don’t know,” I said in earnest. “But I do know neighbors had to have heard the fighting or, at the very least, felt the tremors from your magic. It won’t be long before

the human authorities will be here.”

We scattered around the room quickly, overturning papers, reading book covers, and trying to connect anything Jovii had been researching to high-level refinement magic.

“Here’s a book on Nymphs,” said Glory, wiping some blood splatter off a leather bound book cover.

“He seemed to be a sports fan. Here is a huge stack of Sports Illustrated . But I don’t think that’s very helpful,” mused Farris, bent over in a corner.

I stood up and walked back over to Jovii, somehow desensitized to all the death and gore. After having watched my parents drop dead on the dais, I didn’t know if anything would shock me anymore.

Jovii was on to something. Otherwise, why would dark fae human minions be stalking his refuge in the human realm? Amira must have told them where he lived—she had said she had visited everywhere on her travels. I didn’t doubt that she had discovered his whereabouts at some point. Just another betrayal on a list of sins that could never be forgiven. “What were you looking at, Jovii?” I whispered to the air between us. I knelt down and just happened to glance at his hand bent at an awkward angle toward his chest. In his fist was a crumpled up piece of paper, so old that it was almost transparent.

I gently took it and smoothed it out on the floor, reading the scrolling words along with Jovii’s iconic uppercase notes. “This is it,” I said as much to myself as the rest of the room.

Everyone came to crouch by me. “The Renaissance Spell?” Glory read the words like a question. “I don’t know that one.”

“This has to be it,” I said. “Look what it says: ‘The Renaissance Spell: results in the creation of new life. Ancient Nymph magic. Components unknown.’ Then it looks like Jovii underlined new and wrote underneath it ‘Draku.’ And under the word components , he wrote ‘Soul magic—Permanent.’ This has to be it.”

“I hope this is not it,” Glory said, “because no one has ever uncovered the root evil that created Draku in the first place. We surmise that the transformation into dark fae lies somewhere with the transference of faerie blood and that Fayonir must have cast some sort of spell before she died. But whatever magic could create something horrible like Draku, it is probably knowledge no one should possess.”

Blaring sirens echoed against the colonial brick row houses, making Glory’s warning that much more ominous. The dimly lit room was suddenly filled with bright red and blue lights.

“Time to go,” I said, throwing up a portal so fast that all I had to do was think it. But there was no time to bask in the marvel of my upgraded Balance magic. I grabbed the spell off the floor and we all disappeared back across the Seam.

### CHAPTER 13

The minutes ticked by as the debate heated up within the confines of the throne room. The Renaissance Spell had us divided. Glory, Lennyx, and Leyanna—of all people—were urging caution. While all of us had hit the private bathhouses of the High Shaedes to scrape off the bits of human matter that had welded itself to us like a second skin, Glory had had a servant wipe her down while she read the majority of the book on Nymphs and was now holding herself an expert on all things refinement magic. Lennyx was, by nature, hesitant and calculated. He didn't want to touch anything that might have resulted in Draku, and Leyanna was loathe to agree. Mostly, she was just aggravated with Dru for causing her to miss out on an epic fight, so siding against her was also Leyanna's sullen attempt at reprisal.

Dru and I were convinced, however, that this spell was the clue to understanding what Ciaran could not. Why else would he and Amira have sent people there? Jovii knew something. He was very wise and very old, as well as a friend to all creatures. History painted him as kind of a bleeding heart. He lived during a time when all animals were subject to the laws of faeries. They were to serve the realm as needed, and whether they were reticent and wild or loquacious and domestic, it didn't matter. A beast of burden was just that, and carry the burdens it must. If you had wings, you carried messages. If you were a predator, you were enlisted to fight against the enemies of the realm. But there was unrest among the superior of the animal species, and Jovii took up their cause as his own. He convinced his fellow High Shaedes to allow him to create a new realm. And creation is always soul magic. It is something so rarely done because a literal piece of your soul goes into the spell, and oftentimes leaves the faerie forever changed themselves. But it was my understanding, as it was in Jovii's case, if the spell is blessed by the Balance, the Balance can make you whole



again. And Jovii's Isle was definitely blessed.

All the talking creatures migrated there, and there has been no conflict with them whatsoever. The faeries still have the blind loyalty of all the other feral animals of the realm, so there have been no repercussions here either.

Had Jovii seen a new cause in the dark ones? Was his research just random curiosity, or was he driven by objectives that might be in alignment with the Dark Princes themselves? Amira seemed like a manipulative creature; had she somehow convinced Jovii to find the answers to her and Ciaran's burning questions about his transformation? There were too many questions and not enough time.

Dru was starting to yell, and when Dru lost her cool, things had become too heated.

"Enough," I said firmly. "We don't need to agree on a spell or its intentions to make the best decision for the court. There are options we have and options we don't. Looking at only what we know, how are we going to handle the Night Court?" I looked up at the dawning sky. Fatigue had settled deep in my bones from lack of sleep and adrenaline emptying out of my body. "Ciaran attacks tomorrow," I reminded.

"Now that we have a name for this spell, let me go back to the Room of Records. Maybe I can find out more about it," offered Glory.

Dru groaned. "That could take weeks of research, and you could still come up empty-handed. I've changed my mind. Let's prepare for war. The odds are not in our favor, but I'm not going to just hand the Night Court our people. We must get ready to fight."

"Preparing defenses is not the worst idea," said Lennyx. "Maybe Leyanna and I could prepare some heavy elemental spells that will make portaling anywhere in the realm

very difficult.”

“But not impossible,” I muttered under my breath. “I have nothing to offer here. My best contribution will be prayer at this point. Prayer to the Balance that whatever cruelty might be headed our way might be quick and decisive. It’s dawning on me that we’ve been positioned as scapegoats, and maybe it’s all by design. Destined to sit high, destined to fall far. But you all don’t need me here to list our weaknesses, even if it is my only true skill.”

If we had tried so hard only to arrive at reading history books and strengthening defenses against an enemy who had already beaten death and a foolproof curse, then we were truly already lost.

I turned to leave, and nobody stopped me. Maybe they recognized in my words the self-loathing that was always just underneath the surface, or maybe it was that they agreed with my disparaging assessment of the situation. But either way, the other High Shaelde let me go without a word.

Farris was waiting in the hallway, just beyond the doors of the throne room.

“Well, what is the next step?” he asked.

I couldn’t even look him in the eyes.

“Bed,” I said grumpily as I stomped right past him. I was ready to let my anger and frustration fester. My hate had come full circle, first jumping from myself to the Night Court, then to the Balance, and back to myself again. I didn’t want to be around Farris or anybody else, for that matter, lest they get caught up in some residual animosity.

“What happened, Opal? Talk to me,” he pleaded. He reached for my hand as I walked

on, and I snatched it out of his reach. I knew I was acting like a child, but there was nothing left for me to do. I tried being responsible, I tried being strong, but in the face of adversity, I was weak. And tomorrow, it was going to become glaringly apparent just how weak.

“Stop,” Farris begged. “Did something happen?”

My anger flared, and I spun on him.

“Did something happen?” I echoed biting. “Farris, you were there! You saw what we are up against first-hand, and those weren’t even faeries. Shadow beasts, humans with super powers, dark magic we don’t understand—we are fucked. FUCKED.” I stopped, suddenly aware of the volume of my voice and the fact that we were in hallways, where any member of the court could walk by at any moment. I was mad, but I wasn’t ready to incite a panic. I pulled him into one of the meeting rooms, an antechamber really, set up with a large table and chairs and little else. I shut the door and leaned against it. Farris came and leaned next to me.

“We are not cut out for this kind of decision-making. I am not cut out for it. Even if there was more to learn about the Renaissance Spell, we are out of time. Something tells me Ciaran is not one to negotiate anyway. We could attempt to lord the spell over him, but he would probably burn the whole world down anyway just for spite.” He went for my hand again, and this time I let him have it. I didn’t want to feel comforted or safe, but being so close to him—it was a feeling I would never be able to fight.

“If the Balance chose you, Opal, and you are so certain it was not because of your magic, perhaps it is because of another reason. Have you thought about that?”

“All I can think about is how I miss my mother and father. How angry I am at Amira, and yet, somehow I miss her too. How close to death we all are, how I should be

walking you to a portal right now to keep you safe instead of burdening you with all this.” I rolled my head to the side to look at him. Reflected in his eyes was a different path—one I didn’t have to walk alone. He was looking at me longingly, his lashes selling promises, his lips tempting every inch of my body to leap and let go.

I jumped into his arms, and his hands deftly spread my legs to wrap around his waist in one fluid movement. He spun me around and slammed my back into the door, while I took a fistful of his wavy blond hair and yanked his head toward me. I needed his lips pressed against mine. It was a ravenous moment, like someone throwing food to the starving. Our lips met again and again, lost in a passion that only comes when you know you are not guaranteed tomorrow. He pressed his hips against mine, pinning me to that door, and I could feel my magic awakening inside. There was a new sensation there—something I couldn’t quite place but also couldn’t quite ignore. It was like a tiny little spark of something that wanted to be an inferno. A wisp of a feather that wanted to be a falcon. A shining star that wanted a galaxy to revolve around it.

He was massaging the sides of my bottom with his hands, while I was clawing at his back in a way that scared me. The kissing went deeper, his tongue now invading my mouth. Possession was not a desire; it became a need. I needed him—every inch of him—to be mine. I tilted my head back to reach some air, my eyes fluttered toward the open ceiling as he nuzzled his way down my neck, kissing and rubbing his soft cheek on my skin. Then my magic surged, and it was like an electrical shock.

He stepped back away from me so fast that he almost dropped me. I braced myself against the door and tried to regain my balance, my legs shaky. My vision was a little blurry, but it only lasted a few seconds. I looked at my hands, and my arms and their normal level of sparkly iridescence was more vibrant. I was glowing. I looked over at Farris, who was steadying himself on the table, and realized that he too had a faint halo around him. His eyes had turned a sea foam version of their former blue, and his hair had gone almost completely pastel green.

“This cannot be good,” I whispered. After having been so angry and then so contrastingly blissfully happy, the shock of seeing the changes on Farris was enough to make me feel faint.

“There is nothing possible that could be bad about what we were just doing or about to do.” He smiled, still bracing the table and panting. At least his sense of humor was still intact.

“Did you feel that?” I asked. “Your eyes, your hair. You’re different.”

“Oh I assure you, I felt everything just now,” he said, laughing. He pulled some of his hair in front of his face to inspect it. “What do you think it means?”

“I-I’m not sure.” My head felt dizzy. “You aren’t magical or anything, I can feel that. But my magic reacted to you. Though I have no idea why or...” My voice trailed off. Farris was suddenly by my side, always so solid when everything else was unsteady. As soon as he touched me, my magic came alive again, but not as violently as before. Regardless, it made me afraid.

I pushed him back hard, and he looked so wounded. My mouth opened to speak, I wanted to assure him that this was love and not some sort of wild reach before the end of the world, but nothing came out. I was horrified by how uncontrollable my magic had become. Visions of what Draku must have gone through when he became the thing that we all detested the most flooded my mind. Only it was my face in the place of the silver Shaede’s and it was my blood that transformed a man into a monster. There was nothing I could say to Farris that would salvage this moment, and I didn’t know enough about my own magic to reverse whatever I had done. It was as if I had marked him somehow, and now he’d be forever altered.

Instead of making things worse with words or with actions, I went back to running away. Not toward my room this time, but toward the kitchens instead. I downed some

daphweed tea behind a wall of stacked plates, trying to stay concealed from courtiers who understandably had a hundred questions to ask. Then I tore west in the palace, heading toward the Room of Records, where I quickly found Glory poring over a pile of books and loose papers, trying to solve all the problems of the universe.

“Opal, hi. I’m sorry for earlier. We all have vastly different ways of dealing with impending doom. Are you okay?” She looked generally concerned as she left her perch on the second level balcony and crawled down a ladder to me.

The Room of Records was one of the most under-hyped places at court. For starters, it wasn’t just a room; it was a four-tiered warehouse of documents that held all the extensive knowledge of the realm. Scrolls and tomes of ancient histories and descriptions of places no one had visited in millennia. Spell books from all the courts in the realm also resided here, happily revealing all their secrets to the High Shaedes over time .

“Something’s happened, Glory, and I need your help.” I didn’t know at what point on my walk there I had decided to ask Glory for help, but now that I had, I hoped I wouldn’t regret it.

“What happened?” she asked in a hushed voice. I didn’t know if there were any servants or registrars hidden from sight in the thousands of stacks of books, but it was best to err on the quiet side.

“I kissed Farris, and my magic—it changed him,” I said. Of all the people on the planet, she was the last person I wanted to confide in, but she was perhaps the only one I could trust to ask for help, so here we were.

Surprisingly, she didn’t act surprised or say anything to humiliate me further. Instead, she just furrowed her brow and got right to the heart of the matter. “Changed how?” she asked.

“Slight physical alterations, pale, pale green. He didn’t develop magical abilities or anything or seem otherwise transformed, but I’m freaking out. Glory, is this the beginning of what my sister did to Ciaran? We have to get to the bottom of that spell.”

“Well, Farris is a human, so I wouldn’t worry about turning him into a daywalker,” she said candidly. “But if you do have access to refinement magic, Farris aside, perhaps if we understood it, you could somehow undo what your sister did to Ciaran.”

“Jovii’s notes said it was a permanent change, and I have absolutely no control over it.” I blushed, thinking of Farris’s kisses blazing across my jaw.

“And unfortunately, I have learned virtually nothing in these stacks,” she admitted. “Just a lot of really sordid accounts of Nymphs doing some crazy things under some crazy circumstances. But no evidence as to how. Just stories, really. I think you were right before; we don’t really have time for this.” She tossed a book she was holding onto a table nearby, and a little dust cloud puffed into the air.

“I have an idea, Glory, but I don’t think you are going to like it,” I whispered. Glory moved in closer. “I need you to enlist a speedy creature to carry a message that is for Amira’s eyes only.” Glory’s eyes went wide, and I kept talking before she had the opportunity to refuse. “I need to talk to her. She had something to do with Jovii’s research, I know it. It’s all too coincidental. And it’s really been bothering me that Ciaran even deigned to wait three days. Why not make his demands and then just release his beasts and burn the place to the ground? Could it be that Amira is advising caution? If that was the case, perhaps she could be reasoned with. I’ve been so blinded by my hatred for her betrayal that perhaps I’m missing an opportunity for discourse, or at the very least more information as to what Ciaran and Edmyn are planning.”

Glory actually considered my idea. “The other Shaedes will never sanction this. Refinement magic is a lot like dusklight magic, I think. You can’t understand it until you live it.”

“I don’t want them to know, Glory. Dru, especially, would never let me meet Amira alone. Her sense of duty to protect is too strong.”

“Well, call it a sense of duty, but I’m calling it common sense. I will send your message and keep your secret, but I will accompany you to the meeting. Amira smells like death and is about as crooked as a centaur’s hind leg.” I knew this was the best arrangement that I was going to get, and the minutes kept rolling by.

“Have her meet us in the meadow of the Gaylenswood. Close to the tree edge, somewhere private.” Glory nodded before grabbing ink and paper.

“My parents say the Filly Moth is the fastest flyer with a message, and the most direct,” she said. And for the first time, I hoped her parents were right.



### CHAPTER 14

The Gaylenswood started where the Corewood ended, wrapping itself along the west edge of the realm like a misshaped half-moon. It was said that the Forest Court, run mostly by yellow Shaedes and Naturals, had a name for every tree and bush. It was teeming with wildlife who loved living in an environment that was so well looked after.

We had managed to sneak out later that afternoon, under the guise of taking a short walk to meditate—if anyone asked. Which no one did. We had spent the whole day holed up in the Room of Records, practically hiding from the other High Shaedes and everyone else at court. Not telling anyone where we were headed or what we intended to do made me feel a little guilty, but I would have done almost anything to avoid having to confront Farris after what had happened, and doing something drastic to avoid the impending conflict with the Night Court seemed as good of an excuse as any. For all the others knew, Glory was still buried in research in the Room of Records, and I was still off somewhere sulking. Farris had probably started looking for me by now, which would have raised some serious questions from the High Shaedes and maybe led them to believe I was off hiding somewhere in shame .

None of them would be able to guess where we were actually headed. And that was by design.

We had portaled to the far west side of the forest, to a place I had never bothered to travel to before. Splayed out before us was a golden carpet of various species of yellow flowers, baking in a sky filled with unending sunshine. We stayed in the shadows on the edge of the forest, awaiting Amira's possible arrival, but my attention

had drifted elsewhere. Across the meadow, to be exact, where the Shadowlands laid its wicked claim.

“Spooky, isn’t it?” asked Glory, also scanning the dark horizon. “My parents once took me northward, to camp on the beaches and to gaze upon Jovii’s Isle from afar. We made a hike of it and visited family friends that live in the Gaylenswood, not far from here. One of the older kids we were staying with took us out to this meadow. As a child, it was quite terrifying, but as an adult, I thought it would be less so since I understood more about curses, the Balance, and the protections that afforded us. But now here we stand, well within reach of its dark purposes. It’s not too late to go back, you know. Amira might not even show.”

“For Farris’s sake and everyone else’s, no realm is safe if we don’t accomplish something from this meeting, so I pray that she does show,” I said, starting to have doubts myself.

There was enough noise emanating from the depths of the forest to notice when it abruptly went silent. A portal opened near where we huddled, and Amira, dressed in a long copper-colored gown that clashed sordidly with the pastel in her hair and skin, crossed the threshold into the meadow. She took long, proud strides to reach us, chin tilted to the sky, clearly enjoying the sun on her face—a luxury she had for years done without.

“Sister dear, I cannot say that I wasn’t intrigued to receive such a bold request from you this morning,” Amira purred. “Our spies tell us some congratulations are in order. A no-shaede High Shaede. The Balance must really be scraping the bottom of the barrel to find a way to beat the Night Court.” I would try to look offended if it wasn’t for the fact that her words mirrored the exact inner thoughts of my own mind.

“Who’s to say what the Balance intends, Amira? But I do thank you for coming.” I paused, trying to choose my words very carefully. I didn’t know her well enough to

know what would set her off, but I knew she really loved Ciaran, so I thought I'd start there.

“Was it Ciaran’s idea to go to Jovii’s, or was it yours?” I asked.

“I hardly think it matters at this stage in the game, but it was mine. I told the Shaede Court I traveled a lot before meeting the Dark Prince. I spent lots of time with Jovii on both sides of the Seam. Whether or not he knew whose daughter I was, I do not know. But we bonded, and he was looking into my—our enigma.” My anger flared, realizing that Jovii was not just collateral damage but a friend of hers that she had no problem killing. The discussion had barely started, and I was already learning plenty about her.

“And what is that—this enigma?” I tried to keep calm, but I could feel Glory waiting silently nearby in the shadows, leaning in for the answer to that question with anticipation.

“Have you not felt it yet, sister?” Amira stifled a giggle. “A strange connection with the Balance that also gives us a heightened sensitivity to the powers of others. Your little purple friend over there? I can feel her magic coursing through her veins; I know you can feel it too. All Shaedes can tell magical beings apart from those without magic, but she can sense little more about you, whereas you can practically touch her magic. Have you ever stopped to think that if you can sense it this acutely, that you might be able to harness it?”

“High Shaedes syphon power from one another all the time; that is not a unique ability,” I reasoned.

“Yes,” she continued, “but I’m not saying to take it and use it, I’m saying you could take it and store it. Become the most powerful faerie the realm has ever known.”

“You can do this? You can just steal magic and store it? If that’s the case, why do you not just take over the world for Ciaran?”

“Because I can only sense the magic. I was not made a High Shaede. But I think you have the ability now, whether you know it or not. Think of the things we could do together. Ciaran will have his war one way or another, but even if we do not figure out the root cause of his day-walking, all together we would be unstoppable.”

Interesting. All at once, it hit me that although I was the one to call this meeting, it was Amira who had come to bargain. And even though this siphonic ability was very fascinating in theory, she just gave me all the information I needed to know about how much she and the Night Court knew about the Renaissance Spell. Even if she had been in conversations with Jovii, we killed her warriors, and the information never reached them.

“Why Ciaran?” I asked, partially because I was avoiding angering her by declining her offer and partially because I was generally baffled at her choice of mate.

The question made her instantly smile in a way that made my stomach churn. “You know, I really had expected to find a court of uneducated, uncivilized, and undead brutes, who led a miserable existence in the shadows. Even if my expectations had not been so gravely low, Ciaran would have exceeded them far beyond my imagination. These were not the boring, stuck-up fae I’d grown up with—they were beautiful. He said my power spoke to him, whatever that means. I swear male faeries have been using that same line on coquettish young female fae for millennia to get them into bed. I was not an idiot; I knew he was dangerous. I knew he was capable of darkness. But I was enchanted. Not like, literally—but you know, my curiosity and desire overrode the teachings of my youth. His way may be harsh sometimes, but his words are fair. Why not him, Opal?”

My eyes widened, suddenly terrified that that question might not have been

rhetorical. Then she continued, “Why must he and his court bear the punishments for sins committed by a man who died as long ago as the moon is old? And if we, as faeries of the Shaede Court, could look at these men and women of the night and bring them into the light, is that not fairness? Is it not balance? Is it not our duty?”

Shit. That one definitely did not resonate as rhetorical. I glanced back at Glory, wishing she was an orange Shaede and could read my mind. It was time to go. Amira didn’t just fall in love with a man—she fell in love with an entire movement. She was so brainwashed that there would be no convincing her to influence her lover; his battle was one she had come to believe in.

“The Shaede Court will never accept the cursed and the damned, Amira. I do believe there is a path here to peace, but it would take more than I think either of us is willing to give,” I said.

She heard the rejection in my words but did not show signs of disappointment. Before I could take a step back toward the trees, a portal opened, and Ciaran leapt out with dramatic flair, standing brazenly before us with what looked like dead vines in one hand. He whispered an ugly word into them and threw them in our general direction. The vines hit the ground at our feet and slithered up our bodies so quickly that there wasn’t even time to think of the word portal, let alone cast one. The dark magic bit into our skin as the vines quickly ensnared our bodies, leaving our legs the only things we still had control over. Our magic was in a choke hold, and Amira just laughed and laughed.

In my mind, I had always known that my clandestine meeting with Amira had the chance of going poorly, but this was bad—very bad. When we were pushed across the portal into the Night Court Palace, I felt my magic suddenly freeze over. It was there, but no longer accessible. It took a minute for the ice to set inside my body. It felt like dead weight. I was suddenly cold—very cold—making the burning from the vines that bound us almost a welcome discomfort.

I tried to take in our surroundings as we were shuffled through a mass of mingling courtiers, all dressed in the gothic style of black silk, dark lace, and leather. All with dark features contrasting on pale skin, like animated ghosts in the night.

The room itself was cavernous. There were no windows or lamplights to illuminate the space, but thousands of candles in different shapes and sizes lined up on pillars and set in candelabras along each wall. The effect created both an eerie and intimate feeling in the space. Deep into the back of the room, where we were headed, were a pair of dark wooden thrones sitting on a raised platform with seven or eight wide stone stairs leading up to them. The thrones themselves were ornately carved with scaly beasts crawling up the backs and down the arms and had deep purple velvet cushions on the seats. One throne sat empty, while the other was occupied by Edmyn, a beautiful human female draped over his lap. She was alive but unconscious, two visible bite marks dribbling excess blood down her neck.

Ciaran pushed us down on our knees before the thrones and then skipped up the steps to take his seat. Amira, looking satisfied and triumphant, slowly took her place, standing next to her lover. Edmyn, emotionless as ever, hardly seemed to even notice us. He wore a loose black shirt underneath the long red leather jacket this time and was absentmindedly fingering the wounds on his victim's neck.

“Ladies and gentlefae, what fortune has fallen on us this day. Not one, but two High Shaedes have come to visit. Shall we make them feel welcome?” As always, there was a dangerous edge to Ciaran's voice. His sycophants laughed hysterically, and it took everything I had not to look at Glory. If I turned my head and saw fear in her eyes, I would crumble. Instead, I tried hard to focus on a tiny crack in a stone stair about three steps up. It was my task, my sole purpose. Hold onto that crack and not let myself go to the place in my head where I knew I'd never see Dru, or Farris, or the Shaede Court again. To a place where the sun simply did not shine and everything smelled murky and old, like death.

“Oh, come now, ladies,” continued Ciaran, intent on getting a rise out of us. “You have to admit; it wasn’t that hard to catch you. What news can you bring us of the Shaede Court? You all have been awfully quiet over there.” I don’t think he actually expected a response from us, but rather more wicked laughter from the court at our expense.

“My darling Amira has some wild theory about your magic, colorless one,” Ciaran looked down on me. I continued focusing on that crack, imagining having the magic to fracture it further and causing the whole section of room to crumble in on itself. “Is alliance still a dirty word at the Shaede Court, or could you see yourself aligning with us? If what she thinks is true, we could probably overtake the realm even without a war.”

Glory made some sort of disparaging comment under her breath, like ‘filthy undead monster,’ and Ciaran snapped his fingers, causing her to double over in audible pain as if an invisible fist had just punched her in the stomach.

“Stop!” I yelled, my voice so loud it echoed against the stone walls like thunder.

“There she is,” Ciaran said eagerly, delighted in my outburst of emotion. “I bet you have the same fire as your sister, or at least I hope so for my dear Edmyn’s sake.” I glared at them both, catching a smirk from Edmyn. My skin crawled and my stomach dipped as I remembered Ciaran’s words to my father days ago in the Shaede Court. Perhaps we start with this one. He had meant for me to mate with Edmyn, for me to somehow break his curse. That day in the throne room, I had thought him crazy for suggesting such a solution, but now with what had barely happened with Farris, I knew that there was potential it could actually work.

Ciaran continued to goad. “Come on, pinky. Don’t look so glum. There are worse fates than sacrificing your body for the betterment of this fine realm.”

“You want respect? But you would rape and murder to get it. You want freedom? But you would rape and murder to get it. Neither the Shaede Court nor I would ever ally with something so vile, so rooted in evil. I’d rather die than have my magic tied to anything benefiting this Balance-forsaken place.” Glory moaned beside me in agreement, and I braced myself for a similar beating.

Ciaran burst out a short, superficial laugh, then said, “If it’s death you want, that can certainly be arranged. But not until after we see if you can awaken the light in my brother.”

For the first time, I looked pleadingly at Edmyn, frantic now for any sign of dissent, but saw only indifference. Ciaran waved his hand suddenly, and the vines uncoiled from our bodies, fell to the floor, and slithered back to his lap .

“Would you have her now, Edmyn, or can your appetite wait until after a little festivity?” Ciaran asked.

“I’ve waited this long, brother. I can wait a little longer. Besides, you know how much I like to play with my food.” These were the first words I had ever heard Edmyn speak, and they were terrifying. His voice was low and raspy, probably from talking so infrequently. But his words pleased Ciaran, who was smiling like a madman and instructing music from somewhere to be played.

Ciaran took Amira’s hand and guided her down the steps. When she passed us, I noticed a slight change in her expression. I wondered if this was all part of her plan, or if seeing me so humiliated had not actually been what was intended. Either way, it didn’t matter now; Ciaran floated them both into the center of the room as a stringed instrument started playing something slow and sad. A circle of courtiers formed around them, and they danced and danced as if nothing had just happened. I think it was meant to be wounding and dismissive, but I took it as a reprieve. I went to help Glory up. She struggled but seemed physically like she was going to be okay.



“When his magic touched me, it felt like I was going to choke on dirt,” Glory said, rubbing her stomach.

“This is all my fault; it was a stupid idea to seek Amira out. She certainly appears to be one of them.” We stood together and moved to watch Ciaran and Amira turn themselves about the room to the peculiar music, visibly enamored with one another. The circle eventually broke up, and they were joined by dozens of other couples, their many shadows climbing the walls like specters.

I located two doors, one at the front of the room, that looked like the main entrance, and another smaller door to the left of the thrones, probably to some antechamber much like the ones at the Shaede Court. Was it even worth imagining how far we could get before one of these dark fae recaptured us? Was it worth the torture to try? If I had access to my magic, I would have just gone white and been done with it. But now we just cowered together, awaiting our inconceivable fates.

“Why didn’t we tell anyone where we were going? This is not solely on you, Opal. I knew the risks and still agreed to go with you. I wanted to try to do something useful—something more than just reading and researching. I just don’t know how one survives something like this. And I am freezing,” Glory spoke, her teeth starting to chatter.

“I am too,” I said. “This place is like a—” I was interrupted by a warm hand touching my shoulder, startling me to silence. I turned to see Edmyn, much too close for comfort, his jade eyes dancing along with the flickering candlelight. I felt paralyzed by his nearness, like prey caught in an invisible snare, watching death hovering close above.

“If I may,” he said softly. And suddenly I felt that warmth from his hand spill down my arm to my fingertips. It made its way to all the other cold places on my body and calmed the chill. My muscles relaxed a little, and I couldn’t deny that I felt improved.

He then took his hand and reached for Glory's, who reluctantly allowed his magic to take her shivering away. When he was done, he stepped back and went back to looking around wearily at the dancers.

"It must be quite a shock to the system to be cut off from the Balance after having your temperature regulated from birth. You'll get used to it," he said nonchalantly.

"I don't want to get used to it," Glory spat. "I want to go home."

"Look at some of these humans. They have adapted just fine," he said, ignoring Glory entirely and gesturing to some of the guests. "Unconventional, I know. We collect a few each year, it seems. They are outliers in their realm, drawn to the darkness for different reasons. Some are lonely; some develop a taste for our blood, which gifts them unnatural strength and agility, and they become addicted. But some just haven't met a scary story they didn't like. Most humans dream of princesses and unicorns, but these dreamt of dark lords and skeleton horses."

"You have skeleton horses?" asked Glory. Edmyn rolled his eyes—the most expressive thing I'd seen his face do yet.

"No, you dim Shaede. We have black unicorns with a curved horn."

"Menacing," I said sarcastically. There was no point to any of this conversation, and we were way beyond trying to fake civilities.

"Not everything that is dark is meant to be menacing," he said with an edge to his voice. "Sometimes something that is dark is just different, and different can be beautiful ." The way he said the word beautiful caused goosebumps to run down my arm, and I wondered if this was a natural occurrence or just more of his impish magic.

The song had slowed to a stop, and another slow very similar sounding haunt began.

“I believe it would please the court if we danced.” Edmyn held out his hand, his sharp nails long and menacing, but there was no way in the four faerie courts I would ever willingly touch him.

“You have got to be joking,” I said.

“It wasn’t a joke, nor a request.” And he used his magic to force my hand into his, my feet reluctantly following him into the middle of the swirling dancers. “I hate dancing,” he said casually, wrapping his other hand around my waist. It felt like a talon, and I was the defenseless mouse, clenched inside his grasp. We stepped together around the room, catching Ciaran’s eye, who beamed with deranged excitement. The other dancers seemed happy enough, their mouths flashing glimpses of sharp teeth in between jovial conversations and seductive whispers. I lost Glory somewhere in the crowd, but I prayed she was still safe and unbothered somewhere along the edge of the party.

We danced and danced in silence, the song so long that I almost found its rhythm. But as soon as I had, the music stopped, and a line of servants emerged from the entrance doors carrying heavy silver trays laden with wine goblets and plates full of pastry, meats, and fruits. Faeries and humans alike applauded their arrival, and as the servants milled about the group, everyone seemed eager to participate in the meal.

“Go find your friend,” Edmyn said quickly. “Tell her not to eat or drink anything she is offered.” I opened my mouth to ask why, but he released the bond his magic had held over me hard and shout-whispered, “Go!”

I don’t know why I trusted his advice, but his command felt urgent enough, so I went. I pushed my way around well-dressed faeries and servants, offering me drinks and a smoked shadow beast tongue. Glory was not hard to miss, as she wore one of the only

bright colors in the room. She was standing near where I had left her, looking nervous and alone, like a rabbit caught in a fox den. Only she could have been the fox if she had her magic. She could have even been the bear that ate the fox, but without our magic to aid us, we were just two women who were no match for the monsters that surrounded us.

I was slightly out of breath by the time I grabbed her arm. “I’m glad I found you. I’m to warn you not to drink or eat anything.”

“Of course I didn’t. Everybody knows not to ingest anything from a new realm. History is littered with faeries and other beings giving in to temptation and finding themselves tricked.”

“You know, it is amazing to me that even in the face of probable death, you still find opportunities to condescend. And you take them,” I said unkindly.

“Now that’s not fair,” she contested, clearly offended. “You don’t know anything about me, Opal. You don’t know what it is like to have a family whose only love language is quizzes, achievements, and accolades. If we weren’t talking about how to turn me into a High Shaede, we weren’t talking. It is as simple as that. Don’t think I didn’t grow up hearing the name calling and seeing the sneers, mostly coming from a place of jealousy, I assume—but really. I had no one looking out for me growing up. My parents meant well, but I was ostracized from having normal friends. I don’t know how to talk to people. And I literally don’t know how I got here.” She threw her hands up, gesturing to the universe in frustration, and it was then that I realized that we may have been more alike than I had previously imagined. “I was praying to the Balance, not me, please not me, but I fucking know more about magic than anyone else at court—and now look where it’s got me!” She had raised her voice and started to cry. The meltdown we were both trying to avoid had commenced. Definitely not my intention.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly, trying to soothe her. I put my arm around her shoulders. “I’m sorry for what I said. I’m not handling this any better.” Several dark fae were looking and whispering in our direction. Thankfully, I spotted Ciaran far across the room, goblet in hand, laughing at something that Edmyn had also deemed worthy of a smile. His face, so often in its neutral state, looked quite luminescent when he smiled, and I was glad they were too busy distracting each other to catch our little moment of weakness. “We can’t let them see our fear, Glory. We have to be stronger than this.” I smoothed some of her hair out of her face and wiped her tears. “I don’t know what hope I have for the Shaede Court at this point. I don’t expect them to save us; they don’t even know we are here. But I do hope they come up with some sort of way to defend against Ciaran, or whatever we endure here will have been for nothing.”

Glory pulled it together, just in time before Ciaran came bounding past us and up the stairs. “Attention, dear brothers and sisters of the Night Court. Might we impart a little good fortune on Prince Edmyn as he takes his mate to his chambers with the possibility of joining me in the light tomorrow morning?”

This must be some strange custom of the Night Court because all the faeries in attendance bent low to touch the stone ground, which, after a few moments, bloomed into an enormous carpet of clover. Only it wasn’t the pillowy, soft, green clover of the glens of the faerie woods. This clover was brown and wilted, and it made a slight crunching sound when you stepped on it. Weirdly enough, in little clusters, it began to flower. But again, these were not the little white tufted blossoms of the glen, but large, velvet-soft, black flowers that I had never seen before, with veiny leaves that looked like they were glowing electric blue. They were quite mystical.

Two human servants dressed in long black skirts and gray fitted vests came to my side. I sought Glory’s hand and clutched it. My heart was pumping so hard that I could feel it in my eyes. Ciaran gestured to someone in the back of the room who started making his way to where we stood while Ciaran addressed the court once more.

“And fortune does not fall solely on Prince Edmyn this night, for Lord Henrick will take the purple Shaede to bed. Perhaps he too will find his way into the sunlight tomorrow.” There was some clapping for Henrick, an oily, bearded faerie with a stocky build. He wore a tunic made of mink, smelled like rotting meat, and looked a little too eager to claim his prize. Glory spoke a thousand words to me by the way she was squeezing the life out of my hand and starting to tremble. She was right. I really hadn’t given her much of a chance. Not while growing up— not ever. But she was smart, she was brave, and she was not crying right now, even though I knew she wanted to. She was a warrior in her own right, and I wished people back at court could see this version of her, facing her hairy and aggressive-looking assailant with her chin held high.

I, on the other hand, was about to lose it for us both. She might be willing to take on this fate, but we both knew she didn’t have any refinement magic whatsoever. When morning came and dawn looked on Henrick’s stinky, pale flesh, he would burn. And killing her will be the natural next step.

“I will bed them both,” Edmyn called out from where he still stood in the crowd. I could barely see the top of his curls, but he was there, on Glory’s behalf, trading one horror for another. Ciaran was enthralled. “Oh come on, brother,” Edmyn badgered. “I’ve waited so long for this. And we don’t know what specific Shaedes, if any, carry this ability. Release them both to me; you know I can handle it.”

“So be it,” declared Ciaran, gesturing for the servants to take us. Henrick was visibly fighting his disappointment, but it was Amira who I was focused on as we exited the throne room, her face pallid with remorse.

### CHAPTER 15

The two human servants walked us silently down a maze of stone walled hallways. While the general structure of the castle was austere and simplistic, more of a fortress than a castle, inside some of the rooms we passed, we could see the touches of the grand and the opulent. There was definitely an element of darkness to the décor, but overall, it was elegant. Tapestries hung in some rooms, depicting ornately woven scenes of tragedy. Candlelight was amplified in others by gray globes of glass placed over flames to magically enhance the light. Statues cast in ebony hid in dark corners, illustrating cursed faeries frozen in eternal lament.

We were led into a private bathing room where a large hot spring was dug out of the center of the floor, just like the bathhouses at the Shaede Court. Only this one was small, and the windowless room felt claustrophobic. There was no bed of moss or lovely, humidity-loving flowers decorating the space. It was just more candles, more stone, and the scent of something acidic and citrusy hanging in the air.

“Undress,” one of the women ordered. She couldn’t have been more than eighteen. Maybe even younger.

“Please,” I whispered, in case we could somehow be overheard. “ You cannot agree with this. Please, help us find a way out of here. This cannot be allowed to happen.”

“I said, undress,” she repeated, looking unmoved. The other woman went about pouring some colorless liquid into the water, making the lemony smell burn my eyes.

“Why do you do this?” I asked pleadingly. “Why would you serve someone so rooted

in darkness?”

The servant narrowed her eyes and said, “Because when you aren’t good enough for the light, the only place left to turn is the darkness. Now get in.” And she pushed me into the pool, fully clothed, the hot water almost scalding my body.

Glory, watching all this unfold, quickly undressed and climbed into the bath beside me. I peeled the wet clothes away and handed them to the silent servant. She removed them from the room and quickly returned with some silky silver robes. Glory and I bathed in silence. If it wasn’t for the high temperature of the water, I would have been willing to stay there forever. To prolong the inevitable. To spare ourselves the cruelty that awaited us in a different room of this castle.

If the cost of my mating with Prince Edmyn brought any benefits at all to the Shaede Court and the other faeries of the realm, I would have liked to believe myself able to self-detach and make the sacrifice. Never a willing participant—no. But under those circumstances, where the act served an actual purpose, I thought I could learn to live with myself afterward. But this was not that type of surrender. This wasn’t a ransoming; it was an exploitation. And the only one who would benefit from my debasement would be Edmyn himself and ultimately the Night Court.

Glory and I accepted the robes and allowed the servants to comb our hair. They braided it and pinned it up on our heads in an attractive way, but all I could think of was how exposed my neck had become.

We traveled down another dark hall, but this one seemed wider and had a decorative carpet rolling through its center. We arrived at a door made of dark-brown wood with iron filigree mounted around its frame. The servant opened it, and we entered into a very large and lavish bedroom. On the far side of the room was a sitting area where every seat was piled high with red velvet pillows. The rugs that covered the stone floor echoed the same sophisticated design as the hall. Along one wall was a large



fireplace that was so huge that it burned tree trunks instead of logs or branches. It created a warm inferno that heated the whole room, causing color to paint my cheeks.

There were—no surprise—an assortment of candles clustered in bunches sporadically placed around the space, and on the other side of the room, near the door, was a dressing area. It was built into the wall. A small rectangular bump-out big enough for someone to dress in, complete with a tufted chaise lounge covered in velvet the same shade as the black flowers that appeared in the desiccated clover on the throne room floor. The walls of the dressing area were covered in shelves with various boots, belts, and folded pants. Hooks held draped coats and heavy tunics. A gilded mirror ran the length from the ceiling to the floor on one side wall. There were also enormous, brocaded curtains in black and gold that were tied up on either side of the space, framing it off from the rest of the room. They were cut from the same fabric that hung from the back of the bed.

The bed was positioned directly in front of the fireplace. It was massive and would look intimidating even under normal circumstances. Like all the furniture in the room, it was made by an artist's hand, carved from the same dark wood of the door and finished with a glaze that looked almost wet against the dancing firelight. There was a mountain of pillows atop the blankets, which were so midnight blue that they looked almost black. Giant fur blankets from no animal I had ever seen before lay folded at the foot of the bed next to several skimpy night-gowns that were obviously displayed for our choosing.

“Pick one and get dressed,” the young servant ordered us next.

“You cannot be serious,” Glory said in a panic. “You cannot seriously be asking us to choose the clothing we are going to be defiled in?”

“Fine, I'll choose,” she replied. She picked up two long, glossy white slip dresses and threw them at us. “Get dressed. Prince Edmyn should be here soon.” They collected

the remaining garments and, without any further instruction, left us alone, shutting the door behind them.

“This is really happening,” Glory said, frozen in place. She had gone somewhere in her own head, and I had no words of comfort for her, so I remained silent. I quickly slid into the sheer nightgown and helped Glory into hers, as nothing with her seemed to be properly functioning at the moment. She had gone out of her own body, just staring at the bed as if it contained invisible horrors only she could see.

I walked around the room to give my own body purpose but couldn't get my mind to focus on anything besides Edmyn's jagged finger tips. I tried pulling Farris's face into memory, but quickly pushed it away. He didn't belong here. His goodness and gentleness did not belong in this realm of darkness and pain.

The door opened, and Glory immediately went hysterical. She was screaming, crying, and shouting awful things at Edmyn, who looked as tired and uninterested as ever. He waved a hand which sent her flying unconscious onto the bed.

“What did you just do to her?” I shouted accusingly. I ran to her side, and placed my hand on her cheek.

“Relax,” said Edmyn, clearly drunk and staggering into the dressing area to hang up his leather coat. He started unbuttoning his shirt. “It's only a sleep spell; she'll awake in the morning feeling like she's had the best sleep of her life.”

“I don't believe you,” I said, gently shaking Glory's arm to rouse her.

“Well, you don't really have a choice, do you?” The way he looked at me from across the room would have made a dragon bend in submission. I dropped Glory's hand, praying she was in fact asleep, because I didn't need her to witness whatever was about to happen. Edmyn walked over to the other side of the bed, his bare, sculpted

chest and arms painted orange in the firelight. I was no match against him.

“I will not lay down without a fight,” I said with more bravery than I actually possessed .

“As much as that offer is very much in alignment with one of my favorite forms of carnal desires, alas, I must disappoint us both. I am not going to mate with you, Little Prism.” He unbuckled his belt and went to put it on a shelf.

I stood there, confused, a thousand questions vying for priority on my tongue. “You aren’t going to force me to mate with you tonight?”

He was seated on the chaise lounge and pulling off his boots now, smiling at my confusion. “No,” he said with the devil in his eyes. “Not tonight, nor ever if you do not wish it. I’m always eager for a chase and happy to win a struggle, but only if my lover is willing to play with fire.”

“What about the power of daywalking? And Ciaran? And what about Glory?” The questions were pouring out now.

“There is no doubt in my mind that you and your shiny refracted shaede might hold special magic that could indeed unlock the secrets of our curse. But after the many years I have lived on this planet, both living and undead, I’ve learned enough to know that magic of that caliber always involves soul magic. Very powerful but equally unpredictable, with soul ingredients being among the most difficult to procure. I do love my brother, but ambition has always rendered him blind. He can’t see it, but if any bit of Amira’s soul was used in the undoing of his curse, then the main ingredient was love. It has to be. They are nauseatingly in love, and it has changed them both. Since the very opposite of that is what is going on between you and me, I’m not going to hold my breath for being able to once again feel the sun upon my face. Mating with you would be a chore, one that I might have even enjoyed, but there is

really no point. As for Ciaran, leave my brother to me. And as for your friend, what about her? I'm just thankful she doesn't snore." It was definitely the longest speech I'd ever heard him give, but I was still not satisfied. Edmyn, on the other hand, tossed the boots in a corner and draped his long, muscular frame along the lounge chair. Framed by the drapings, he looked like a baroque painting. He closed his eyes, waving the dozens of candles to extinguish themselves, clearly done with the conversation. But I wasn't .

I moved around the bed quietly and climbed into the other side. I laid my head on one of the velveteen pillows and tried to stifle an involuntary sigh of comfort from my lips. I was tired, warm, and I could just barely hear the calm, steady breaths coming from Glory trying to lull me to sleep. I was so weary.

I looked over at Edmyn, still as a corpse in the firelight.

"Why are you willing to defy your brother?" I asked softly. I wasn't even sure he was still awake, but then he rolled his head to the side and looked at me.

"You ask a lot of questions, Little Prism," he said lazily. Sleep was calling him too, but I needed to know. Why was one of the biggest monsters in the Night Court offering us sanctuary? Could he be right about the soul magic needed to back the Renaissance Spell? If that were the case, Ciaran raping and pillaging all of the faerie realm would never bring about any of the results he was looking for. It was folly. Moreover, my sister and I were the only two faeries I knew of that had access to the refinement magic also needed to drive the spell. It would explain why my kisses had such an effect on Farris but not on Astor. It was somehow easier to admit now, as I might never see Farris again, how much I had come to love him. Had I been close to giving him a piece of my soul?

"My name is Opal," I said, forcing Farris out of my thoughts again.

“I know,” he replied softly, and then turned to close his eyes again. I thought he was going to go back to sleep, but he kept talking, eyes closed, as if he were in a dream. “You and your sister are a new shaede entirely. I see it in your eyes. You are just like how she was when she first came to court. Full of self-loathing and lacking confidence when there is so much magic at your fingertips. Vibrancy of shaede is a myth really. If one appears more powerful the darker they are, that is just coincidence.” He was slurring his words a little between the wine and the lassitude, but his was the wisdom that came with age. “Ciaran was also like you, once upon a time. He hated being a Natural, hated it enough for the both of us. He constantly watched the Shaedes and allowed every minor grievance to fuel his hate. I learned hate from Ciaran, as it was an easy enough emotion to understand. But when I went on my conversancy and got away from Ciaran and his toxic opinions, I made friends with another Natural and a blue Shaede named Lyara. She was beautiful, and having feelings for her should have been reaching way beyond my grasp. But she didn’t see it that way.” He was suddenly more lucid and laced his fingers behind his head as his shiny, dark eyes bore into me.

“I was happy. I went home to court, making plans to spend more time with Lyara, whose kisses I can still feel on my lips even now. My brother had disappeared, they said. It didn’t concern me, as he was always so angry and I didn’t want him to slander what Lyara and I were creating. So yes, I admit that a part of me hoped he was off on a long adventure and might leave me to my own devices.” Edmyrn paused, and I realized in that moment how unhappy he must be. I knew what was coming next and wondered how hard it must be to relive the choice his brother made on his behalf.

“You know he murdered me in my sleep a few weeks later; all the realms know that story,” he said bitterly. “But what no one knows, not even Ciaran, is that two days before he returned to slit my throat, my shaede had come in. I was a yellow. A golden sheen appeared on my skin. My hair was the color of lemons ripe on the tree. Overnight, the sun turned into an old friend, and I only got two days to plant. Two days to create new flowers, to feel the soil and hear its needs. It was so much magic.

It was a purpose and a life, and then it was over.”

Nothing in my heart told me that I could trust this man—this cursed thing that feigned disinterest all day at court and then revealed a damaged soul and broken heart to someone who he openly mocked and kept imprisoned. But his story was undeniably tragic. Ciaran had also been changed against his will, but both brothers had had very different outlooks on life before they were turned. Being a dark faerie only seemed to amplify Ciaran’s hate, while I wasn’t sure what had happened to Edmyn. He just seemed lost.

“Anyway,” he said, adjusting himself to get more comfortable. “That is why I would defy my brother. He stole an entirely different eternity from me. And although I love him, I will never forgive him for that. ”

“What are you going to do?” I asked, my eyes squinting through the darkness as the fire was starting to fade.

“I’m going to sleep, and so are you. Enough questions, Little Prism.”

I reluctantly closed my eyes and let the sleep that had been begging finally come, bringing with it dreams of war.

### CHAPTER 16

When I awoke, I noticed the fire had somehow built up again. All the candles were lit, and the heavy fur blankets had been wrapped around both Glory and myself, making the warm little nest of blankets almost impossible to leave. In the dressing area, two dark gowns lay splayed out over the lounge chair where Edmyn had slept, Edmyn being nowhere in sight. I rolled over to Glory.

“Wake up,” I gently urged her. “Glory, you need to wake up.”

She moaned a little in vexation, then her brain caught up with her body, and she shot up with a jolt.

“Oh my stars! What happened? What time is it? Are you okay? Are we okay?” She grabbed a hold of me, looking me over. “Where is Edmyn?”

“I have answers to almost all your questions,” I said and started filling her in with everything that had transpired after she was hit with the sleep spell, minus the tiny detail about Edmyn’s prior shaede. He had kept that secret for so many years that it seemed wrong to repeat it.

“I hate it here,” she said finally, getting up and stretching her sore muscles. “It’s so dark that it’s impossible to know what time it is. Everyone looks at everyone like they’re food, and without access to my magic, I feel hollow. It’s the most terrible, aching feeling.”

“I know. I feel it too,” I answered. “But don’t mention food again. More than

anything, I am starving.” I also got up, feeling well rested and knowing we must have been sleeping for hours. I could feel it in my bones. It was the next day, and for all we knew, a war had already been waged against our realm, one in which we were completely incapacitated to participate. I wondered if Ciaran had already learned of Edmyn’s deceit if perhaps a civil war might also be brewing within these castle walls. But the growling in my empty stomach overrode all other thoughts, so I walked over to the dresses.

“Black on black, or black on black?” I offered sarcastically to Glory.

“Hmm, that’s a tough one. You choose,” she responded with a wry smile. I tossed her dress on the bed, and we both quickly dressed, thankful for sleeves and something thick enough to hide our nipples.

Mine was off the shoulders, rimmed with complex black lace, and had a heavy satin skirt. Glory’s was also black satin but had a little bit of fur around the collar and cuffs. Our hair had managed to survive the night, so we just left it as it was, and timidly opened the bedroom door.

One of the servants from last night stood in the shadows, waiting. It was the grumpy one that pushed me into the bath. She looked at us appraisingly and then said, “Follow me.”

We walked a fair distance through hallways I didn’t think we’d traversed the night before, but it was hard to tell in a place that knew no light. We were shown into a large dining room where candles floated overhead and another massive fireplace was aflame. At the end of the long dining table sat Amira, who immediately stopped eating when she saw us. There were two more place settings set, one on either side of her, and two empty chairs. She gestured for us to sit.

“I’m sorry I started without you,” she said with a nervousness in her voice I’d never



heard before. “There are strawberries. You know, in that damn Gaylenswood meadow, the air is sort of saturated with that smell. It wafts over here and drives me half mad with longing sometimes. So anytime we have strawberries, I get excited—I guess.”

Her little outburst made me so confused, and I just stayed rooted in the doorway, as if the room’s floor was covered in vipers that only I could see. Do not go in there, do not even try, they warned. But the servant pushed me forward, right into the snake pit, and Glory and I very reluctantly took our seats. Then I smelled the fresh fruit and muffins and saw a pitcher of what looked like water on the table, and my mouth began to salivate to the point of drooling.

“Please,” Amira eyed me anxiously. “Please eat.” She heaped a large number of various items on my plate and then onto Glory’s, who looked at me skeptically, yet I could almost hear the hole in her stomach groan under the table.

“Last night’s fare was saturated with shadow beast blood. It is how the dark fae stomach eating actual food. It’s actually Edmyn’s creation. Somehow, he has developed, with the help of his magic, crops that actually grow in this cursed soil, but they take fresh sacrifice and are irrigated with blood. These faeries just drink the blood too, but some of them say the food incites nostalgia. Others say it is positively delicious.” Amira’s explanation was almost enough to make my appetite turn, but not quite. “Here, watch me. It’s perfectly safe.” She took a strawberry in one hand and a slice of bread in the other and bit into them both. “It’s edible, I promise. Our human servants run around the Gaylenswood at night and steal grain and fruits and vegetables from the Forest Court. Just not enough for them to really notice. They have an abundance anyway,” she explained with a slight bitterness to her voice.

I nodded at Glory, and we both dug in, trying to eat slowly, but it felt too good to be filling the pit. I drank almost my entire goblet of water and then looked at my sister, who was staring at me with what could only be sadness in her prismatic eyes.

“I’m really sorry, Opal,” she blurted. “I told Ciaran about your letter. We both knew you would never side with us, but maybe by taking you here, by keeping you here, I thought we could get the Shaede Court to actually take us seriously and negotiate. I never, ever thought... I mean, I didn’t mean for Edmyn...” She was having a hard time using difficult words because of the truth they held .

“You mean you only meant to kidnap me, not to get me raped?” I said in an effort to wound her. It worked. She buried her face in her hands, but there were no tears. Amira was too hardened for that. She, who would sell her own sister to the devil. Who would have her parents murdered. Who took love and transformed it into a weapon.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated. After a moment of hesitation, she asked, “Did it work? Is Edmyn free?”

“How should I know?” I spat. “He was gone when we awoke this morning.”

She did not look convinced. “Opal, you would know . The spell is incredibly powerful. When Ciaran’s curse broke, the whole castle could feel it.”

“I guess we will know when we know,” I said trying to keep it vague. There was a time when I would have loved to discuss love affairs and mating with my sister. As a young girl, I fantasized about my sister returning someday and about all the secrets we would share. How much I would have loved growing up at court with someone else like me around. Perhaps we could have even saved each other. But right now, all I could do was eye the butter knife on the table and imagine stabbing her in the eye.

“I hope we find that it worked,” Amira said. “Otherwise, Ciaran will be that much more hell-bent on burning everything to the ground. He is starting his attacks today.”

“No, unfortunately, he isn’t,” came a low voice from the doorway. Edmyn stalked

into the room wearing the same black leather pants from the previous night and a white shirt with what looked like mud all over it.

“Edmyn,” said Amira, clearly startled. “Where have you been? Ciaran left early this morning, leaving no word where he was off to. And my stars, you are filthy.”

“Yes. I too was up before swamplight. We received word that our entire stock of bleeding beasts had somehow escaped their pens and were chaotically roaming the realm.” Amira looked horrified, but I could have sworn I saw the edge of Edmyn’s mouth turn up.

“But that’s impossible,” said Amira. “Those pens are well cared for. It took an eternity to build up that livestock, and without it, the crops won’t get irrigated and the dark fae will be thrown into starvation. Ciaran has got to be livid.”

“That’s an understatement,” Edmyn said, grabbing an apple from the fruit platter with a dirty hand. He smelled like a sewer, and I was momentarily afraid my entire breakfast was about to revisit the table. “I don’t know what could have happened. The beasts may call him master, but they have gone completely wild. I wrestled the ones nearest to the pens, as magic does not always work well on them. Ciaran said he would be portaling the rest back as soon as he finds them.”

“But that could be days! He doesn’t have time to be running around chasing beasts. And what about your daywalking? Did you go test it?”

“Nah,” Edmyn said, turning to smile at me with fresh mischief in his eyes. “I promised Ciaran I would wait for him. And anyway, Opal has definitely been worth the wait.”

Glory dropped her fork with a clatter. Edmyn tossed the apple to me and took his pungent odor, hopefully somewhere to bathe, while Amira put her head back in her

hands, and I just smiled.

Amira wasn't much for talking after that. She told us that we were free to roam the castle and listed possible points of interest: the underground pool, the small courtyard at the castle's center, the library, and the great hall—a raucous place where members of the court tended to congregate when they were feeling the need to be social. Guards were stationed at every exit, so there really was no reason to look for an escape. She reminded us not to eat anything unless we were certain it wasn't from the Shadowlands and to stay away from the other dark fae if possible. “They can be a species hard to navigate alone,” she had said before dropping her cloth napkin on the table and hurrying out of the room.

Glory and I continued to eat in silence until we were certain we were very much alone.

“I'm glad what was meant to happen last night, did not,” she said finally, in between bites.

“Me too,” I said, refilling my cup. “But it is hard to feel too much relief. Without our magic, this place is swarming with faeries that would love to snap our necks. And I have zero faith in whatever Edmyn is up to. Whatever it is, it seems like he's just prolonging the inevitable.”

Glory stood up abruptly, grabbing a handful of strawberries. “I am going to do the thing I always do when all seems hopeless—and head to the library. Would you like to join me? Maybe these dark fae have writings about things we don't.”

“As much as I would love to scour the shelves for ancient secrets, I think I will check out the courtyard. I need to see the sky, even if it is cursed. Let's meet back here in a few hours.” Glory nodded and walked out of the room, munching her berries.

I slowly finished my food and resisted the urge to hoard some for later. I left the gloomy dining hall for the even darker network of hallways, stopping to ask a passing servant if I was headed the right way toward the courtyard. I had made it maybe only ten more feet before a door opened to my right, the sound making me almost jump out of my skin.

There, outlined by candlelight and hot steam from the bath, was a wet, shirtless Edmyn, fresh out of the water and wearing only a loose-fitting pair of olive green pants. He raised a pale, muscled arm and leaned on the door frame, his dark ringlets dripping water all over his body and onto the floor.

“Where are you going without your purple shadow, Little Prism?” he asked coyly.

“Glory is spending some time in the library, and I was in search of the courtyard. I needed some fresh air.” The way he was watching me was unnerving. “Are you not cold, Dark Prince?” I asked. Watching the waves of steam wafting out of the room and dancing around his bare limbs was making me shiver.

“You forget that I am very old, with an abundance of magic to keep me warm if I so wish it. But I am also not quite alive, not in the way that makes one feel cold.” He bent over to pick up a nearby towel and started rubbing the rest of his curls dry. “Also, my name is Edmyn, if you don’t mind. ”

“Then why do you call me a prism if you know I have an actual name?” I challenged.

He rubbed the towel over his chest and abdomen smiling, “A prism is a way of looking at or thinking about something that causes one to see or understand it in a different way. Is that not what you do?”

“What?” I asked, utterly confused.

“Your very existence defies most common standards of the way faeries think about shaedes. It should cause us to question, or maybe even redefine, some of our most foundational ideas about magic. I find you rather intriguing, really. Well, all that and prisms are, by nature, quite beautiful.”

I found myself speechless. It was definitely a profound compliment—one I’d never believe myself worthy of. And one I’d never think would ever come out of Edmyn’s mouth. There was probably something appropriate I could have said in response, but instead, Edmyn continued to survey me with a roguish look, one that delighted in my discomfort.

“So what is a Farris, anyway?” he asked, watching me twitch.

“What?” I sputtered, horrified that Farris’s name could find its way into Edmyn’s vocabulary. “What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know; I’m asking you. You talk a little in your sleep. I don’t mind, but seeing how this has got you so flustered, now my curiosity is piqued.” He tossed the towel and folded his arms, staring me into submission.

“It’s complicated,” I said.

He relaxed against the doorway. “Well, is he your faerie lover?”

My blushing cheeks betrayed me. Feeling forced to explain, but finding words difficult to form underneath Edmyn’s piercing gaze, I hesitated just long enough for a short, bulky faerie to appear in the hallway, distracting us both.

It was Henrick, wearing the same sullen look he had put on once Edmyn stole Glory out from under his nose.

“Good day, my prince,” he mumbled. I thought he was just going to walk past us, but I guess the dark faerie’s penchant for stirring up trouble got the best of him. He stopped beside me and came in close to sniff my neck. “Absolutely delicious,” he purred. I tried to back up, away from his grotesque attentions, but he started to grab my arm.

In a move that was so fast I didn’t even see it happen, Edmyn grabbed me by the neck and pinned me to him with my back against the front of his body, his sharp nails like five tiny knives against my throat. I was practically on my toes, paralyzed, afraid to move lest he draw blood. My eyes, so surprised and afraid, locked onto Henrick, who looked equally shocked.

“She belongs to me,” Edmyn growled, his fanged teeth clenched. “And if you, Lord Henrick, ever so much as gaze upon her shadow again, I will feed your entrails to the beasts every morning from now until the end of time.”

My heart was beating so fast that I was certain Edmyn could feel it against his chest. Henrick bowed very low, repeating apologies and assurances in a frantic voice as he cowered into the darkness of the hallway and eventually disappeared out of sight.

Edmyn released my neck, causing me to stagger forward and almost fall to the ground. I felt his magic catch me and fill me with the same warmth he had donated the night before in the throne room.

“Henrick is a pest, but he is also a coward. He will not bother you or your friend again.” He went back into the bathing room to slide on some boots and don a light weight beige shirt.

“Thank you,” I said. Even though it felt weird to thank someone who I thought had been on the verge of strangling me only moments prior. I rubbed the spot on my throat where I could have sworn his nails broke skin, but there was nothing there.

“I promise you, my bark is stronger than my bite—unless, of course, you are into that.” he said, watching me while pulling on his boot and suppressing a smile. “Come on.” He came back out into the hallway. “If you wanted fresh air, I think we can do better than that puny courtyard.”

Edmyn deftly navigated his way throughout the dimly lit halls. He led us to an isolated corner of the castle I would never have found on my own, where a single guard stood tall against a small gray door .

“Prince Ciaran said the Shaedes were not to leave the castle, my prince,” said the guard.

“Well, Prince Edmyn says this Shaede may, under supervision, of course. Stand aside.” The guard did not argue, and with a twist of the knob, Edmyn and I were suddenly standing on a dirt path overlooking vast rolling hills on the east side of the castle. From our perch, you could see the expansive swamplands to the north. Down below, the path led to rows and rows of plants growing from grass that was so dry it could have been straw. The rest of the view was cut off by the castle itself, protruding into the land. But what was most remarkable was the light.

We were definitely outside, but it wasn’t as dark as I had imagined it. The eternal clouds covered the sky in a sheath of cottony gray. But it was more like dusklight than darkness. In comparison with the deep shadows of the castle’s interior, I found the outside almost pleasing.

“I like it out here,” Edmyn said, starting to make his way along the path. “Perhaps it is my inner Shaede stirring somewhere inside this corpse, but I have come to prefer the companions of the plants and the soil to the brainwashed courtiers that would do almost anything to hear Ciaran sing their praises.”

“Do you miss the Shaede Court?” I asked as we continued our zig zagging



downward. The air, although a twinge acidic, felt like heaven in my lungs.

“I think I miss the sun more than court, in general,” he answered. “The Night Court is pretty much the same as any other. Faeries vying for favor, stepping over or on top of those they would deem lesser, leaders who may think they are doing the right thing and causing havoc for us all. Ciaran does believe himself a hero, and I think a part of him is even guilty for having broken his curse. He’ll stop at nothing to make it possible for others to share in the light.”

We reached the bottom of the hill, and it was clear now that these crops were thriving despite their color and general look. Starving for sun? Yes. Larger than your average tomatoes and carrot bushels? Also, yes.

“You grew all this?” I asked, bending down to feel the leaves of what looked like a giant head of wilting cabbage. But when I touched the leaves, they were not brittle at all, but a soft, tender frond. The neat rows of edibles stretched out for what looked like a mile or two in each direction.

Edmyn crouched down next to me, knees right in the soil. He leaned down and put my palm gently on the ground, and then pressed his much larger one on top of it. His nails did not look so claw-like and menacing in the gray light. His magic, which I was starting to recognize like the feeling of a warm blanket on a cold night, pushed through my hand and into the ground.

Perhaps it was like Amira had said, I had a heightened sensitivity to other Shaedes, so I could feel his power more acutely than other fae could. Or maybe it was like Edmyn’s pet name for me—I could just see his magic in a different way. But when it passed through my hand into the soil, I felt yellow. If one could even feel a color. It felt warm and bright, like sunlight. There was a trembling in the earth under my palm, and then another flash of heat, followed by a tickle. I jumped a little at the touch, and when I pulled my hand back, he followed suit. There, where we had just been

pressing, a tiny seedling had broken through the soil. Only it couldn't have been a seedling, as there was no seed. It was pure magic.

I turned to him, and he was so close. His face held an emotion I hadn't yet seen on him—he was happy.

“Thank you for showing me. This is... amazing,” I said. Dark fae were considered by most to be an aberration of nature. But Edmyn had managed to create something from nothing—life from the darkness—and that didn't seem like dark magic to me.

“It's not much, especially once irrigated with shadow beast blood. Everything takes on a macabre quality after that. But it is a small comfort that makes many of the faeries here still feel connected to their humanity.”

“Speaking of the shadow beasts,” I started, wondering if now was a good time to ask questions, seeing as he seemed in the mood to share. “How do you know for certain that Ciaran is going to be occupied for days with them? ”

Edmyn tilted his head and looked at me as if he were weighing the pros and cons of letting me in on his plan. “Ciaran knows he cannot come back without our main food source secured; otherwise, the court would be in chaos. The beasts mainly answer to him, so it is he who must do it. It takes too much magic to create new beasts, so he breeds them, and that takes time. He has to herd up the ones we have and portal them back to their pens. Only I spelled the pens to continually let them loose again and again and again. No matter what magic he tries to use on the pens, I don't think he's getting through this spell. I've been working on it for years.” He laughed a little to himself. “I kind of wish I was there to see his face the first time he thinks he's got them all back, just to see they've escaped again.”

I couldn't help but also smile at the thought. “That was very clever, but how long will the spell last? And what happens when it ends?”

“I’d give it a solid four days, maybe five. Amira is going to be quite irritated. Those two are hardly ever apart. Might be good for her, actually; good for us all to see what life could be like out from underneath Ciaran’s constant shadow.” He was not laughing anymore. “As far as what happens when he returns, I have something else I’d like to show you.”

He stood up, not even bothering to shake the soil off his pants, and offered me a hand. I took it, always surprised by the warmth that flowed through him despite him not having a heartbeat. We traipsed through some of the crops till we came to a small clearing in between where the vegetables ended and a large orchard of fruit trees began. He scanned the area, making sure we were alone, and said, “I’m showing you this so that you might come to trust me, or at the very least, feel reassured. But you mustn’t tell anyone. You cannot even say anything to Glory about it. You must promise.”

Faerie promises are usually something we all take very seriously. Sometimes faeries even promise in magic to keep each other’s secrets. I had no access to magic right now, so I couldn’t be bound. I owed this man nothing, but deep down, I knew I wanted to be someone worth trusting, and Edmyn’s secret seemed important enough for me to pledge my honor .

“I promise,” I said solemnly.

He checked the grounds one more time, then waved both hands over the clearing. Immediately the glamour fell, and the empty clearing became a tightly knit strawberry patch, ten or so perfect rows of berries so maroon, they almost looked brown. Each shiny berry was connected by a network of leafy vines that held sharp, spikey thorns.

“Those don’t look like any strawberries I’ve ever seen,” I said, moving to take a closer look. However, Edmyn moved to grab my waist and pulled me back.

“Do not go near them, and do not touch them, Little Prism.” His words in my ear gave me chills. “I have an idea of what they will do to my brother, but I fear what they might do to you.” I didn’t even have to ask what he meant. These berries were meant to poison. He waved another hand, putting the heavy glamour back in place.

“How do you know they will work?” I asked, my adrenaline spiking at the thought of something that might actually incapacitate an unkillable enemy.

“I’ve been testing them, mostly on random shadow beasts.” I didn’t ask what he meant by “mostly” because I didn’t want to know. “Fortunately or not, my magic to create nourishing plants in this barren wasteland also lends itself to creating plants of incredible toxicity. It’s taken a lot of tweaking and even more secrecy, but one tiny bite of those berries will kill even the largest of our beasts dead in seconds. I’m not naïve enough to think that they will be enough to kill Ciaran, but I am confident they will weaken or disable him. And that is all I really need. If he cannot lash out with his magical arsenal, then I can imprison him. Those enchanted swamp vines work on our magic as well as yours. We can bind him in the dungeons in perpetuity, and find a way to peacefully move forward with these very, very long lives we lead.”

I stood there, searching his face for emotion, but he had gone stoic again. That empty look that he wore almost exclusively while in public had only ever been a mask. Did Ciaran even know his brother, really? Not the younger sibling who followed him around, nodding and laughing at his jokes, but the yellow Shaede that dreamt of sunlight— not to wreak havoc and assert authority, but just to feel its warmth and grow beautiful things with its blessing? There was a gentler spirit there under the fangs and the violence and the bloodlust. And I felt lucky enough to get to see it.

But could Edmyn really betray his brother? Could I trust him to do what was necessary when facing his own flesh and blood? Ciaran walked around thinking he was Edmyn’s savior when really he was his oppressor, enslaving Edmyn to an eternity of having to pay for Ciaran’s sins. There was definitely enough bad blood

there to push Edmyn to the edge, but would he take that last step, and would these strawberries even be potent enough to work?

I pitied Edmyn. In a way, I knew what he could be feeling. I too had a sibling that was a gross disappointment. After what happened with my parents and then her recent betrayal in the Gaylenswood meadow, she continued to disappoint. But could I have swapped out those strawberries at breakfast today with these cursed ones? I couldn't be sure. I really didn't know if I'd have it in me to end her the ways I have been dreaming of during quiet moments of silent rage and confusion. Henrick? Knife to the throat. Ciaran? No problem, knife to the throat. But Amira? Family is tricky like that.

All these thoughts brought out an empathy that outweighed and overwhelmed my fears and sense of logic. I walked over to Edmyn and put a hand on his shoulder. He turned to look at me, surprised and unsure. For a moment, his solid arms embraced me, and I wasn't sure which of us needed it more. He smelled like the earth and sweet citrus, and despite the warring thoughts raging in my mind, I allowed myself to absorb all the warmth he was offering.

### CHAPTER 17

We spent the rest of the morning walking along the fields together, talking about everything from our childhoods to our favorite swimming holes at Pellshaeven. I learned the Dark Prince's parents died very young in faerie wars, leaving Ciaran feeling very protective and responsible for him from a young age. His parents were both green Shaedes, and Ciaran had often vocalized to him that he believed it was their blind allegiance to the Balance that had gotten them both blown up by battle magic. Edmyn never apologized for how my parents died, but now I knew he knew how it felt to have family taken from you.

After jumping across a murky creek, bubbling with what looked like a current of mud from the swamp making its way slowly through the lands, we had come to another large hill. We climbed to partake in a different view of the crops he had planted. Now I could see the whole of the castle, its outline eerily framed by the blue skies across the meadow. It was quite foreboding, with its square, fortress-like towers and tall windowless walls of stone. Edmyn pulled off his shirt and laid it down for me. He gestured that I should sit, and he sat down beside me on the dry grass, perfectly content with the dirt and the dust.

"This wouldn't be the worst place, you know. Under different circumstances, I could find a way to be happy here. I'm just not sure what those circumstances would be." Edmyn relaxed back on his elbows, looking long and peaceful.

"You say I have the ability to make people see things in a different way, but that seems to be your specialty." I picked up a shriveled clover growing nearby in a dust patch and twirled it around between my fingers. "I can see the beauty in some of it,

where before I had seen none. These clovers are still clovers, just different.” I handed it to him, and for some reason, when our fingers touched, I jumped a little.

“People are always afraid of what’s different, Little Prism.” He reached up and put the little brown clover behind my ear. On its way back down, his hand brushed against my cheek, causing nerves throughout my body to frizzle. His gaze was so unnerving, as if his eyes saw parts of me I had never thought I needed to hide. Those beautiful eyes, flecked with gold in the dusklight, found everything—all of it—and left me feeling exposed.

He lifted a finger up, then pointed downward, causing all the pins in my hair to fall to the ground and the braids to untwine, leaving my hair loose and wavy.

“I like it better this way,” he said. As if I had asked his opinion.

I suddenly felt very unsure. Was I so easily distracted? A wave of guilt hit and almost knocked me over. As I sat here ogling the handsome Dark Prince, Glory was going blind in a dark library researching every possible book on dark magic to uncover a loophole that doesn’t exist, completely unaware that Edmyn had an actual plan. The other high Shaelde, at this point, were most likely bracing for impact since Ciaran’s time limit had run out—ignorant of the fool’s errand Edmyn had sent his brother on and unknowing of where Glory and I had completely disappeared to. And then there was Farris, perhaps with whom the majority of my guilt resided, as I brought him into this world of magic and war and then promptly abandoned him. He, who was so deserving of someone who would not forget about him while traversing the shadows.

“I think it is probably time to get back,” I said abruptly. “I told Glory I would meet her for lunch.” Edmyn did not seem affronted. He sprung to his feet and offered me his hand to help me up—but he didn’t let go until we got to the castle.

As we arrived, Glory was already sitting in the dining room with a stack of books on

either side of her. She raised both eyebrows as she watched us enter—me with my hair wind-swept and Edmyn, smiling, half-naked with his shirt balled up in one hand.

“Hi,” I said, pulling up the chair across from her. “No Amira?” I asked.

Glory eyed us both as if two shadow beasts had just pulled up chairs to share the meal. “Hello,” she said carefully. “Where have you been?” A simple question with a simple answer, but she wanted details.

“Edmyn was showing me the crops he’s planted in the eastern fields. I never did make it to the courtyard.” I smiled awkwardly. Edmyn was enjoying making Glory uncomfortable. He leaned all the way across the table to reach the water pitcher, flexing his bare triceps in her face.

“No,” she said with an air of incredulity. “I don’t suppose you did.”

Edmyn laughed a hearty, bellowing laugh that startled us both. He got back up, as if the theater had finished its epilogue, and bowed to us.

“Ladies, it’s been a pleasure, but I need to find some sustenance that this afflicted body can actually digest.” He winked at me, a demon in a demigod disguise.

Glory picked up some bread and looked at me expectantly. The guilt was still there, quietly eating at me, while another, much smaller part of me yearned to follow Edmyn.

“We were just taking a tour of the grounds,” I said, hearing the rough edge of defensiveness in my voice. “He is very proud of his tomatoes.”

“I’m sure he is,” she said haughtily, beginning to load her plate with food. “Are we any closer to knowing the plan, or if there even is one?”



I opened my mouth to speak, on the very cusp of lying to the only one I could truly trust within these walls. But if Edmyn was really going to poison his brother, he was the only one who should know about it. Why I also got to know about it, I wasn't sure. But it wasn't the worst thing, being the one in the Dark Prince's confidence.

"I know Prince Edmyn has a plan. He doesn't seem to want harm to befall us or the Shaede Court, but we must still be careful. I am not as confident any plan will work against Ciaran." And that was the truth. "Did you find anything in your studying?"

"Not really, just lots of books on torture and death. Some as old as Draku himself, which was kind of neat to see. But there was one ancient scroll that I thought might be of some interest to you. It looks like a letter from a Nymph faerie called Sandrell to her sister Eyllaria. Here." Glory grabbed the thin piece of parchment she had splayed between two books. The paper felt hearty for a relic. Perhaps it had been spelled to remain well preserved. I spooned myself some vegetable soup and slowly read it aloud.

"Dearest Eyllaria, I know many raindrops have fallen since I last wrote. How wicked of me to keep you from yet another month's recount of life here at the mouth of what the humans call the Borysthenes, right on the edge of the blackest of seas. The water isn't exactly black, but the times are. The humans are restless and seek the lands of their neighbors. There is constant war, constant traffic up and down the river. I am terribly bored and terribly lonely. Most of the other Nymphs are older and tire easily of conversation or diversion. Perhaps I may confess here to you, the naughty tricks I've been up to, so that we both might be amused. Two nights ago, I sat alone on a rock, telling stories to the waves and watching them roll with laughter. A ship, on its way home from devastating a nearby enemy, found the entrance to the Borysthenes a very rough homecoming indeed. From my perch, I watched the waves take the ship to shore, smashing the hull onto rocks, and in the dim moonlight, its passengers stagger onto land. I felt perhaps the tiniest bit responsible. I am, after all, a masterful storyteller, capable of sending the waters into reverie or raucous abandon. I flew

across the night toward the shore, as only two men remained on the beach. One was dead, and the other danced with death, his head bleeding a steady stream onto the shell ridden sands. The old Nymphs were always leaving the humans to their devices, always watching them live and die without interference. But I thought it would be pleasing to save this one. He was quite pretty to look at, and the thought of bringing him back as something better and stronger with more cunning amused me. I kissed his forehead and stroked his long hair, taking care to braid some of it, and then kissed him again. While I sang some of our favorite hymns, I coaxed a little magic into him, pretending he was a little fish out of water that needed Mother Earth's love and caresses to breathe again. Suddenly, his eyes blinked open—they were very handsome indeed. He spoke of a dream where a beautiful woman made love to him on a bed of sand, and I smiled and called him ' VÍkingr af hjarta minn ' in his own tongue. I am both delighted and fearful for the new species I have made, sister. The VÍkingar will be a force like no other, or at the very least more interesting to watch. I hope you and Mother are doing well. Pellshaeven is so beautiful in the wintertime. Do not tell on me, dear sister. Most affectionately, Sandrell."

I looked up at Glory, who was only half listening, her nose buried in a forest green covered book as thick as a brick. " VÍkingr af hjarta minn?" I repeated aloud. "What does that mean? That is a language I am not fluent in."

"Viking of my heart," Glory said without looking up.

"My stars! Sandrell created the Vikings ?" My mind was reeling. The image of Sandrell, so inconvenienced with her own melancholy that she would use refinement magic on a wounded sailor and create an entirely new line of hard, resilient, titan-like men, who we all knew worshipped Nymphs and Shædes alike, for her own personal entertainment. It was shocking. And it also confirmed, from a Nymph's own careful hand, that they had the ability to truly change living things into something else.

"What I wouldn't give to ask her a few questions," I muttered, silently rereading the

letter over and over.

“Remember, the Balance did not favor the Nymphs in our histories, Opal. She sounds kind of unhinged to me,” Glory said, taking a few more bites and diving back into her book .

“Are you saying that refinement magic shouldn’t be performed? Because if that were true, why were my sister and I gifted it?”

Glory shut her book, and the sound echoed in the dim room. “I’m saying refinement magic is dangerous. Look at what your sister was able to do. Look what she made.” I tried not to feel like some sort of mutant that should be quarantined, but Glory saw the dismayed look on my face. She said kindly, “Look, Opal. I’m not saying I think you are going to run around making homicidal daywalkers. But be careful. Whatever you make, the Balance will know. And look what life is like when you lose its favor.” She gestured around the dark room, and all I could do was nod.

I had so little control or understanding of what this magic was that I never stopped to really think of the responsibility that came with it. Sandrell was a wild faerie that used her power for her own pleasure. Surely, all fae were guilty of that in some way or another, that was how we lived so comfortably and peaceably. But I agreed with Glory; there was an edge of danger to this spell, and its results were irreversible, so if I ever did feel that magic engaging with someone or something—I’d better be very sure of what I was doing.

We ate in silence for a while until Amira came in, looking pale and frazzled. “Edmyn has just informed me that he is going back to check on the shadow beast pens, and to see if Ciaran needs any assistance. He asked me to tell you.” I looked at her trembling lip, her fingers repetitively tapping her sides nervously.

“You know he can’t die, right?” I said with absolutely no sympathy in my voice. The

fact that she was this worried about someone who was indestructible was almost ridiculous, but the anxiousness was real.

“It’s just that it doesn’t make any sense. Normally I don’t miss my magic, but I hate feeling helpless in situations like this.” Now that I could understand. Glory and I exchanged unkind glances, but it didn’t look like she was going to leave without reassurances.

Glory was more generous than me. “I’m sure he’ll be fine,” she said. I nodded in agreement.

Amira sighed, thanked us, and left the room. Glory and I finished eating, and I followed her to the library. We spent the whole afternoon there. Glory’s research seemed all over the place, but I was only looking for one thing—more letters from Sandrell. We came up empty-handed after hours in the dark, domed room, with nothing more than dim candlelight to aid our searching eyes.

We found a few servants in the hallway and asked what time it was. Somehow it was after nine at night. We were both exhausted, a little disoriented from losing so much time, and not at all hungry after gorging ourselves at lunch. We asked the servants to lead us back to Edmyn’s room, ironically the only room we’d actually feel safe in. When we arrived, I had half expected and half hoped to see Edmyn there, but I didn’t. We dressed in the slinky nightgowns from the previous night and climbed under the covers. The fire was going strong, but the silk was cold. Glory hummed a little song, one that I had heard before but couldn’t name, and the two of us fell asleep with the furs pulled up to our noses.

### CHAPTER 18

My eyes opened to an empty chaise lounge and a loudly snoring Glory beside me. The heavy blankets, amplified by our own body heat, had created a furnace, and I was sweating. I got up and walked around, trying to see Edmyn in all the luxurious finishings in the room. He was basically a farmer; an herb hog was what the other courts called the forest faeries when they teased them about their botanical passions. Herb hogs were the happiest with their hands and feet in the soil or mud, but this room looked like a pampered prince lived here, one who owned a belt for every day of the month and had a penchant for decorative fabrics that looked more like works of art than functional hangings. He was a walking contradiction. Both dead and alive, both full of dreams and doom, both loving and hating his brother. I almost felt like I knew him.

The door opened slowly, and Edmyn entered. He was not quite as roughed up as he had been the other day, but his hair was windblown and his clothes were definitely soiled. I crossed my arms over my chest, hyperaware of my near-nakedness all of a sudden. He gestured to Glory, and I whispered that she was still asleep. He walked over to the dressing area and exchanged his dirty shirt for a clean one, but that was it. He started walking toward the door again. I moved in close to get to him before he left and grabbed his arm.

“What is it, Little Prism? Did you miss me already?” he whispered. His smile was radiant in the dim light near the doorway. I dropped his arm, and refolded my arms knowing full well I looked like a stubborn child.

“No,” I whispered with as much dignity as I could muster. “I’m just wanting to know

how it went. You were gone all night.” He took his hand and put it delicately under my chin, forcing my eyes to meet his. My hands dropped to my sides, as if they had forgotten their purpose in life, and I realized in that moment that it had become very possible that I might have actually missed him. More than I should have.

“You have nothing to worry about. My spell still holds, and I was working on the berries half the night.” It was very apparent that he was staring intently at my lips. Even the mere thought of him kissing me caused a small fissure in the block of ice that had been my magic. It was like he was calling to it, whether he knew it or not. Whether or not my brain had said no or reasoned the emotions away, my heart was ready to defy everything and give in. There was no understanding it—something between us was electric. No matter how wrong it was or the fact that we had only known each other a few days, he had managed to show me a glimpse of his soul, and something about it called to mine.

Glory stirred, and the snoring paused, only to begin again seconds later.

“I think I do worry. Not like Amira worries. But what happens, Edmyn, if your plan fails?”

His hand fell from my face to his side. He leaned forward so intimidatingly that I had to step back and make my back go flat against the wall.

I felt his power flare, but he was not angry, merely provoked. I should have known better than to question someone so easily prone to violence. I had momentarily forgotten all the volatile flaws of his breed and was unprepared for the repercussions.

He leaned into my ear, his wavy curls tickling the side of my face. “Do you not think my magic can stand against Ciaran’s? Do you think me weaker than my brother?” His hot breath was a warning against my skin, as shivers ran their way down my body. I shook my head just ever so slightly, but it wasn’t enough. “Say it,” he whispered into

my ear. “Tell me you feel my power.”

For a moment, I didn't think I had a voice anymore. My body had sort of melted into the wall, held in place by his weight. His palms went to the wall on either side of me, and that was when I felt his arousal. His pelvis pressing himself into me, clearly revealing that something about this exchange was undoing us both. “Say it, Opal,” he urged. “Fucking say it, so help me.” His breath sounded ragged, like a man trying to decide whether or not he was going to jump off a cliff.

“I feel it.” I breathed, aware of my magic burning hot in its prison of glass. Fire burning in my cheeks, between my legs, and in my very soul felt like I was about to implode. “I feel it,” I whispered again against his cheek. His musky smell was like being outside again, and a part of me wanted to stay there. “I feel your power, Edmyn, and Ciaran is no match for you.”

His tensed muscles relaxed, but he stayed against me. His closeness brought such a confusing mixture of fear and longing. I thought I might wrap my arms around him, but that had the potential to ignite something that neither of us was ready for. His breathing steadied, and I felt the hardness against my thigh pull away. He was suddenly just a few inches from my face, desire running like mad sprites between our eyes. They would have us close the distance. They demanded it, even. But I remained silent and only a little scared for us. How close we came to something very intense. Something irrevocable. Something unnatural.

He pushed away from the wall and ran a frustrated hand through his tousled curls.

“I cannot fail,” he said hoarsely. As if that explained everything that had just happened.

“I know,” I said. Because somehow it did.

Then he walked out of the room, closing the door behind him as I slid to the floor and tried not to crave him.

Two days passed, and the Night Court had become restless. News had spread of Ciaran's heroic efforts to rescue their food supply, and Edmyn had left us in his bedroom that morning and never returned. A war was promised. Curses were supposed to be broken. And their leaders were suddenly absent, leaving all the dark faeries to their own sinister devices.

Glory had stopped going to the library as several orgies had broken out randomly among the stacks. I had found the courtyard, a dim and dreary concrete square with stone benches and a few wilting potted plants, but was immediately accosted by two male human servants making crude comments and threatening violence. Every time we stepped out of Edmyn's room, it seemed like a raucous party was beginning in the halls or a vicious fight. The last meal we tried to hold in the dining room ended with two dark faeries clawing each other to near death right outside the doorway. From then on, we decided to have meals sent to Edmyn's room. Court had turned into the savagery we had always expected from the Shadowlands, and I wondered how Ciaran and Edmyn had ever been able to tame all these ruthless fae to begin with.

Glory and I were starting to go stir crazy, however. The castle had always been a prison, but this was the first time it had really felt as such. We played cards for endless hours, read whatever books Glory could get the servants to bring her from the library, and laid around talking about home. I was reminded of the time Dru and Leyanna had started reminiscing before the end of our conversancy and how large and looming my personal problems had seemed then. How naïve and self-centered I had been.

Glory was reading in the sitting area, and I was draped over Edmyn's bed, lost in thought, when the door cracked open. It was Amira. We hadn't seen her since her frantic outburst in the dining room days ago. She had gray, almost black circles under



her eyes. It was apparent that she hadn't been eating—you could see it in the hollowness of her cheeks and the weak way she walked, kind of hunched over, as if her stomach was in constant pain.

“Could I talk with you, Opal?” Her voice cracked. She was in despair.

Glory shut her book and eyed me intently. For all the faeries that I could have been stuck with in dire straits, Glory had turned out to be a clever and loyal companion. We had spent enough time together; we could practically read each other's thoughts. She didn't want to leave me alone with my enemy, but she was questioning if I needed to be alone with my sister. I nodded to her silently, and she got up to announce she was going to take a bath. She grabbed a robe and made sure to glower at Amira's back before heading out the door.

“What do you want?” I asked, sitting up straight in Edmyn's bed and pulling my knees up to my chest.

Amira shuffled slowly to the end of the bed and sat on its edge. Her long, thin fingers fidgeted with a pleat on her silk dress. She just stared at her feet, lost in stormy thoughts, so I asked again, “Amira, what is it?”

She was startled a little and looked at my face. In the flickering firelight, I could see the shimmer on her skin. Our shaede really was ethereal and pleasant to look at. It gave her a mysterious, almost mystical quality, and I wondered if anyone had ever thought that way about me.

When she spoke, her voice was shaky and weak. “You must think me crazy. Crazy and horrible, and evil.”

This start to the conversation caught me off guard, but sympathy was a luxury I could no longer afford as far as Amira was concerned. I watched her stand by while our

parents were murdered. I promised Dru vengeance for her father's death. Amira's hysterical laughter when Ciaran seized us in the meadow still rang in my ears. I was no longer built for sentimentality. Whether or not Edmyn succeeded, I had accepted my fate. Now she needed to accept hers.

"You chose violence, Amira. You told me you were at a crossroads after your conversancy, and you said you chose adventure. But what you really did was choose violence. Violence, death, and darkness. And, what's more, you unleashed it onto the people who loved you most. Who never gave up hoping you would return to them. I don't really know what you want me to say." I hugged my knees tighter.

"I think we are beyond me apologizing for what happened to our parents. I don't think you will ever accept it anyway. I wouldn't. It was reckless, encouraging Ciaran to confront the Shaedes and challenge them. I always knew the risks, and I ignored them."

I stared into the fire, trying to focus on the flames instead of my own anger. "We are beyond a lot of things, sister."

She wrung her hands a little, and quietly said, "I know. And that is not why I came here." She took in a wobbly breath. "Something is not right. With Ciaran. You must feel it with Edmyn, too. There is this terrible ache when we are separated. It started the first night we mated, when he gained his daywalking abilities. We forged a very strong bond. One that I swear is so powerful that it is almost its own living, breathing thing. I can't explain it. Can you?"

I just shrugged my shoulders, shook my head, and let her take that for what it was worth. There was always a chance that if I described anything about what could have happened between me and Edmyn, I ran the risk of being caught in a lie.

"These past few days have been torturous. I can feel him faintly still, but he must be

using a lot of his magic to shepherd those beasts. And I don't know if it is because he is all I have, or because of our magic, or if I'm still kind of shaken about what he did to you." She looked at me with so much regret in her eyes that it spilled over in the form of tears, which fell hard and stained her dress. "But I fear for the future. He has always been ambitious, yes. But also a visionary. I thought he was capable of more restraint. Of a calculated, multi-front attack on the realm to influence faeries into a different way of thinking."

"You mean into submission," I interjected.

"No, I never thought Ciaran wanted to be king of everything," she said soberly. "He would have been happy with equality. A seat for himself alongside the High Shaedes would have sufficed. But it was the Shaedes that wanted submission—the Shaedes who looked down on him and called him lesser and unworthy."

She wasn't entirely wrong. Her assessment was flawed in that she didn't believe someone as egomaniacal as Ciaran wasn't constantly scheming for more power and more influence, but the Shaede Court, for centuries, had turned their backs on the cursed ones, and that kind of slighting was bound to incite rebellion. I glanced at my shoulder, where the Perryflower was in constant bloom. I, too, was guilty of taking my ire from feeling ostracized at court and breaking protocols set in place to control us. My love for tattooing was rooted in it. But I was only rebuffed for my shortcomings. I tried to imagine a world where I was called cursed, and maybe we all end up like Ciaran in the end. Especially if fighting to be seen was all you'd ever known.

"I can see why you chose each other," I said. "But now you stand by him. He is going to destroy everything and everyone that stands in his way. Amira, how can you support this? Tell me that there is still a part of you that thinks clearly enough to see that this is wrong. Bond or no bond, your love aside, can you see how astray he's gone? Could you persuade him to change course?"

She shot up onto her feet and raised her hands in the air. “I’ve tried, Opal! Oh my stars have I tried. Ever since that day in the throne room, having finally faced his rivals, he has been different. He loves me, of this I have no doubt. But his love for power far exceeds anything I could offer. He already took the daywalking abilities. I am without anything left to offer, Opal, and I am scared! And I am so sorry for Edmyn and everything that has happened!” She was stomping around the room, crying and covering her face.

There was nothing I could say to comfort her, even if I wanted to. She was in love with a demon.

“Love makes us do strange things,” I said unhelpfully, my mind flashing to Edmyn trapping me against the wall. “Do you think we are the only Shaedes that can do refinement magic of this magnitude?” I asked in an effort to get her to focus on something else.

She came back to the bed and sat beside me, closer than we had ever been before. Had anyone walked in just then, we really did look like two sisters with near identical complexions, huddled together in conspiracy. Amira reached slowly into her pocket and retrieved a folded piece of parchment. I repositioned myself cross-legged on the bed and took the paper, unfolding it with care as it looked very old.

“This is a letter from an ancient Nymph named Sandrell. I think you and your friend might have found the other one buried in Ciaran’s collection. Over the years, Draku, Ciaran, and all the other dark lords of the Shadowlands have collected works on dark magic and ancient beings with ties to great spells. During my personal research on the spell that broke Ciaran’s curse, I came across the letters, but found this one particularly interesting.”

I read quickly, my voice in a whisper. “Dearest Eyllaria, I write to you with tears streaming down my face. The most unthinkable calamity is taking place, and I pray

the Balance takes pity on me when I release all my magic back into the sea this night. I shall let it go with the evening tide. My vikingr, Erik, is dying. He is in so much pain, and his final moments are unbearable. He has brought such ferocity and light to his people. He has mated with seven of the women in his village and spread his seed so more warriors like him might take up his legacy. My legacy. But now he is slipping away, and my heart cannot be mended. I knew this day would come, but I urge you, sister. This spell is not for the faint of heart, for it has cost me more than I can bear. We few who have the faint colorings of the many must not be tempted to take from our fellow fae. We few who are gifted the ability to refine the work of the Balance must do so with fervent caution. I am sorry that I will miss your wedding, Eyllaria. I have many regrets, but Erik cannot be one of them. It is just our time to leave this realm. I will leave you kisses across the stars, my sister. Yours, Sandrell.”

My own eyes had welled up with tears to the point where I could barely make out the Nymph’s signature at the bottom.

“What a tragic love story,” I said, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand.

“Sandrell fell in love with that Viking. She gave him a piece of her soul. She was always going to outlive him, but when the time came for him to die, she couldn’t bear it. It’s very romantic, but also very telling. This is a magic only a few faeries have. She describes it there, toward the end. ‘We few, who have the faint colorings of the many.’ ”

“It makes me wonder how many faeries there have even been with this shaede, ever,” I said. It was hard to imagine a realm with an entire tribe of iridescent fae, all with some of the most powerful and dangerous magic the realm had even seen. If they existed, they weren’t very well documented.

“I just wanted to share this with you. You deserve to know some of our history, even if it isn’t much.” She got up and smoothened her skirt. I scooted to the edge of the

bed, suddenly realizing something truly terrible.

“Amira, if you had this information all along, did you ever share it with Ciaran?”

She looked at me, her body going tense. She couldn't have thought that I wouldn't have connected the dots. “I never showed him,” she said. “Until recently, that is.” She moved a few steps back, as if scared I was going to lash out. “I told him after the night our parents died. He understands finding more faeries that have the magic to undo their curse is going to be difficult, but believes the realm is vast.”

She was right to back up. Suddenly, I was on my feet, anger boiling under my skin. “Is going to be difficult? Do you even hear yourself?! My stars, Amira! He wants to force Shaedes to mate with dark faeries! He killed our parents over it! He stole me for Edmyn! He was about to pass around Glory to the dark lords like a plaything! And he did almost all of it, knowing full well that none of these Shaedes produced the magic needed for that spell. At what point is he just wicked, Amira?! And at what point are you just an accomplice?”

She grabbed the letter off my lap as complex emotions washed over her face. Maybe she was having a crisis of conscience, but if she had explained the contents of this letter to Ciaran and he was still moving full steam ahead to undercut the power of the Shaede Court, then we were all lost anyway.

Having no good answer to my question, she left the room quickly, slamming the door behind her. I lay back in bed, exhausted from the conversation with my sister and slightly obsessed with the story of Sandrell. I wondered if we were somehow related across millennia, or if we both just happened to find ourselves in a serendipitous set of circumstances, the consequences be damned. Sandrell had created something that she loved. And in the end, although it killed her to see Erik fading, she had no regrets. Would I? My magic, even in its confinement, wanted to do something with Edmyn. Something that blurred the line between good and evil, something significant and

new. But would it be worth what it cost me?

There was no doubt in my mind—the “good” side needed all the help it could get. If the poisoned berries failed, Ciaran would not only be powerful enough to turn the faerie world into his own little kingdom of hell, but he would have learnt that his brother tried to betray him. And I unfortunately knew how horrible that felt. Only, I was not an unhinged sociopath to begin with, so I could only imagine what Ciaran’s reaction would be.

The door flew open with a bang, and Glory came in white as a ghost, her hair in drenched purple tendrils falling down her back.

“Glory, you gave me a fright.” I clutched at my heart, worried at what had prompted this outburst that had her running from the baths.

“It’s Edmyn and Ciaran. They are back,” she said between heavy pants, throwing on her heavy dress and whipping her hair into a twisted bun.

My heart didn’t slow at that news. I slid quickly out of bed and resisted the ridiculous urge to comb my hair. We weren’t going to a party or a ball—we were going to war.

Glory nodded as we marched out of the room and down the hall. I had learned the complex system of hallways fairly well by now, and Glory had said that the Dark Princes were in the throne room having a meeting with the lords of the court. Apparently, the servant tending to her bath was very talkative.

We arrived at the throne room doors. I’d yet to see them closed. We waited with the few guards positioned outside, wondering if it wouldn’t have been a better idea for Edmyn or Ciaran to come looking for us. I was terrified Ciaran would have immediate plans to go test Edmyn’s daywalking abilities, or even worse, set his hostile takeover of the Shaede Court in full motion. But either way, we had to know,

and I had to see Edmyn and confirm he was still on the side of good.

The enormous doors lurched open with a sonorous moan, and a small flood of lords, talking in hushed, tense tones, exited the room. Henrick was among them, but he didn't dare glance my way .

We entered the sepulchral space, which seemed to have quadrupled in size with the absence of the court. Edmyn was standing above Ciaran, who was seated on his throne, looking absolutely exhausted. His soiled shirt was torn open across his chest and was missing part of a sleeve, but his skin showed no marks. His freakishly long hair was tied loosely in a ponytail, but even from the foot of the stairs, I could see some of his hair was singed. His nails were black with dirt and blood. And his face had lost some of the mania we had become so used to seeing in his presence. There was no sense of drama or electric energy to this Ciaran. This Ciaran looked like he needed a nap.

Edmyn turned when he heard us walk up, and although he was also a little worse for wear, he still seemed himself—at ease and apathetic to just about everything in his brother's presence.

“Edmyn, it looks like I was not the only prince that was missed these past few days,” Ciaran croaked. Even his voice had been worn down. “Look at them, like little pets searching for their master. How well you've trained them.”

“We want to know what you plan to do to the Shaede Court,” said Glory boldly.

Ciaran waved his hand dismissively. “Go away, woman. Like I have the time or the energy to explain my great plans to either of you.” He got up slowly—very slowly—as if he still had some internal healing to do. He put a hand on Edmyn's shoulder and said, “Thank you, brother. Your assistance wasn't needed, but your company was a comfort. I am blessed in these shadows to have such a loyal friend.”



Ciaran patted his shoulder and then took the stairs one at a time. I couldn't see Edmyn's face, so I could only wonder whether or not he was having second thoughts.

### CHAPTER 19

Edmyn had pushed past us in the throne room, refusing to look at me as he stormed out the doors. Glory and I exchanged puzzled looks.

“What do you think is wrong with him?” asked Glory as we turned to leave as well.

“Oh, I don’t know, the end of peace?” I said sarcastically. “Heavy is the crown of the brother of a narcissistic psychopath.”

Glory smiled glumly. “It was a little satisfying to see Ciaran so run down. If Edmyn does have a plan, now would be a good time to strike.”

“I agree,” I said, wondering if that was what was bothering Edmyn—perhaps the pressure of time was upon him.

“Let’s have dinner sent to the room,” suggested Glory. “I don’t want to risk running into Ciaran again. Even in his fatigued state, he still gives me the absolute creeps.” I nodded and we headed back to the room.

The servants brought a nice tray with enough food to leave us both full and tired. Hanging around the castle for days now and not having much stimulation other than conversations between each other seemed to bring on lots of different kinds of fatigue. Fatigue with our circumstances, fatigue from worrying about things we had no control over, the fatigue that naturally came from an endless night.

Glory and I had been given fresh white linen night dresses, which were still short-

sleeved but didn't cling to the body, and were much warmer than the other nightgowns we had been wearing. We lay flat on our backs, looking up at the dark canopy of drapery above us, trying to imagine a clear night sky, a cool spring breeze across our warm skin and the symphonic sounds of nightlife lulling us into slumber.

Glory's breathing told me she had succumbed. I, however, continued to stare above me at things that weren't there: my parent's smiling faces, Leyanna pushing Lennyx around, Dru armed with her knives, Farris and his half-smile across the counter of a coffee shop. Then I imagined all the people I loved dead, their bodies strewn across the yellow meadow of the Gaylenswood like fallen trees that were battered and snapped apart after a lightning storm. So powerful yet so fragile against something that even the Balance's magic couldn't reach.

I sat up quickly once I heard the door creak open. I didn't know how long I had been lying there, envisioning the bleakest of futures—hours felt like days that night. Edmyn, wearing a long black satin robe, flopped down on the dressing room chaise and stretched out. His hair was slightly damp, and his eyes, too, held fatigue. He looked at me across the room staring at him and asked, "What are you still doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep," I said. I moved so my head lay on my hands on my side like a child. "Where have you been these past few days?" I asked quietly.

"Most of the time I was out in the Shadowlands, wandering around and being of no help to Ciaran. But the other part of the time I was busy tending to those damned berries." He sounded very irritable. "They are not ready. They need at least another day, maybe two."

"And Ciaran is ready to act now, isn't he?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Ciaran needed some time to recuperate both physically and magically after his

prolonged struggles with the shadow beasts, but he is adamant about me walking in the sun tomorrow morning. Before breakfast, before anything else. I had always thought I would get a chance to slip him the berries before that happened, but there is no way of accomplishing that now. Not without setting off his hyper sense of paranoia, and then there will be no way of getting close to him. He is already certain someone is to blame for the shadow beast fiasco. That meeting with the dark lords earlier was less of a meeting and more of an interrogation tribunal.” He moved a few rogue curls out of his face. “This is the first time I feel as if perhaps I am not an equal match for my brother. Fate favors him. That spell failed sooner than I anticipated. He will see tomorrow morning that I have defied him, and he will take up his cause against the Shaede faeries with betrayal sowing fresh rage in his heart, and I will not be able to stop him.”

Edmyn closed his eyes, perhaps willing sleep to come, as I had also tried before his return. It wasn’t like him to sound defeated. And it worried me that if he had underestimated the duration of his spell on the shadow beast pens, how could he be so certain the berries were or weren’t ready or would even work at all?

I watched him lie there motionless, hating the fact that I had missed him. There was still so much that I wished to learn about him. Amidst all the hell that would rain down upon us, facing the inescapable difficulties that stood in our way, I wondered if there was a realm in the universe where we would be allowed to exist together. Not Dark and Shaede, not cursed and blessed, but just man and woman on common ground.

Perhaps it was the impending doom or the insomnia, or maybe the part of me that could relate to Sandrell—the part of her that chose action instead of sitting back and watching a man die alone on a beach—but I became suddenly very aware of how much Edmyn needed me. I couldn’t stop a war or help the enchantments on his strawberries. I couldn’t even donate magic to his cause, even though I had just then decided that I wanted to. He had protected us from the very beginning and stood to

lose everything in the morning. We all seemed willing to accept defeat at this point, but it just couldn't be the end.

I pulled back the covers and got up, careful not to wake Glory. My feet on the cold stone floor silently carried me to where Edmyn lay. Whether he was asleep or awake, I couldn't be sure. The robe he wore was so dark, it melted his body away and made him almost one with the night. But I could make out his face in what was left of the firelight, still and unmoving but not quite relaxed. I had seen him relaxed once before, sitting in the mud on a dim hill, looking over the only nature this realm had to offer. Even for a creature from the Shadowlands, he was still a man who deserved happiness. He didn't choose this fate any more than I could choose to feel this way about him. Was it love? I couldn't be completely certain. I knew I had come to love his tortured parts, the broken parts, the parts that saw the beauty in all things. The parts that seemed to want to save me even from myself, and the parts whose sense of honor and integrity kept him from giving into temptation. I stood there, in the middle of my uncertainty, wanting to give him everything, wanting to make him smile. The only thing that scared me about Edmyn anymore was the thought of not being able to be near him.

As soon as I admitted all this to myself, whatever kind of magic that lived within me threatened to rupture its prison. With little hesitation, I slowly climbed on top of Edmyn, straddling his waist, and allowed desire to rule me. His eyes fluttered open, and he registered me sitting there looking at him expectantly and ushered my face closer to his with his hand on the back of my neck.

"What is this, Little Prism?" he whispered, our faces so close that I could feel his breath on my lips. "Do not start fires you cannot tame."

"You once said that I belonged to you," I whispered back, my voice a little surer sounding than I think either of us expected. "Prove it."

Both our magics liked the sound of that. Whatever barrier was set in place, keeping me from it, shattered into shards of pleasure and pain as he pressed his lips to mine.

If kissing him was the spark that started everything in motion, our hands were what kindled the flame. Mine went raking through his hair, something I'd maybe always wanted to do. His found their way slowly down my back and then back up again, stopping to massage my breasts and then finding their way back to my face. Even though touching him now was like being on fire, my body started shivering—the result of energy trapped with nowhere to go, or just the visible plea of my body begging for what only Edmyn could give.

“Do you know what you are doing?” he asked quietly, the gold flecks glowing in his eyes. I could have sat there and watched them shine forever. He had become dauntingly hard beneath me, distracting me from finding my words. “You do not need to be a hero. I will do my best to protect you, no matter the cost.”

It pained me to think that he thought this was some sort of sacrifice on my part. That my affections were fueled only by a desire to keep us safe. Even with my straddling his manhood and holding on to his hair like it was some sort of lifeline, he was capable of courtesy and kindness. But I didn't want him concerned about the outcomes—I wanted him in me. And if our mating happened to break his curse in the end, I didn't need it to justify the means, even though it would. Like Sandrell—no fucking regrets.

“I'm no hero, Edmyn. I'm just yours. I've come to know you, and now I can't imagine a world without you.” I felt him shift underneath me. He ran one of his hands through my hair—something perhaps he had always wanted to do. I could tell he was getting revved up but wasn't quite ready to let go.

“You think you know me now, but you didn't know me then. And then was a very, very long time ago.” With a face that held only dark promises and wicked thoughts,

he rubbed a long nail along my bottom lip so slowly that I felt the nightgown bunched between my legs become saturated with want. “There is more to the darkness than cursed magic and shadow beasts.” He took the finger from my lip and ran it along his own, making a point to skim one of his sharp incisors, causing blood to instantly swell from the cut. He smeared the blood along my jawline and down the side of my neck, then lifted his head up to lick it. I felt his body writhe in a moment of pain, but his erection was so stimulated that it was practically throbbing now. “The dark ones have managed to find the thinnest line between pleasure and pain. But I don’t want to scare you, Little Prism. You, whom I have already silently pledged a thousand of my lifetimes to protect. You, who deserve so much more than making love to a shadow.”

Without really thinking, I grabbed his wounded finger and put it to my lips. When I licked the blood off, I tasted acid, but I refused to flinch. I watched his eyelids flutter in near ecstasy. My throat burned as the metallic taste traveled down my throat, but it was only there for an instant as Edmyn’s magic chased away its sting. Having his blood in my system, even for a short while, was dangerous. But it proved just how much I trusted him. Then the hand that was still resting on my neck quickly grabbed a fistful of my hair and pulled, hard. My head went back. I stifled a scream so I wouldn’t risk waking up Glory. My heart quickened, and my magic stalked my insides like a cat in heat. “I am not afraid of you,” I said with fortitude.

He released my hair so I could look at him. He was smiling dreamily and shaking his head in amazement. He flicked a few fingers, and the curtains closed around us. It was suddenly a very intimate scene. There were only a few candles glowing in the corner, and although the chaise lounge was tufted and plush, it was not really meant for two.

“What about Glory?” I whispered.

Edmyn smiled, his sharp teeth shining in the candlelight. “Sleep spell.”

Feeling like if there was ever a perfect private moment to be had with Edmyn, that we had somehow managed to find it, I pulled the nightgown off over my head and let my opalescent hair fall wild all around my naked body. I undid the belt of Edmyn's robe, and it quickly gaped open, exposing his alabaster chest. Edmyn, eyes full of mischief and hunger, in one swift, aggressive motion, was suddenly on top of me. He had managed to flip me over and pin my body to the bench without me even seeing it happen. It was surely magic, but it still stunned. My eyes went wide. He reveled in my surprise, clearly aroused by how easily I was overtaken. He kneed my legs so they fell off the edge of either side of the bench, and then knelt in front of me while he allowed the rest of the silk robe to fall to the floor. His body was so sculpted that he looked like a statue of white marble that was too inhumanly beautiful not to be art and too valuable to be touched. And yet, touch we did .

He hovered above me, teasing every last nerve I had with kisses that ranged from sweet and tender to rough, aggravated caresses that caused me to moan and beg for more. He then grabbed my wrists with one hand and spelled them to remain restrained against the only arm of the lounge chair while he took one of his pointed nails and, without breaking skin, drew lines down my body from my collar bone, up and over my nipples, down toward my navel, and always stopping just before he touched the place where all my need for him was accumulating.

It didn't seem fair that he could use magic and I couldn't, but the spell withered away as soon as I kicked my legs up and wrapped them around him, forcing him closer to me. "You are not ready yet, Little Prism. Do not invite a devil in without getting something in return." He unhooked my legs and put them gently to either side again. I started to try to sit up, but he was so magically quick again, suddenly kneeling on the floor at the other end of the bench with his hands on my hips. He yanked me toward him, causing my head to slide back down and rest again on the cushion, while he delicately started kissing the private parts of me that wanted him the most.

I felt the line. The dark ones have managed to find the thinnest line between pleasure



and pain , he had said. He massaged, he licked, and he seemed like he knew how to make a mess of me, but every time my legs started to shake and my breathing quickened, it was like a red flag to Edmyn. He would pause his diligent oral attention to nibble at my inner thigh or cup his hands under my bum and squeeze, anything and everything except the thing I really, really wanted.

My magic became background noise, a loud buzzing in my ear that was like static on a radio trying to come into tune. The more Edmyn touched me, loved me, and teased me, the clearer that magic came into focus. The more it understood that it was Edmyn who pleased me and it was Edmyn who we adored, the stronger the magic became.

“I can’t,” I said, grasping for his head as I writhed with delayed pleasure. “Please,” I begged as my magic eagerly sent shockwaves throughout my body.

His magic scooted me back on the bench, which was welcome as my legs had become so weak I didn’t think I’d have the strength to have moved on my own. He also came to straddle the bench, looking down on me like easy prey, a small smile on his lips. He took one of my hands and placed it on his long hard shaft.

“Is this what you want?” he asked mockingly, but the way his muscles began twitching I knew it was what he wanted too.

“Yes,” I said softly, any fight left in me had gone. Any hard edges had been worn down. I truly felt like his property now. He could have done anything to me in that moment, and I would have allowed it and then thanked him for it later.

Thankfully, he was done with having enough patience for the both of us. He used the side arm of the chaise to steady himself as he slowly entered me. But that was the last bit of control he had left. His eyes became murky golden pools as he thrust himself in and out, oblivious to the spell that had already begun. I found the strength to tear at him with my nails, to cling to him as he rode us both near the edge. His breathing

became that of a creature, a beast whose hunger might be endless by the countless lunges he took into the depths of my body. I called out his name in between yips of pain or ecstasy—it was no longer clear. And when I finally fell over the edge and he felt me cling to him in the only way that could subdue the fire we started, I brought him with me, and he came with such ferocity that he had me calling out his name again and again.

The ground had been shaking, but I hardly noticed. I don't think I could have noticed a tornado ripping the roof off at this point. What I did notice was the satiated feeling of my body and the comforting weight of Edmyn's head on my shoulder. There was also an odd feeling in my soul, where my magic had definitely touched it. It was not a bad feeling. In some ways, it even felt right, as if something had mended itself. But it was different. I felt different. And when I opened my eyes, I noticed that Edmyn and I looked different. Both our bodies had shimmery halos surrounding them that wafted in and out of focus in the shadowy room.

“How do you feel, my prince?” I asked, twirling a few strands of his black hair around my finger .

With some effort, he found my other hand and pressed his palm against mine. He lifted them up near his face, and when he pulled his hand slowly away, the glowing halo of light that enclosed us both had fused together when we touched. As he pulled away, there was a visible thread of light that bound us together. There wasn't any real tension—it was just between the magic. It was beautiful and fleeting, for in a few seconds, it faded away into darkness.

“I feel as if it is I who now belongs to you,” he said. I could feel his smile against my skin. “Somehow, you've helped me remember how it felt to be alive. And for that, I am forever yours.” He grabbed my hand quickly and kissed it. “How do you feel, Little Prism?”

“Like I need this night to never end.” I was trying not to let sadness sneak in and pollute these serene waters we’d created, but reality was only ever on the other side of a door. And it would come knocking soon enough.

He pushed his body up so he could see my face, but in the exact opposite of the smooth and precise movements that got us into this position, Edmyn’s hand slipped off the chaise lounge, and both of us were suddenly on the floor, laughing in a tangle of arms and legs.

“Well that was unintended.” He leaned in to kiss me as I laughed against his lips.

“Unfortunately, gravity is a fickle mistress,” I giggled.

“Indeed.” He grunted a little as he slid around the side of me and got up. He disappeared behind the curtains and then came back with one of the enormous fur blankets from the bed. I sat up, and he draped it around me, then came to sit next to me, huddled close under the heavy coverlet.

“So now that I have become intimately acquainted with every inch of you, are you going to tell me about the tattoos? Rather naughty for a Shaede of any color, isn’t it? I thought inking one’s skin was a major affront to the rules of dignity and decorum the ancients decreed. Or have things eased up a bit since then?” He kissed the Perryflower on my shoulder and looked at me like an explorer who had reached the peak of his quest, only to discover there was so much more world left to discover .

“The flower on my shoulder is just something I love. It always reminds me of home. And I wanted to tattoo something on myself that was large and very distracting.”

“Wait.” He leaned in to really examine it. “You did this on your own?”

“Yes.” I smiled. “It was kind of like, if people were going to stare at me, I wanted to

give them something to stare at. Or something like that. I was young and insecure, I loved art, and I loved having control over my appearance. Maybe I also loved the idea of creating something permanent. The nature of the Balance was that everything was in a constant state of change, but sometimes there was more comfort in the permanence.”

“So this was your way of telling the High Shædes to fuck off.” He grinned, running his hand over my delicate linework. “I’m impressed.” His hand traveled down my chest and further south until it rested on my inner left thigh. “And what of the two I noticed here.”

A fresh blush bloomed on my cheeks and I couldn’t help trembling at his touch. Of course he would have noticed those; he had just spent an hour in that region and probably had the landscape memorized.

“Those are my secrets,” I said, giving him a coy side eye. “But I suppose there aren’t many of those left between us anymore.” He shook his head and waited patiently for an explanation. “Fine,” I said with a resigned sigh. “The outline of the tiny mountains and the setting sun—that’s Corynthia. Even though faeries are forbidden from going there, it’s still a place I’d love to see. And the second is the collection of stars humans call Cassiopeia. I recognize it easily when I see it in the sky, and I guess I just like the thought of a beautiful queen sitting high in the sky watching over us. The stars may burn out, but until then, they are very faithful guardians.”

Edmyn’s fingers traced the markings from memory on my skin, causing shivers to come in ripples. “Irony that you chose a woman who boasted that she and her daughter, Andromeda’s beauty, was superior to that of the Nereid Nymphs of Thetis.”

“And why is that, because I have Nymph magic too?”

“No.” He leaned in to kiss me. “Because your beauty surpasses them all.” He kissed

my lips and then my eyelids, the softest of touches. “So what will be next? A handsome shadow beast with fangs and golden-colored eyes?”

I pushed him away lightheartedly. “No. Perhaps never anymore tattoos for me. I started tattooing my friends at court and so the High Shaelles got rid of all the inkspires in our realm in an effort to squash my artistic insolence.”

Edmyn brought up his closed fist in front of my face, and when he opened it, a shiny metallic inkspire hovered slowly in his palm.

“An inkspire like this?” he asked mischievously, like a magician revealing the rabbit hiding in his hat. I clapped my hands with the untainted joy of a little girl.

“I can’t believe you can do that! I’ve tried for years to locate one in the realm, but they’ve been spelled as contraband.” I took the tiny object from his hand. It resembled an ornate thimble with a sharp point that looked like it could be a distant cousin of a fountain pen. I knew it ran on its own magic, but was useless without an artist to drive it. I hadn’t realized how much I had missed the feeling of untapped creativity. But now on my delicate index finger, my mind craved to put ink to skin.

“Do me,” Edmyn said, letting the blanket fall off his shoulders. “Ink me with something that you think would suit me. I leave the subject entirely up to you.” He stretched his body out across my lap, the perfect specimen, ass up, and I searched my mind for something meaningful to mark him with. It couldn’t be cliché or overly sentimental, but I wanted it to be something to memorialize what we had found in each other. Staring at his perfectly curved buttocks was distracting, but the idea came to me anyway.

“You know, this will hurt,” I warned. I flashed back to when I had tattooed a tiny diamond on fire under Leyanna’s rib, and she had cried like a baby. At that point, I hadn’t even thought she was capable of producing tears.

“I hope that’s a promise,” he said in that voice that made everything below my waist warm and heavy.

Feeling inspired, I made contact with his skin and heard the inkspire sizzle. In the human realm, I knew the ink guns they used were like a tiny needle injecting bits of ink into the skin. This was creating something between a burn and a cut, but because faeries heal so fast, the mutilation was followed by a clean, dark line.

My design was ambitious, and I had only seen my inspiration once, but once was going to have to be enough. The placement was going to be just below his hip, with the image wrapping around the side. I smiled with the wishful thought that I could be one of the only people who would ever see it. I started with the outline first, and then carefully added depth with shading and created some contrast by leaving some negative space against some of the darker parts. I worked for over two hours, as Edmyrn and I covered many lighter topics of conversation that the universe hadn’t really allowed us to discuss yet. I learned he was an avid archer and didn’t like the texture of tomatoes in any realm, despite being an expert at growing them. I talked at length about Dru and Leyanna and disclosed my love for chocolate and vacationing in Pellshaeven.

When the tattoo was almost done, I knew blacks and grays would never be enough. So I asked Edmyrn for a vibrant blue, and I felt his magic swirl around the inkspire. I added the color, hearing him sigh as the point of the inkspire dug into skin that had just been healed. The added color gave me confidence, and I slapped his bottom to signal that the artwork was finished.

“The next time you promise pain, Little Prism, you better deliver,” he purred darkly as he pushed himself back up and sat back on his knees. I blushed anew, with the heat hitting my cheeks like someone had just slapped me in the face. His chiseled abdomen rippled as he turned his core to examine my work. “It’s a Moonflower,” he said, recognizing it immediately. He ran his fingers over the dark petals and veined

leaves.

“A what?” I asked. “I didn’t even know it had a name. I saw it almost glowing among the dying clovers on the throne room floor and was struck by its unique and haunting quality. Please don’t tell me they have some sort of morbid meaning. I chose it because of its allure. I think they are one of the most hauntingly beautiful things in this land.”

Edmyn looked at me with an almost sympathetic look in his eyes. “You would find the one plant in the entire realm that holds bold color. The Moonflower is an inexplicable occurrence in the Shadowlands. We think instead of sunlight, it might actually feed on moonlight. Some say it is an indicator that the Balance has not forsaken us forever; that it still wants us to remember that beautiful things can grow in the darkness and that we can adapt and grow into something good. We spell the floors with Moonflowers when we want to bless someone with good fortune. As if to remind them of the goodness that lay dormant here, within the shadows.”

“Well, then I nailed this, because you are the good that resides here, Edmyn. And now, every time you look at this, you will think of that.”

“I will think of you,” he said adoringly. And then he pulled me on top of him and took us both into a realm that was entirely our own—one that had me once again calling out his name.

### CHAPTER 20

I had slept like the dead. My eyes blinked rapidly, adjusting once again to the minimal light in the room and locking on to the empty chaise lounge in the dressing area. My body felt like it had been stretched and reworked to its limits, the ghost of lemons still hovering on my skin.

At some point in the early dawn, I must have fallen asleep on the floor in Edmyn's arms. I had wanted to stay up all night as there was no reason to sleep with the future so uncertain, but Edmyn's ability to prolong pleasure had pumped so much tension into my body that sleep was no longer an option but a necessity.

Now I found myself magically tucked under the covers next to Glory's slumbering body, my night dress back on, wondering if everything about last night might have been a dream except for the black satin robe that lay discarded on the floor. My body shivered as memories of Edmyn's lips brushing my neck came flooding back, even though there wasn't one inch of me that was cold.

The door opened brusquely, and a faerie servant entered with fresh dresses draped over one arm. My head popped up, and Glory stirred, slowly sitting up.

"The Dark Princes are waiting for you in the throne room," she said, laying the dresses over the end of the bed and exiting without another word.

Glory rubbed her eyes. I think we were both in disbelief that the moment had finally come. Only Glory was probably going over scenarios of what would eventually happen when Ciaran found out Edmyn failed to break his curse, and I was busy



wondering what would happen when she found out that the opposite was true. There was a part of me that was rationalizing with my conscience, telling myself that there wasn't enough time to fill Glory in with all the sordid details of mine and Edmyn's new bond. But if I was being honest with myself, I was just afraid. Afraid of her judgment, afraid of the consequences of what I had done. It was easier to just slip on the beautiful olive-green dress and allow things to just play out as they would, then face Glory's reaction to everything I had done.

We were at the throne room in minutes. Amira was there, some color back in her cheeks in an emerald green dress. She still looked nervous but was calmer than I had seen her in days. She had her arm locked with Ciaran's, who must have been blessed somehow with the sleep of the just, as he stood tall and spirited, his eyes alight with possibility. Edmyn, dressed in his signature black pants and long red leather coat, no shirt, raised an eyebrow at our entrance and turned to his brother.

"There. They are finally here," Edmyn said impatiently. He flicked his wrist and opened a portal. "I've waited long enough to try your theory, brother. Let's go trial this shit." Ciaran clapped his hands together excitedly as Edmyn stepped through the portal and then gestured that we were to go next, he and Amira to follow.

We exited into the west side of the castle grounds, far down below the castle's perch, in a gully of that long, itchy, dehydrated grass. The air was somehow cooler on this side of the castle, as the way the castle loomed above us provided almost constant shade. A few hundred yards away was the crisp edge of the Shadowlands, where it butted up against the border of the Gaylenswood meadow—the scene where Glory and I had first encountered Amira, which now seemed like months ago. The flowers were so delicate and fragile, looking up against the dark harshness of everything hard and dreary of Draku's Lair.

"There it is, Edmyn," said Ciaran, starting to take long strides toward the meadow. "Your future awaits, and it is looking particularly bright."

Edmyn smiled. My heart was paralyzed with conflicting emotions. Elation for Edmyn—he deserved this. I wanted this for him. Fear that the Balance would see what I made and punish us both somehow. And hate. I hated that even for one moment, Ciaran was going to get the satisfaction that he had somehow brought this all about. He would feel validated and be all that more dangerous.

We quickly reached the edge of the shadows when Ciaran turned to us, like he had almost forgotten we were there. He cast a spell on our bodies that froze us from taking another step toward entering into our realm. I wasn't that surprised; having access to our magic again would make it harder to recapture us or make us cooperate, so keeping us stuck and immobilized was definitely the safer bet. And Ciaran was always hedging his bets.

“Now, remember, brother. Only a fingernail at first. We don't need you losing a hand or anything,” Ciaran said dotingly. Amira also appeared to be holding her breath.

Edmyn toed the line dividing infinite day and night and slowly let his hand move toward the sunlight. That hand that I had come to know so well, the hand that recently had me writhing in pleasure, the hand that I could so easily imagine brushing a stray strand of hair off my face—it crossed the line into bright sunlight... and did not burst aflame.

A collective breath from everyone present was released. Edmyn turned to look at me, tears welling in his golden eyes, and I couldn't help but smile. He was overcome with disbelief, joy, thankfulness, and overwhelming power. He took that inaugural first step into the full sun and instantly fell to his knees. The coat came flying off, and he just knelt there, bathing in light and weeping like a child finally coming home after being so unbearably lost.

Glory couldn't turn her head, but I knew confusion was washing over her as her shrewd and analytical brain was beginning to replay every single moment of our

imprisonment. Had she missed something? How was this possible? Surely, she would arrive at only two possible explanations. Either Edmyn had forced himself upon me or this was some sort of miracle that her rational, logical mind couldn't comprehend. Never would she come to the conclusion that I had fallen in love with this man and had willingly given him a part of my soul.

Even when Ciaran knelt down and embraced his brother, the two of them sharing this special turn of fortune, I had no regrets. I had to have confidence that good would triumph over evil, and I had to have faith in Edmyn's berries.

Amira shared in their elation, but she kept staring back at me, as if she looked at me long enough, she could figure me out. Maybe our bond as sisters, even if it was only by blood, gave her a keen perception of me. But it wasn't just paranoia—she definitely watched me as if she suspected something amiss.

Ciaran helped Edmyn to his feet and walked back to us. He grabbed Glory's hand, freeing her of the spell, and drug her toward the meadow. I opened my mouth to yell, but as I expected, the spell did not allow for the production of sound. Ciaran pushed her hard on the ground just before the sun hit and said, "You are of no use to us now. Run back to the Shaede Court and tell the rest to give us a reception tonight at eleven. I may have been delayed, but I will have their answer to my demands, or I will have their heads."

Glory looked so frozen with fear that, for a second, I thought she might have still been under his spell. Ciaran shouted, "Go! You stupid girl!" And she frantically crawled into the light, transformed into a Filly Moth, and flew away.

We portaled back into the throne room, but it wasn't for several hours before Edmyn and I had a moment alone, as Ciaran wanted to discuss at length the upcoming visit to the Shaede Court in private. When Edmyn finally came to find me in his room, I leapt off the bed and jumped into his arms, inhaling his signature scent of citrus and the

outdoors.

“How was it?” I asked him as he spun me around and squeezed me close to him. “How does it feel to be a daywalker?”

He set me down gently. “It feels like new life. Like I’ve been reborn. And after last night, somehow I feel like I may finally have it all.” He leaned over to kiss me softly.

“And Ciaran? He looks quite pleased.”

“Yes, well, have you met my brother? He would take credit for the very air you breathe. He was quite pleased when he said, ‘all is going according to plan.’”

“Do you think you will be able to find a way to poison him before tonight?” I asked. There was no need to skirt around the issue as time was not on our side.

He walked over and rested his arm on the mantle, staring at the fire. I watched the flickering light and shadows make war across his face.

“I am ready to do it, if that is what you are asking me. Whether or not I get the chance is questionable.” He squatted low to stoke the flames with a bit of magic. “I have to sneak out to harvest them. They should be almost ready. But he is very busy getting ready for tonight, and Amira is not letting him out of her sight.”

I placed my hand on his head and stroked his hair. What a tumultuous day. Receiving your greatest wish come true in the morning and facing the ultimate betrayal of your brother in the evening. I wondered if, in his melancholy, he could sense my heart breaking for him through our bond.

He got up, swooped me up in his arms, and tossed me onto the bed.

“He means to implore the High Shaelles one more time to submit, or he is going to attack the following day with a round of shadow beasts, human warriors hooked on faerie blood, and lastly, some sort of weapon he won’t divulge to me.” He settled in next to me, lying on his side and propping his head up on his arm so he could see my face.

“What do you think that could be?” I asked, thankful that he was sharing this information but equally horrified by the destruction heading my people’s way .

“It is always hard to tell with him. Shadow beasts weren’t always so ferocious and hungry. I used to spend a lot of time around the swamps and befriended lots of the wildlife. But he couldn’t let well enough alone and did countless experiments on them. He crossbred species until the creatures were unrecognizable. Add to that some battle magic and dark enchantments, and now he commands a host of beasts that will wreak absolute devastation once unleashed. I didn’t really see that one coming, so when left to his own devices, I definitely fear whatever he is capable of.”

“When left to your own devices, you created something pretty lethal yourself,” I reminded him.

“True, I am always displeased when I am able to see a bit of him in myself.”

“I didn’t mean to displease you. I am glad for your devious hand with those strawberry plants. This can’t be easy for you, Edmyn. I am sorry it falls on you.”

He came closer and took my face in his hands. “You could never displease me, Little Prism. And it makes me glad that you’ve found gratification in these devious hands.” He kissed me lightly, but he was looking at me in a way that made me crave something more. “What will happen after?” he asked innocently, pretending he couldn’t see how much I clearly wanted him.

“What do you mean?” I asked, trying to refocus.

“If I can undermine Ciaran and somehow imprison him here, what happens then? Obviously, the Shaede Court will remain as pompous and privileged and as safe as ever, but what about you and me? Could you see yourself as a Dark Princess of the Night Court?”

His question took me aback because I had honestly never imagined that world before. There was never really a moment where we had enough hope in a plan or a direction to envision a future post Ciaran. He was like an impenetrable wall that was so tall and vast that there was no seeing over to the other side.

“I don’t know, Edmyn. My sole focus all this time has been survival; I really never stopped to think about what would happen if we did.” I traced a line down the collar of his coat. The leather was soft and cool beneath my hand. “And now I guess it is equally as difficult to imagine a world without you.” I burrowed a way into his arms and just lay there, listening to the hollow of his chest.

“There will never be a world without me in it,” he said sadly. “So I suppose what I’m asking is if you will stay. With me.” It was the most vulnerable I had ever heard him sound. But as much as I didn’t want to hurt him, I also didn’t want to make promises I couldn’t keep. I had promised to keep the berries a secret from Glory and I did. My honor was still very much intact.

“Being cut off from my magic is agony, but being cut off from you might actually kill me. However, there is also the duty I have to the realm. The Balance chose me to help reign, and although I don’t know if I’ll ever know why, it seems wrong to turn my back on my fellow High Shaedes.” I paused for a moment to think. I could feel him tensing beside me. “Edmyn, I don’t know if I could ever call the Night Court home, even though lying here with you feels as close to home as I’ve ever been. Is there a world where you could appoint a dark lord to oversee the Night Court in your

absence, and you spend the majority of your days with me at the Shaede Palace?”

“You speak fantasy very well, my dear.” His voice was raw with bitterness. “A world in which my ageless enemies receive me with open arms to their court while I defile their precious opalescent princess behind closed doors? That would be a sight to see, but it is fiction. And no dark lord I’ve ever met possesses the restraint necessary to keep the peace in these lands. If I left the Night Court, it would turn into a living hell. Dark magic would fester here, and who knows what that would create.”

“Perhaps there is a world on the other side of this we haven’t seen yet,” I whispered into his chest. “Things still bloom in the darkness.” I courageously slid my hand into his pants and let my hand settle on the tattoo I gave him. I looked up to find his eyes glassy, moved by grief, and now flooding with desire.

“Whatever the world, Little Prism, I want to build it with you,” he said as he rolled on top of me and ravaged me with his devious hands.

### CHAPTER 21

The normally too hot bath water was like a salve to my worried mind as I fully submerged and let the heat overtake my senses. Edmyn and Ciaran had plenty to busy themselves with all afternoon, so being left to my own devices had not been good for my overall mental state. When I couldn't take the high temperature anymore and couldn't hold my breath any longer, I reemerged and relished in the attack the cool air had on my skin. I wanted to cling to any feeling that could distract me from the minutes slowly ticking by.

I asked the servant to bring me my robe. Back in Edmyn's room, I combed my hair, braiding a few pieces and securing them in the back with a few pins. Another dress arrived, and somehow I thought Edmyn might have had a hand in picking it. It was a tight red leather corset with a hip hugging, black leather skirt to contrast. There was a stretchy black lace overlay that looked like a second skin going down to my wrists, embracing my throat, and flowing all the way to the ground. It had a little train behind it, which did not make it optimal for fighting, but this was not a dress meant for battle. This was a dress meant for seducing. My tattoo had become one with the dress, blending in with the lace design, and I couldn't help but stand before the mirror in Edmyn's dressing area and imagine what trouble we could get into—me and this dress... and Edmyn.

For some reason, it had taken me days to notice the tiny clock hidden among the shelves. Fifteen minutes until eleven. There was no more waiting and no more postponing. I practically ran to the throne room and saw much of the court gathered there. The dark lords and ladies didn't seem to look down on me as much as they once had, for I had liberated their prince. Hustling into the grand room, my gothic



train trailing behind me along the stone, I suppose I had even started to look like I belonged here.

Everyone was drinking. There was a celebratory note to the conversation. I even spotted Henrick smiling and laughing with a few ladies dressed in various hues of black. A few fanged smiles greeted me as I passed, but in this sea of monsters, I was only interested in locating mine.

“Here, Mistress Shaede,” gurgled a bald human with a tray of goblets. “We have a variety of delights tonight. A dark shadow beast flavor with a hint of black grape, regular faerie wine with a dash of human blood thrown in, and this boring regular wine for those humans that haven’t acquired a taste for the sweet nectar yet.”

Something told me the servant was not going to take “no” for an answer, so I grabbed the human wine and continued my search. The princes were not on their thrones, and Amira was nowhere in sight. I made it to one of the back walls on the far side of the room, and there they were. Ciaran was sporting dark leather armor and a long, intricate braid. He looked like he was going into battle. Amira was wearing a deep, royal blue velvet gown and a sapphire encrusted headband. She looked like a queen. Edmyn wore only eyes for me. He excused himself from their conversation and ushered me a little way away, moving so quickly that he almost sloshed the drink from his cup.

“You look ravishing,” he said, looking me up and down. “I don’t know why I do this to myself. Dress you up like this, and then not be able to touch you. I could have that lace in shreds within seconds.”

“Promises, promises,” I said, unable to fight a smile. “Are you doing all right?”

“Yes,” he answered quickly, adjusting his coat. “I think all will be well.”

I couldn't really question him further, not with so many dark fae around. But seeing as Ciaran looked to be in perfect health and fortitude, I was forced to have faith that Edmyn knew what he was doing.

"Good luck," I whispered.

Goblets in hand, we walked in step toward Ciaran, just as the portal swirled open.

Ciaran and Edmyn led the way, followed by me, Amira, and three dark fae guards.

The Shaede throne room was surprisingly empty as we entered into the shadows of the vacant chamber. It was rather late, but certainly if the Shaede Court knew of Ciaran and Edmyn's visit, the faeries of the court would flock to witness the events of the night out of a sense of duty to defend or sheer morbid curiosity.

Without the crowd, there was little separation between our small party and the four High Shaudes perched on their seats atop the dais. I felt my magic awaken, and it was like a long caress from an old friend where neither of you wanted to be the first to let go. My first instinct was to lash out at my captor, but Ciaran and I both knew there was nothing I could do that he couldn't defend. Not to mention that kind of show of force might ruin any diplomacy that might have a chance of happening tonight. I remained reluctantly by Amira's side, my hands clasped idly in front of me around my goblet. Looking upon the faces of my friends was like looking at strangers. Not because they were different, but because I was very changed from the person I had been before being stolen away to the Night Court.

Before that day with Amira in the meadow, I was intractable. My powers were dormant and a mystery. My greatest skill, perhaps my only skill besides the forbidden artwork, was my ability to wallow in self-pity and look at the world for all it owed me. My questions to the Balance were self-centered and adolescent. My parents had died, and I was in mourning. Now I stood before them, a woman of great known

power, steeling herself from worry and fear. I had seen the demons at the Night Court. I had resided among the shadows. And love had found me there, along with my legacy.

Leyanna, Lennyx, Dru, and Glory, all wearing their shining circlets and donning their official High Shaede robes, looked so much like the Five that had come before us. I was hyperaware of the magic that Amira had mentioned might lay latent inside me. Without much effort, I sensed Leyanna's fire magic and felt that it had a pulse. There was now no doubt in my mind—I had access. There was also no doubt in my mind that I could have access to them all. With the exception of the dark fae, it was strange to think I would normally be the most dangerous faerie in the room.

The bond I had with Edmyn was also more tangible and electric here. I wondered if he could feel me behind him, willing him to do the thing we most needed him to do. But I was having a hard time seeing how this was going to go our way.

Ciaran wasted no time waiting to be an asshole. He walked over to the stone bridge, crossed over the moat, and climbed the dais. "Is this seat taken?" he asked the Shaedes, pointing to my empty throne. To their horror, he picked up my circlet from the throne and turned it over in his hands a few times. "Did we come to an agreement? Or not?" I saw Dru's knuckles go white as she resisted the instinct for violence against this man who dared come near her after what he did to her father and best friend. "Listen, I'll get this ball rolling since no one seems overly talkative tonight." Circlet in hand, he pointed to me. "I've taken one of your queens and made her a whore of the Shadowlands. I've bent the Balance to my will and broken my curse as well as that of my brother's." The Shaedes exchanged tense glances. "Look, I've mated with a Shaede from a respectable family. All I ask for is the equality and respect I'm owed, and that my brother and I be included in decisions made that effect all fae. The first topic up for discussion is doing what needs to be done to bring more of my subjects into the light."

He made it sound like it was nothing, as if his requests were trivial and the Shaede Court was acting like a sulky child for disagreeing with him .

Leyanna was the next to speak. “Dark One, you seem to think you were invited here to negotiate. But you are sorely mistaken. We allowed you here so you could answer for your crimes.”

Ciaran’s smile was sickening. “If you think I came here to negotiate, then it is you, fire faerie, who is mistaken. And the only real crime I am guilty of is existing at your displeasure. I have waited for this moment for a length of time that your infantile minds can’t even fathom. My patience is up, and I want what is mine.”

Glory was watching me intently as I stood passively among our captors. I could feel her guilt for leaving me with them. I could see it in her eyes. Her magic reached out to me, like an offering, but I pushed it away. She stood up, mere feet away from Ciaran, and said, “Enough of this. I cannot stand to listen to another word you have to say until we get Opaline back. Release her now, or there will be no more discussion.” Lennyx didn’t look like he liked the sound of that. Dru’s eyes also widened at Glory’s bold words.

To my surprise, Ciaran said, “Done.” He turned and gestured for me to join him on the dais. As I walked slowly toward the thrones, I stole a look at Edmyn’s face, which was once again a stoic painting of the most handsome and bored courtier in the realm. “We are done with her anyway. She’s served her purpose, eh, Edmyn?” The man in question cracked a smile for his brother and gave a little bow. Ciaran actually handed me the circlet and backed up so I could take my seat.

Dru looked at me skeptically, as if to say, what the fuck happened to you? I knew I looked a little different, but what little she might have been able to sense of my magic most likely felt different too. It was not till I was on the dais, facing the front of the room, that I noticed a man with pale-green hair and a crooked smile gazing at me

from across the room near one of the fire pillars. It was Farris. My magic recognized him immediately, like a happy puppy would when its beloved owner returned home at the end of the day. He was dressed as a faerie warrior—a little more than I'd like. It was incredibly reckless for him to still be at court, let alone here in the throne room where all the monsters were. Still, seeing his face was a comfort. It always was.

“The prodigal has returned,” said Ciaran with a dramatic flair. “So if your answer is no, let's hear it. For I shall have my answer one way or another this night.”

Glory sat back down. “I say the answer is no. Black Shaedes had a place here at court once upon a time. But faeries like Draku never wanted to accept their fate. The faerie realms should not be punished for falling under the Balance's favor.”

Ciaran's anger sparked. “Black fae, Naturals, Shaedes like Amira—humiliated, pressured, told who they were and what they were allowed to do, ignoring their gifts.”

“Or utilizing them,” interjected Lennyx, trying to appease. “You think of it as exploitation. But really, this is a disagreement of perspective. No Shaede is above a Natural—we all need each other to survive.”

“Include me now, or don't,” answered Ciaran with an air of fatigue. “I'm not going to beg. But if it is a 'no' to the seat, then it is a 'yes' to a war.”

The tension in the room was becoming thicker than a Corewood tree. I could sense all the magics in the room licking their lips, salivating with the hope of being unleashed. Just when I thought Leyanna was about to start spewing fireballs at will, Edmyn moved toward the dais, goblet still in hand from the party.

“You all have a death wish if you think a war with the Night Court is preferable to collaboration with my brother,” he said, coming to stand next to Ciaran. He was very

at ease, almost too comfortable in the midst of discord.

Dru glared at him, seething with repulsion. “Go back to your Shadowlands. High Shaedes have trapped your kind once before, and we are prepared to do it again.”

This was news to me. They were prepared to die for this, but I wasn’t ready for anyone to die for this.

“Oh, we will go back to the Night Court,” purred Ciaran. “But when we do, we will be dragging your corpses behind us.” He raised a hand, and I felt his magic augment. I felt myself bracing for impact and was ready to go nuclear with my own magic, but then it stopped. Edmyn had placed a hand on Ciaran’s back .

“Brother,” he began. “This has been a long time coming. This night is momentous for you, for me, for all the children of the dark. Before we spill their blood, may I make a toast for your vanquishing of the prejudiced?” He raised his cup, making direct eye contact with me. “May the Balance choke on the bones of our enemies, and may the magical creatures of the Seam one day bow to your vision of equality and authority.”

He bowed low and handed the goblet to Ciaran, who feigned embarrassment but would never pass up an opportunity to be praised. The other Shaedes looked like they were going to be sick. “Well said, Edmyn. Well said.” Ciaran took a sip and raised the cup back to his brother, but Edmyn didn’t take it. He just took a step back and watched as Ciaran’s face quickly faded to gray.

Black veins crawled out from under Ciaran’s sleeves and collar. The whites of his eyes turned a pallid yellow. His hands and feet turned inward. His wrists snapped quickly backward, breaking instantly. His eyes looked surprised and horrified, his mouth open in a silent scream. His breathing had been reduced to gasping in between strained coughs of blood and phlegm.

“You go too far, brother,” said Edmyn quietly. My eyes welled up with tears. The other Shaeldees were exchanging worried looks. This was not at all what anyone was expecting. But even though I had been expecting it, I was still not prepared to watch Edmyn torment his brother. “We will never be taken seriously with methods such as these. I have warned you and pleaded with you, but you do not listen. And it might very well be too late.”

Ciaran’s left eyeball was starting to droop. “I made you, Edmyn, and I can unmake you,” he gurgled while dark blood started pooling in his mouth. “You betray me for faeries that won’t let you near their own power. You think they will reward you for this? You think anything will change?” He spat blood onto the white stone. “Don’t let daylight or some minxy little half-Shaede blind you to our mission. These fae will never accept you... and that whore—” Edmyn’s magic rose before Ciaran could finish his thought and sent the deteriorating corpse of his brother flying across the room, slamming him into a wall .

Ciaran laughed as some of his teeth fell out. Instead of lashing out at Edmyn, he used what little magic he could summon and cast a spell at the nearest pillar of fire to spill over and ignite a wall of fire, blocking him from the rest of the faeries. Lennyx jumped up and sent moat water to squash the firewall, but all it did was create a wall of smoke so dark and thick that Ciaran was completely hidden from view. Amira, standing protected behind the Night Court guards, was whispering and sending healing spells at Ciaran with incredible force. Their bond did something to increase the impact of the spells, and I was worried the strawberry poison wouldn’t hold.

Enchanted swamp vines had materialized in Edmyn’s hands. He looked devastated, frozen in place, while the smoke cleared. At first, I thought it was Ciaran breaking through the smoke, staggering into the throne room, his black hair shredded, his skin sagging off his face, revealing its ivory skeletal structure, rotting nail beds exposed, and bare forearms that showed signs of sores and gangrene. But it wasn’t Ciaran.

Through a portal Ciaran must have opened on the other side of the smoke, fifty or so walking corpses entered the throne room at varying speeds, their eyes dead, their bodies in various stages of decay. But though their appearance looked dilapidated and forlorn, they were aggressive, unyielding, killing machines. Ciaran had made a zombie army. And in the first row, I spotted what used to be Meridee—the daffodil clip still attached to her matted hair. Her gray face, covered in scars, wore a murderous expression as she lunged forward with the rest.

Amira screamed as the zombies advanced on her. Her guards jumped into action, the undead unbiased in who they attacked. All the Shaedes got to their feet, ready to battle. Farris came nearer the dais, sword drawn. Who gave him a sword? I wondered angrily. But there was no time for that—this was a fight they might be able to win if they all worked together.

Glory called birds, small black ones that swooped and darted in and out of the crowd, blinding many of the enemies, but mostly just distracting them. Leyanna started throwing fire, and Lennyx directed ice daggers to heads and hearts, testing pressure points to find what would ultimately take them down. Dru summoned more green faeries to flood the throne room. She charged in with her swords and Farris followed. Amira was backed against the wall, throwing out force spells that pushed the enemy back, but it didn't really harm them, and she couldn't keep that up forever. One of her guards got too close to an undead, and it ripped out his throat with its broken teeth. Edmyn was wielding dark magic that was making individual corpses explode, but it was taking too long. There were too many, and every time something succeeded in destroying one, three more entered the room through the portal.

I flexed my magic and threw it at the portal, trying to close it, but it didn't even flicker. Ciaran must be healing if he was strong enough to keep it open from the other side.

Looking around the room, everyone was active, with elements, spells, and swords



shocking, decapitating, and wreaking havoc on bodies, but more of the enemy continued to replace the newly dead. Farris was now single-handedly defending the exit so no zombies made it out of the throne room. Lennyx had turned the moat into a lethal crossing of lava-like liquid. The steam made my eyes burn, but several zombies had already tried to cross it and had instantly dissolved into goo.

My magic itched and begged for release, but I wasn't sure if I had enough control to do what needed to be done. The front line of zombies got smarter and started getting ready to throw one of their companions over the lava moat to reach us. I opened my hands at my sides and closed my eyes. Sensing all the Shaelles in the room, including Edmyn, I accessed their magic, like running down a hallway and opening all the doors as I went. It was easy—too easy. I reached in and grabbed only a handful of everyone's magic—enough to fatigue them, but not enough to bankrupt them. I then moved to place my palms together, took a deep breath, and when my fingertips touched, a sonic wave blew over Ciaran's monsters, flattening them into piles of bones and dust. My reach went far, even through the portal and a little way into the Shadowlands. It bought us enough time to close the portal before more cursed ones could advance.

I turned to Edmyn, my eyes drunk with power. "Stay," I said, to the surprise of all who could hear me. It was all I could do to not get on my knees and beg.

"I cannot," he said, breaking both our hearts. "This isn't over. I had no idea that he had raised the dead. But he's my brother, Opal. For better or for worse. And we both belong to the darkness."

"I know," I said. I knew that this attempt to tame his brother cost him so dearly, but that the love that he was turning away from felt like it was going to be the end of us both. Tears burned down my cheeks, but I had to close the portal. He took a step closer and touched my hair like it was just us and no one else. He gave us a moment to cherish amid all the death and smells of decomposition. And then he turned to

cross the stone bridge and exited through the portal.

Amira was abandoned by the two remaining guards who jumped into the portal, and I gestured to her that it was now or never. “Go,” I said impatiently, my raw sorrow turning into bitter rage. “I’m closing this thing now.”

“I choose to stay,” she whimpered against the wall.

“Now that is a surprise,” I said while I slammed the portal shut and locked up all our defenses with the effort it took to bat an eyelash. “Guards, take her to a holding room. Don’t let her out of your sight.” Two warriors stepped forward to usher her out, but she was shaking and muttering to herself. She needed to lean on them for support to walk.

Glory came running up to me and wrapped her arms around me. “Opal! By the Balance do you have some explaining to do.” She squeezed my neck and cried happy tears. “Welcome home.”

“Yes, you do,” echoed Dru, hugging me next. Then Leyanna, and then Lennyx.

Farris walked over to the dais, still slightly out of breath from the fight, still clutching his enormous sword. My magic swirled around happily as I watched him approach, despite my drying tears. We remembered him well .

“May I request a hug from the opalescent High Shaede?” He smiled coyly, and I walked over the stone bridge to meet him. He dropped his sword to the ground with a clang, and I remembered just how comforting his enormous arms had always been.

“Well, this is a beautiful fucking reunion, but we are going to need some answers,” said Leyanna in her loving and gentle way. “Why do I feel like my magic could barely light a match right now?”

### CHAPTER 22

The raised voices echoing throughout the empty throne room all blended together in a resonant cry for my attention, but all I could do was stare at the wall where the portal had closed, separating me from Edmyn and a part of me I could never have back. There was always a chance that Edmyn's plan wasn't going to work, and there had always been a chance that I would die in the battle, but the undead careening into the palace, watching the man I loved choose his brother and walk away—these were images that would always haunt me.

Amira was somewhere in the palace, heavily guarded and undoubtedly equally a mess—being separated from someone with whom you shared this kind of bond was sort of like having a painful disease of which there was no cure. Dru had quickly sent green faeries to strengthen defenses around the castle and purple faeries to send messages to the other courts about what had happened. A few orange faeries alerted the minds of all the palace's residences to Ciaran's attack, my return, and that the order to remain in their homes until further notice was still in place.

Leyanna had dismissed Farris before he could interrogate me further—a small mercy. I wasn't sure if she just didn't want him around while we discussed official Shaede business or if she sensed that my affections were unequivocally divided and that my mental state was in complete disarray. Either way, I was thankful.

Now we stood before our thrones, once again arguing and talking too fast, terribly aware of our inadequacy. I had filled them in as much as I could about Edmyn's plan with the berries and his hopes for rendering Ciaran incapable of causing more harm. Glory had already reported all the details about the Night Court she could remember,

as well as the information we learned from Sandrell's first letter, so that was less I had needed to divulge.

However, there was much interest in everything that had happened after she had been forcibly released and a growing desire for an explanation of my new found powers. But Leyanna and Lennyx were currently arguing about the odds of Edmyn and Ciaran tearing each other apart on the other side of the portal, allowing me a short opportunity to mourn.

"Maybe they aren't even our problem anymore," Leyanna said, her hands on her hips. "Eternity can be a long time to hold a grudge, but something tells me Ciaran is up to the challenge."

"It was Edmyn who held the grudge," I said quietly, still staring at the wall. "He was a yellow Shaede before Ciaran killed him."

"What?" said Glory, and all of them turned to me.

"Edmyn told me that before Ciaran came to turn him, he had recently received his shaede. He loves his brother, but they've never been as similar as Ciaran had believed them to be. Edmyn kept the secret at first because he didn't want to hurt his brother, but as time turned Ciaran into what we know him as today, Edmyn's secret became a bitter and constant companion."

"How do you know all this?" Leyanna asked, but it wasn't like they hadn't seen my and Edmyn's final goodbye. It was just that no one had been brave enough to ask me about it. Reliving my short stint at the Night Court was a necessary evil. These were my friends after all, and the only heroes this realm had. They deserved to know, even if I longed to keep my memories all to myself.

"Edmyn did not force himself on me," I said, finally turning away from the wall.

“The darkness was very disorienting at first, but eventually, my preconceived notions were worn away. I spent enough time with Edmyn to learn much about him, his history, and his complicated relationship with his brother. I mated with him willingly—his daywalking abilities were a gift.”

Lennyx looked embarrassed enough for the both of us. Dru and Glory looked appalled, while Leyanna appeared a little bit enraptured.

“When I witnessed Edmyn walk in the light, I knew something had happened,” said Glory in disbelief with anger creeping into her voice. “I imagined countless horrors, questioned everything about our time together. But you willingly gave our enemy the keys to our kingdom? Are you insane?”

“She was in love,” said Lennyx, surprisingly. “Relax with the judgment, Glory, or you will make us guilty of everything the Dark Princes accuse us of.”

Leyanna’s face softened and turned toward Lennyx, their eyes meeting above solid common ground. “I’m inclined to agree with Lennyx,” she said. “Without all the seedy details, are you saying we should all be team Edmyn? What do you think is happening in the Shadowlands right now?”

I paused, trying to imagine the Night Court when the brothers were at odds. “There is a delicate balance at their court, relaxed and refined one moment, but feral and shaky the next. Their courtiers have all been willing to die for Ciaran. I’m sure Edmyn will face a political nightmare once Ciaran fully heals. But whether or not he is capable of forgiveness, I haven’t a clue. And this undead army, I wonder how that will be received at court.”

“I think we have all been faced with what would seem to be a revolving door of impossible choices. Whatever your choices”—Dru took my hand and squeezed it—“I trust you, Opal. We have lost much in this conflict, but we are still here. Balance be

damned, we are still here. Help us fight them.”

Dru would be forever true, and she was right. We had so many people counting on us. In a way, I imagined Edmyn was now counting on us too .

“About my magic,” I said to the group. “At first, it was just Amira’s theory. She was sensitive to other faeries’ magic, but she never had any access. She believed with the help of the added Balance magic, I might be able to actually take, store, and use others’ magic as my own.”

“So on top of the refinement magic, you have the ability to syphon as well?” asked Glory, looking at me like a science experiment she desperately wanted to tinker with. “Do you think you could take all of Ciaran’s magic away?”

“I definitely had access to Edmyn’s, but I think that was only through our bond. It’s like we share magic now, through some invisible funnel, if that makes sense. I’m afraid to touch Ciaran’s dark magic without consent. I’m afraid of what it might do to me. If I’d even be able to control it. But I could try, I suppose.”

“No,” Leyanna said firmly. “I want to trust you, Opal, but what if his magic got a hold of you? No one needs a third Dark One running around and reanimating the dead. And even if you drained him, I don’t think he would actually die.”

“There is one more thing,” I said, making eye contact with Glory. “Amira shared with me another letter from Sandrell.” I quickly paraphrased its contents and shared how long Amira had kept that information to herself.

“That bitch,” said Leyanna. “But I guess we are talking about someone who sold her own sister into sex slavery.”

Glory sighed. “I mean, I guess it does clarify things about your magic, but my parents

say that the Balance always makes magic available when it is needed most. So why now? Why, after ridding the world of the Nymphs thousands of years ago, why bring back their magic now?"

I agreed with Glory in that it hadn't exactly been helpful up until this point.

"Maybe it is time to talk to Amira," Lennyx proposed. "After all, she knows our enemy better than we do. Shall we call her forward?"

"No," I said, scratching at the lace at my throat. "I think I should talk to her. Alone. Besides, the last time she was separated from Ciaran, she was almost inconsolable. We might get more out of her one on one."

"If you think you are up for that," said Dru, "I'm okay with it. But then you really should get some rest."

"And don't kill her," said Leyanna with a wicked smile playing on her lips. "Unless I can be there to watch."

When the guards opened the door and stepped aside, I wasn't sure what I expected. Amira was crouched in a corner of the room farthest from the door, partially hidden from view by the gigantic table filling up most of the space. It was much like the room Farris and I had made out in what seemed like a lifetime ago.

She was not crying, sniveling, or whispering to herself anymore. She was just sitting in a puddle of skirts, her hair a little mussed to one side, her arms around her knees, and a determined look on her face.

I approached her as I would a feral animal, unsure of what it would do if startled. Clearly also haunted by the events of the day, she noticed me with wide, puffy eyes and then went back into her steely trance.

“Amira?” I said carefully. “I need to ask you some questions.” I was going to pull up a chair beside her, but decided to slide down the wall next to her and sit with my legs out, staring in the same direction as her, waiting for clarity.

“He left me to save himself.” She spoke in something between a statement and a question, as if she knew what had happened but still couldn’t quite believe it. “I gave him everything. I gave him a piece of my soul. And when things got tough, he left me.”

I tried hard to remind myself that we were talking about her feelings and not mine. But it made my heart ache just the same.

“He did leave you. Though, to be fair, I think his body was starting to disintegrate,” I said. Not in an effort to console her, but we were just two women sitting there, stating the facts. Something in me wanted to believe that had the situation been reversed and I was his to take, Edmyn would have used his last bit of magic to pull me into the portal with him rather than release a bunch of undead monsters.

“It doesn’t matter; we are all dead anyway,” she said calmly. I was ready to ask some follow-up questions, but she seemed eager to talk, so I let her. “Ciaran had a long time to experiment with his magic. When I met him, he was a man full of secrets. I think he kept a lot of things from Edmyn—not out of distrust but because I think even Ciaran knew deep down how dark he had become. He didn’t want Edmyn to see that side of him. Humans, however, flocked to him. He had some sort of network of servants who would travel in and out of the Seam with his blessing and recruit more humans for his dark and divine purposes. They came to him, many looking like they had lived their whole lives as children of the night. Though I knew some were just lost souls that would willingly cling to anyone or anything that showed even the slightest bit of love or attention toward them. These were the most broken humans, living in some of the deepest shadows of the human realm. And Ciaran promised them a home. One day at court, I just happened to be on Ciaran’s arm, strolling



around the courtyard, when a guard came to him with a note. ‘Thirteen?’ he had said, reading the note with surprise. ‘Keep one or two of the most devout, and then bring the rest to the Southern Lair.’ The guard had nodded and left to execute his orders.”

“The Southern Lair?” I repeated, confused.

“Yes,” Amira continued, resting her head back against the wall. “Eventually, Ciaran told me all his secrets. The bond we have makes it impossible not to. He showed all of the lairs to me in due course, but basically he had large tunnels dug in five different locations around the castle grounds that led to enormous holding cells for his human prisoners. He was taking the excess humans who were coming to the Shadowlands to seek sanctuary and farming them for their blood. Large vats kept the blood warm until it was tapped, and no one knew about it but him. Now, most of the humans at court gave their blood willingly. Even Edmyn partook on the necks of the eager. But when Ciaran wanted a snack or to gift something special to his lords or ladies, he always had a reservoir to pull from. And he was quite generous, as there were always more humans coming in.”

My stomach churned with the image of stale blood in swirling jugs passed around a party. “What did he do with all the bodies?” I asked, but as soon as I said the words, I knew the answer to my own question. “The army of undead.”

She nodded solemnly, a sad and pathetic smile on her lips. “Yep. There were piles and piles and piles of them. He practiced all sorts of spells on them. He could make them dance, could make them rip each other apart. It was barbaric, but I never told anyone. He never called it an army. He never said that he was going to use them to wage war on his behalf. I am so stupid. I thought they were just the sick fascination of a bored and lonely faerie that had an addiction to human blood. Opal,” she said, finally turning to look at me, “you have to believe me. I didn’t know his plan. Not really.”

As much as I wanted to believe her, and maybe I did, it didn't really change anything. I knew he would stop at nothing to get an edge over us now. And maybe their love was real, but she was only ever going to be a stepping stone for a man who believed he deserved to touch the sun.

"So how many does he have, really?" I asked. "You said there were five lairs?"

"The spaces were so large, and there were just so many. Fifty or sixty thousand? Maybe more? He glamourised the exits so that Edmyn would never be able to find them. But, then, it looks like Edmyn himself, was keeping his own set of secrets." She put her hand on mine, and I almost jumped at the touch. My power flared as an overemotional reaction, but it recognized something in her and calmed down. "Are you okay, Opal?"

I scrunched up my face, caught off guard and confused. "Why are you asking me that?"

"You forget that I've known Edmyn a lot longer than you." She smiled sadly again, but this time, there was sympathy in her eyes. "You made him come alive. You bound yourself to him. It must feel awful for him to be gone." The word gone just hung in the air between us like a guillotine blade that could fall at any moment. If I thought about it too much, I was certain it would come crashing down on my neck. However, what was almost more painful at this immediate moment was that the only person who seemed to really see how much Edmyn meant to me was Amira, the person who had hurt me more than Ciaran ever could. And now she sat here, tears in her eyes for me, looking after my wellbeing and willing to mourn alongside me the love I had lost. It was almost unbearable.

"I will be fine," I answered robotically. I had to soldier on—there was too much between us that had been destroyed in earlier battles. But then she did the unthinkable. She moved to her knees and wrapped her arms around me. I couldn't tell

which one of us was shaking or both. Tears fell freely, and I was so exhausted, I just couldn't fight it anymore. It wasn't forgiveness, but it was therapeutic. There was something healing about a hug from my sister, no matter how much distance had been put between us or how different we'd become.

"You have to let the magic lead you," she whispered into my ear. "You were made for a love such as this." It was a sobering thought. The heart forever warring with the mind. The magic forever dueling with our own inhibitions. Who were we to judge or deny our gifts?

It was hard to look Amira in the eye after we pulled away. She was still a high prisoner of the Shaede Court, and I was still on the hunt to destroy her lover. But, in the few moments of calm I experienced in her arms, I had found the beginnings of a plan, and I needed to be ready to act.

### CHAPTER 23

I stood outside my own bedroom door, wondering what would be harder to face: a rabid Ciaran, freshly healed and out for blood, or Farris. It was like the very roots of the Corewood held me in place. I couldn't quite reach my door, but I couldn't flee either. I was just stuck there, knowing I owed it to him, wanting to explain everything that had happened, but also unable to close the gap. He wasn't even supposed to be here. He should have been blissfully unaware of the faerie world, lost in some dusty old textbook in a corner of one of Manhattan's historical libraries, smiling that little half-smile at attractive and available young women, and living his human life without the threats of the Dark Prince breathing down his neck.

He wasn't supposed to be here , but that didn't change the fact that he was. When I finally overcame my own reluctance, I opened the door and was greeted by those pale-blue eyes still enhanced by the green I had put there. His happiness and relief upon seeing me practically filled the room to the point that there was nothing left—no room for my doubts or hesitancy. He crossed the room quickly, like someone rushing to a well after days of dehydration in a barren desert, and enveloped me in his arms. He smelled like Perryflowers and leather and fresh spring air. He smelled like home .

“Are you all right?” His grip on me was gentle but unyielding.

“I'm okay.” I sighed into his chest, breathing him in and letting his fingers linger in my hair. There was so much to say, but so little time. And I knew that as soon as I had made the choice to come here, to see him. I was aware of the possibilities.

His warm hand rested on the back of my neck, and I looked up at him, my handsome,

half-made creation. My magic had chosen him once, and as it felt its imprint on Farris's soul, it came roaring to life once again. My head felt dizzy, and my lips parted to explain, to warn, to confess, but all I could say was "Kiss me."

He probably couldn't have refused me even if he had wanted to. I wondered if my power held that kind of sway. But it didn't matter; there was definitely a love there that didn't simply become erased or replaced. It was its own special thing, and the Balance had blessed it once before. I was ready to summon it once again. But was Farris ready?

His lips tenderly kissed mine and then moved from my lips down my jaw. I gasped as I felt his hot breath near the nape of my neck, felt his teeth nip at the lace that covered nearly all of me.

"This is not your color, you know," he huskily whispered near my ear, sending tremors down my body in waves.

"You have to know, Farris." My breath was already coming out in shallow pants. "To love me is to be forever changed. I have no control as to how much, but we will be forever bonded. And forever is a long time."

His one hand cupped my chin, while the other moved down my back and encircled my waist, pressing the length of him against me. I closed my eyes, trying to focus on the reality of what I was asking him to do. Talking with Amira had helped me realize that perhaps I was led to these men for a reason. For if loving Edmyn was wrong, I didn't want to be right. And if loving Edmyn meant a piece of me remained in the darkness, I was beginning to cling to the belief that loving Farris might keep a piece of me grounded in the light. There was balance there, and where there was balance, magic flourished and did miraculous things .

He kissed me so deeply, his tongue a voracious explorer. My magic was humming

underneath every inch of my skin, electric and alive. “Forever will never be long enough for me,” he said. Our foreheads pressed together. I opened my eyes to him smiling at me as he pushed a strand of hair behind my ear.

“You will always have to share me,” I said softly, my magic daring him to refuse.

“I know,” he whispered back, pulling the thin lace dress up over my head. Then he picked me up and dragged me over to the bed.

“Soul magic is finite. A part of my soul will always be somewhere else,” I warned. All this was such a terrible offer, one no normal man would entertain, but Farris hadn’t had the most normal of lives, and after having spent time in the faerie realm, he probably was already forever changed.

“I’m already yours, Opal. You don’t need to try to dissuade me or sell me on anything.” He grabbed my hips and wrenched me toward him on the bed. I felt his need, suffering hard against the cool leather of my skirt. “Turn me into a weapon for your war or make me into a slave who worships at your feet. It doesn’t matter. I’m already there. I’m already yours. I’m yours , Opal. Now undress and let me make you believe it.”

For a moment, I hesitated. He offered too much of himself when neither of us could truly understand the consequences. But my body betrayed me, the Balance ruled me, and I was suddenly naked, on top of him on the bed, pulling his clothes off and intoxicated with magic. We’d been here before... well, almost here. This was the man we wanted.

It was impossible not to smile as I exposed Farris’s naked body to the sanctity of a clear night sky. He was clearly aroused and riding the high of finally getting the woman he had pursued for over a year. Flashes of memories from uncomplicated times came in and out of focus as I kissed his cheek, his neck, his shoulder. His

backpack, always heavy with books, slung over his shoulder across a shiny countertop. The smell of coffee and his cologne. The echo of his laugh as he walked out the door .

Farris had his hand massaging the back of my head while I kissed his chest, turning his arm so I could see the scars. Another image forced its way to the front of my mind. Farris lying in an unnatural position while blood and poison seeped out of a thousand jagged bite marks. He was a survivor; he would survive this too.

I made my way to his groin, cupping the whole of his buttocks with both hands. A sound of surprise, followed by a moan of pleasure, escaped his lips as I took the whole of his throbbing cock in my mouth and moved in a way that caused his hips to buck slightly and his hand to clench a fistful of my hair.

“If this is what it feels like to be remade, I am willing clay in your able hands, my love.” He chuckled nervously, and I enjoyed the way I could make his body relax and tense and relax again. My magic was weaving invisible threads in and out between us, and the longer we touched, the tighter it pulled. Low and deep inside me, the thrill of watching Farris’s pleasure, in addition to his hands searching for my breasts, my neck, and my lips wrapped firmly around him, began loosening and lubricating my most intimate parts.

Already so bonded, he sensed my growing want and sat up to address it. He lifted my face with his hand, and it became quite clear that he was possessing me as much as I was possessing him. At the moment, we were as vulnerable as two people could be, and my magic delighted in that liberation.

“I know you want me inside of you, but I’m inclined to make you wait,” he said with that half-smile that always made me melt. But his face was so close, and his words only made the urge that much more intense.

I pressed into a kiss, trying to push my way on top of him, but he would not be overtaken. He rolled me onto my back and was quickly outlined in moonlight, framed by the star-studded sky, hovering above me with his pale-green hair dangling in my face.

He inserted the tip of his manhood into me, but only an inch. Just enough to make me inhale and arch my back to rise up and meet him. He nuzzled my nose with his and slowly went in a tiny bit deeper. My breath was coming out in strained puffs as I moved my hips again, only to be foiled by his hand, which came firmly to press them down. I whimpered in ecstasy, and breathlessly swore as he removed himself almost all the way.

“Farris,” I pleaded. “Please, I must have you. I can’t—” He hovered for seconds more, his eyes alight with the satisfaction of my begging, before plunging the whole of himself into my depths, which couldn’t have been more ready and welcoming.

My soul ached, but my need was riotous. His thrusts disturbed my magic in a violent, reckless way that caused our bodies to tremble and prolong our pleasure. When I thought the climax might never come and we might be forever destined to ride the paper-thin line between exertion and release, relief came in the form of a powerful discharge of energy—a wave of magic and gratification that left us clinging to one another until we drifted into a deep and contented sleep.

When I awoke, there was a sunny haze blanketing the room causing me to squint when I opened my eyes. I was lying naked on my stomach, sprinkled in Corewood leaves and Perryflower petals. I turned my head and could just barely make out Farris’s muscular frame curled up on his side. He was facing the wall beside me, bathed in the brightness of the morning light.

I was afraid to touch him. Whatever magic linked us now was just as strong as I had felt with Edmyn, but Farris was not cursed to begin with. I almost didn’t want to see



what I had created. Having survived the intensity of the Renaissance Spell, I guessed I should just be thankful that he was at least still breathing. But I said a silent prayer anyway, that the Balance might have consecrated our mating and blessed us with something we could use.

Farris stretched out in the sunlight, muscles undoubtedly tender from their abuse in the night. I thought I was just sensing our bond—the magic that tied us—but as he moved around, I realized it was his magic I was feeling.

I jolted upright in bed and looked at him with bewilderment. He was smiling, his sleepy eyes trying to focus on me. He reached around my waist and pulled me near him so I was half-resting on his chest. His eyes were still two icy blue-green crystals, but they now held light-gray halos around the irises. They were shockingly beautiful, as if winter itself had touched his soul. His hair was now platinum silver, almost white, but the wavy ends looked like they had been dipped in green and then purple paint. It was an ombré effect that I had never seen before on any other faerie. I flipped over his arm, and although the shadow beast scars were still there, every inch of his skin held the faintest silvery sheen.

“How do I look?” He grinned, holding up a few locks in front of his face.

“How do you feel?” I answered. I didn’t know if he even knew what he was. Somehow I had turned him into a silver Shaede. The first in over a thousand of years. But I could feel the battle magic and the hint of purple Shaede in him too. He was some sort of beautiful cross species, the only of his kind, radiating ancient magic, and wholly devoted to me.

“I feel”—he stopped to ponder the right word—“immortal.” He stroked my cheek with his finger while I got lost in his new glacial eyes. “My skin is almost itching with magic, Opal. It is all very surreal. Like I am connected to the Earth in a way I’d never before realized and now can call on its elements at will.” He took his hand from

my face and pointed to the open canopy of branches above us. He selected a bud of a Perryflower with his eyes and, using his magic, delicately detached it, guiding it down slowly with his finger. But as it fell, it burst into bloom, opening its petals proudly and injecting its scent into the air. It landed in his open hand, and he placed its stem gently behind my ear. Then he folded his arms behind his silver head, looking pretty proud of himself.

“You’re a faerie,” I said, highlighting the obvious. “A Shaede. Do you feel, I don’t know, capable of anything extraordinary, anything particularly useful against Ciaran?”

“Were you hoping for more of a vampire slayer titan with saws for arms and lasers shooting from his eyes?” He was teasing now, and I couldn’t help but crack a smile .

“No,” I said, my palm resting on his steady heartbeat. “I think I just had this crazy idea that if we mated, that somehow my love for you would shift the balance. You know, turn the tide and somehow load the scales in our favor for a change. We already have plenty of faeries with powerful magic and skill willing to fight to bring down Ciaran as it is. I just don’t see how one more really helps us—unless, of course, you can see the future?” Now it was my turn to tease. I didn’t want him to feel like some sort of a disappointment; I was very aware of the prospect that now that Farris was fae, he wouldn’t be required to leave the Seam, and we might actually be able to find happiness together. But I was equally aware that if we didn’t deal with Ciaran, there was no future happiness for any of us.

Farris shook his head, and a weariness fell upon his face. His smile changed to a piteous expression, and his eyes gazed far off as he spoke. “I cannot tell the future, my love. Nor do I bring to the field any exceptional skills that might rival the dark magic that has a hold of the prince of the Night Court. But I do now possess the knowledge of the ancients. I can see your magic, and I know where it came from. I look at these Corewoods and can envision them as saplings. I’ve seen this palace

before even a single stone was set in place. There have been many wars fought on these lands and many planet-altering decisions made by the Shaedes that have graced the seats of the Five. My kind have helped shape the outcomes of many struggles and complications. The Balance will not allow the dark to overcome the light. Thus, I know how we rid the realms of Ciaran. I know how he dies.”

He blinked a few times and then came back to the moment. My mind was rapidly replaying everything he had said. Our stories told us that silver Shaedes were the wise ones, but they were mostly portrayed as advisors and bookworms. No one ever really went into detail about their magic. The texts mostly highlighted and praised the silvers for their contributions to high-level conflicts and solutions to realm tribulations. Did their minds retain ancient secrets or knowledge of things that the rest of us weren’t privy to?

“You cannot tell the future, but you know how Ciaran dies?” I asked, the hairs on my arms and neck standing at attention .

“It is like my mind is a catalog of all the knowledge of all the silver fae from the beginning of the Seam. Like those old microfilm readers at the libraries, I can easily flip through hundreds or thousands of years of stored-up information, but my magic guides me to exactly what I need.”

“And your magic has located a way to kill Ciaran. Like for real. Real dead. Forever?” I was tripping over my words as my adrenaline spiked and my disbelief started wrestling with my hope. A hope that I had thought was lost.

“The only kind of dead I know,” he said, reaching his arm around me and rubbing my back. He stayed silent, serenely watching some butterflies pass overhead.

“So what is it?” I tried not to yell. I didn’t know if he thought he was being funny by keeping the information to himself, but my impatience was apparent. “Tell me, Farris.

How can Ciaran die?”

He squeezed me a little, then went back to rubbing my back, that solemn look back on his face. “I cannot say. You must just trust me.”

For a moment, I wondered if our bond was such that I could force him to tell me. But the piece of my soul that now belonged in him didn’t give me control. On the contrary, it took some of my control away. Instead, I felt his need for secrecy and trust, the current desires of his heart, and it was I who felt beholden. My love for him would never force or coerce. It may have been passionate, but it was gentle, and generous.

I rested my head against his chest once more, wallowing in the magic that made him and feeling curious about the magic he now possessed. Questions floated to the surface about the Nymphs and the black Shaedes and the dragons. Could he have clearer, more first-hand accounts of everything that had happened in the past? I smiled at the realization that, through our coupling, Farris had managed to become the most powerful historian of our time. So much for a few wonders of the world; now Farris had access to all the secrets. It seemed just. It seemed like something the Balance would have made right.

“Do you and the other High Shaedes have a plan for getting to Ciaran?” he asked slowly .

Suspiciously, I turned up to look at him. “Not yet, why? Do you have something to suggest?”

“I do,” he said with a crooked smile.

“Of course you do,” I said as I rolled on top of him and kissed him on the lips.

### CHAPTER 24

The plan was dangerous, but it was simple. One of the most difficult parts, however, was walking into the throne room, explaining said plan to the other High Shaedes, and confessing to having cast the Renaissance Spell—again.

Farris and I arrived at the enormous door hand in hand, the invisible bond between us creating an unmistakable tension that even the green faeries standing guard could feel. Eyebrows raised, they let us pass through the entrance, clearly bewildered by the newest Shaede in the realm with the multicolored hair.

If there were any conversations going on among the High Shaedes standing around the center of the hall, they came abruptly to a halt when we walked in.

“What is that ?” blurted Leyanna, eyeing Farris up and down and moving aside so we could join their little circle.

“Farris?” Glory said, her arms folded. “Opal, did Sandrell’s letter teach you nothing? You are walking a thin line with the Balance. I cannot believe this! We all felt the power ripples last night, but I prayed it was just a random surge of magic.”

“I think he looks good,” said Leyanna, looking impish. “Muscles look good on a faerie. ”

Lennyx deflated a little. “Some of us have other redeeming qualities,” he offered. “We aren’t all soft underneath our robes.” That made Leyanna raise an eyebrow, mildly interested.

Dru stepped forward and produced her knives so quickly that they were nothing but a metallic blur. She was ten or so feet away from us across the circle but closed the gap in less than a tenth of a second. But in the even shorter amount of time that it took for her to take a sharp slice at Farris, he held up a palm and released a spell that blasted Dru backward fifty feet. A regular adversary might have landed hard, sprawled on their back on the floor, but Dru gracefully flipped backward in the air and landed in a defensive position.

“He’s harder to kill this way,” she said matter-of-factly, re-sheathing the knives. “I approve.”

Glory stepped up to Farris next, scowling. “Call a Whitherwisp,” she said sternly.

“That is not fair,” I interceded. “Whitherwisps are very rare, and if I recall during examinations, you were one of the only purple Shaedes that could even do it. He doesn’t even know what one is. You want to test his magic? Fine, but be reasonable.”

Farris circled a finger in the air, focused, his magic ascending. Glory’s eyes went wide, as it was a spell only another purple Shaede could see. He then sat down on the white stone of the throne room floor, cross-legged, eyes closed. The rest of us restlessly stood around, watching him impatiently.

Five or so minutes passed, and then came a rustle from above. Not one, or two, but seven beautiful cream-colored Whitherwisp birds, so skinny and elegant with their curled feathered tails and their golden beaks, came gliding into the room and settled themselves comfortably on Farris’s still body. Three made a cozy nest in his lap, while the others perched on his knee, shoulders, and head. He opened his eyes and stroked the few in his lap.

“How did you do that?” Glory asked resentfully. She summoned the bird on his head to her arm, and it happily came, chirping a whistle-like tune that the others echoed.

Farris's smile was radiant, but not boastful. "I may have promised them peanuts; they are a Whitherwisp's guilty pleasure." He moved his right hand like he was directing a symphony, and the Whitherwisps chattered excitedly before flying back up out of the open ceiling. "That's going to be a surprise for the kitchens." He laughed. Glory too chuckled a little despite herself.

"How does someone who didn't even know what a Whitherwisp was not only summon one but also know its favorite snack?" asked Lennyx, intrigued. He offered a hand to Farris, who took it and was pulled to his feet.

"He has the knowledge of the ancestors, of all the silver Shaedes that came before him," I explained.

"There was a silver Shaede long ago that kept Whitherwisps as pets. His journals held more about those funky little birds than any person would ever care to know." Farris was still the same relaxed and kind-spirited person he'd always been, but it was strange hearing him talk about the faerie realm like it was something he had always been a part of. I wasn't sure I would ever get used to that.

Everyone quieted as they came to terms with Farris's transformation and thankfully didn't ask for any details about how it came about. Leyanna, always willing to break a silence, spoke first. "So the Balance sent us a silver hybrid Shaede. Do any of us have any idea why?"

"Farris says he has knowledge of how to kill Ciaran," I blurted out. It was hard to believe the words even as I said them, and that same disbelief was reflected on the other High Shaedes' faces.

"Impossible," said Glory, out of habit. If she didn't know about something, it likely didn't exist. But after the Whitherwisps, she didn't sound quite as sure as her usual over-confident self.

“We have literally nothing else to put our hope in,” said Dru. “I at least want to hear what he has to say.” They all nodded, sadly in agreement of how desperate the situation had become.

Farris’s silver eyes glowed as he accessed secrets from the deep treasure trove that was now his mind. “We will enter the Shadowlands, destroy Ciaran’s army of undead, and kill the Dark Prince. ”

“Going to need more details than that,” said Leyanna, vocalizing what I was sure was on everyone else’s minds.

“Farris will not disclose how he will kill Ciaran but asks for our cooperation to destroy the zombies,” I said, knowing we were asking a lot. “They deserve a final rest, and as long as they are animated, they can be used to attack the realm.”

“I love the concept of this plan,” Dru said sincerely, “but how do we get into the Shadowlands without getting murdered? How do we know how many zombies are left? How do we know where they are or how to re-dead them in a realm where our magic doesn’t even work? And how can we possibly risk all our lives, and ultimately the lives of all the faeries in our realm, without knowing how Farris plans on ending our unkillable enemy?”

I was ready for the questions, but stacked like that, it made our plan sound fraught with impossibilities. “Amira was the only one at the Night Court privy to Ciaran’s plot to magically revive the dead corpses of humans and faeries that he had killed. He’s been doing it for centuries. He has thousands and thousands of bodies at his disposal, and they are all hidden in five glamoured tunnels around the castle grounds. If we can get Edmyn to let us into the Shadowlands, Amira can lead him to the cursed underground passageways. And then Edmyn can use his magic to seal them.”

“And how are you going to get Edmyn to agree to this? He already chose his brother



and went running back into hell after him. And then you went off and mated with this,” said Leyanna, gesturing to all of Farris. “No offense.” She forced a polite smile. “I’m just saying that he probably won’t be that eager to help us.”

As if in answer to her question, a shiny black beetle, the size of a lemon, came flitting into the throne room from the sky, carrying a small note. It hovered above my head, making clicking noises, until I reached up and took its burden. It zoomed away quickly, and I addressed the group. “Earlier, I had Farris send a message to Edmyn, asking him for help.” I had left out anything having to do with Farris and kept it urgent and direct—to the point. “This must be his response. ”

My hands shook as I unfolded the paper, less because of its contents and more because I knew it was something Edmyn had touched. I could feel the ghost of his touch on the paper, and it was incredibly difficult not to reimagine the feel of his fingers touching me. Could the others see it on my face? How painfully divided I had become? How badly I ached to have a foot in both realms? The wounds on my soul were forever, but I had made my choices with gladness. I had fallen in love with a human who I didn’t deserve and a traitor, so what did that make me now?

My clumsy attempt to open up the folded paper was successful. In hurried script with flourishes of the dramatic on certain letters, I read Edmyn’s message aloud to the anxious faces before me.

“There is no containing Ciaran. He has become a madman. To think I could confine him was lunacy in itself. I’m sorry I failed you. Open a portal soon; I will be waiting to give you safe passage. After he healed, he disappeared, and he is undoubtedly planning something horrific. Hurry if you dare.”

“Do we dare?” asked Leyanna, her lovely face piqued for chaos. “My vote is violence, even if it means having to watch Edmyn and Farris have all the fun.”

Dru rolled her eyes. “I say we go. We may not know what he is planning, but we’ve never had the opportunity to be on the offensive before. I always like offensive odds better. And I think I trust Farris.” She gave him a little nod and he bowed with respect.

Lennyx weighed in. “Peace is sometimes only found on the other side of war. If we can give the realm Ciaran’s true death, our actions will hold legitimacy. Let’s fucking roll,” he said, sharing a smile with Leyanna.

We all looked at Glory, who still looked almost painfully perplexed at the set of circumstances before her. Nothing about any of this added up in a way that made sense to her, and being stuck with options that held little certainty, zero logical reason, and high levels of fatal risk was her own personal version of hell. There was no reading or studying her way out of this one, but we couldn’t act without her consent. We were about to poke an already very angry bear, and the consequences would fall on us all.

She turned to me, her voice frustrated but strong. “I may not trust him,” she said, pointing at Farris, “but I have learned to trust you, Opal. Friendship is its own kind of magic, and it makes impossible situations bearable and fears assuaged. It turns loneliness into a totally different creature and brings laughter into dark places where misery usually reigns. I won’t follow you into this chaos, but I will enter it by your side.” She wrapped her arms around me, and I squeezed her tightly. I wanted her to feel that I, too, had needed her during our time at the Night Court. She had become a constant, a confidant—a friend. And now we were going back, together.

“I guess it’s time to get Amira,” I said.

“I’ll go,” said Farris. Lennyx offered to accompany him. Suddenly, it was just the four girls and a lot of heavy silence.

“I’ve missed you, my friend,” said Dru softly, taking my hand and walking me away from the others. “So, can you really feel everyone’s magic?”

I nodded. “Once I stopped comparing myself to everyone—to everything I wasn’t, I was able to finally see what I could be. And unlocking the Renaissance Spell helped, of course.”

“What does my shaede feel like?” she asked sheepishly. It was funny how we all really wanted to know our magic like a close friend, but in reality, most of us were ever just working toward taming a stranger.

I smiled brightly. “Your shaede is heavy. It feels protective, exhilarating, and electric—but restless. It enjoys a battle but longs for something on the other side of war.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know,” I said, squeezing her hand. “But I’m sure you will find it.”

She looked pleased enough with that. “Are you nervous to see Edmyn?” she asked, worry creeping across her face.

I shrugged as we stopped some ways out of earshot from anyone else. “Dru, I don’t know what I feel other than determination to get to Ciaran and finish this. Edmyn and I were never really going to be able to make it together anyway, since we are so different...” I trailed off, getting lost in the memory of his face.

“Different can be nice,” Dru said. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. He has a past. But we are all out here just hoping that someone someday might overlook our flaws and find us worthy of love, right? Different can change your life.”

She was right about that, for as much as Edmyn showed signs of a physical transformation, my life was forever changed because of him. “I’m not nervous,” I finally said. “Just concerned. He cannot get in the way of whatever Farris has planned. And I can’t be distracted by my feelings for him, not when so much is at stake.”

“What does Farris think?”

“Farris is optimistic. In all things. He is a comfort in that no matter how bad things get, although we both know they can get worse, he never thinks they actually will. It was his superpower even before he was hit with my spell. He knows what Edmyn and I had was unique and significant but must be fueled by knowing that what he and I have is special and significant in its own right. I don’t know, it’s kind of a mess, but if any of it saves the realm? Will it even matter how messed up it is?”

She wrapped her arms around me, her shaede giving off that protective buzz that I had become very well acquainted with over the years, and said, “I hope we live long enough to find out.”

### CHAPTER 25

A mira looked like she had seen a ghost. I might have had some concerns about seeing Edmyn again, but it was taking Amira everything she had to put one foot in front of another as she crossed the breadth of the throne room floor, inching her way back to Ciaran.

Even without speaking, I knew what this was costing her. Farris said that she hadn't hesitated to agree to help us locate the hidden tunnels. She was confident in their whereabouts, and if Edmyn could protect them, she expressed that they wouldn't be hard to find or difficult for him to destroy. It was Ciaran that had us all apprehensive. He was the loose cannon that we all knew was out there somewhere but hadn't a clue where he was aiming.

"Thank you for doing this," I said, taking her hands. "I know how hard this is."

"I thought you might," she said humorlessly. She nodded a little in Farris's direction. "Edmyn will not be pleased."

"Edmyn has bigger problems right now, I think." But as we approached the wall that so often bore our portals, doubt began whispering in my ear.

"Okay," said Dru, gathering us together. Everyone had changed into combat gear or enchanted leather armor, with the exception of Amira. She still looked elegant in her dress from the Night Court. "Now that we are all together, let's go over this one more time. We get in and move quickly. If we don't have Edmyn's protection, we come straight back through this portal." She nodded to the cluster of red and blue faeries

that were huddled by the wall. “Hold it open, unless there’s a threat to the realm. Do whatever you can to hold it open so we always have an exit in case something goes wrong.” They all pledged their maximum effort. She turned to address the wall of green warriors lined up behind us, the Shaede Court’s absolute best fighters. “This will not be an arena for battle magic, but a physical battle is almost a certainty. There are plenty of things that are killable in the Shadowlands, so stay close and be ready for anything.”

I moved to stand beside her, addressing everyone. “Amira will lead us to the tunnels, Edmyn will destroy them, and then we locate Ciaran. That is the best-case scenario, but anything less, and we all die. Are we ready?”

“Fuck yeah!” shouted Leyanna, jumping up and down amid all the somber faces. Only she could make me smile on the cusp of a suicide mission.

“Then open the portal,” Dru commanded.

A swirl of electric blue-and-purple light tails formed on the wall, quickly spinning into a blur that held so much power that it was forced to split itself and open into a shadowy portal. Edmyn was so close now that I could almost smell the kiss of citrus on his skin.

We crossed into the shadows and wanted to adjust our eyesight to the darkness, but there was no time. It was the throne room. I recognized it immediately despite the dim lighting. Edmyn was suddenly there, somehow paler than I remember him, looking like a handsome phantom of portent.

“I wish the Night Court could have entertained the High Shaedes under more palatable tidings, but there is no time to mourn the day. May I introduce Lord Vale and Lord Markis of the Night Court. You can trust them. They are among the few that have expressed their distrust and disgust for the way Ciaran has been handling things

of late. ”

Lord Vale was a very young-looking dark faerie, just barely sixteen or seventeen when he had been turned. He had the signature black hair that all the Dark Ones acquired once cursed, but his features all looked soft, like they would have favored the fair. Lord Markis was a more typical-looking dark lord, with a thick eyebrow and squared jaw. He oozed raw masculinity and muscle, which made me happy he was on our side. He looked like someone who could choke out a larger than average shadow beast with one hand.

“Thank you for allowing us passage,” said Dru.

I had been kind of lingering in the back of our group, but I knew it was time to face him. I grabbed Amira’s hand, who also looked like she’d be happy to remain hidden, and marched to the front of the group letting my adrenaline take control.

“Amira knows where Ciaran is building his army of undead,” I said boldly. “We need you to follow us to these tunnels and destroy them. Then we will deal with Ciaran.”

His eyes raked over me with sadness and longing. I didn’t know if he needed comfort, support, or just a release from it all, but I wanted to give it to him. Whatever he required, I wanted to provide it. But instead, we stood on shaky ground with an entire world between us and ached.

“Hello, Opal,” he said. Hearing Edmyn use my actual name was like snapping a shard of my already broken heart just to see if it would break down further—and it did.

“Prince Edmyn,” I pressed, playing the formal name game in turn. “Do we have your cooperation? There isn’t much time to spare.”

He cocked his head to the side as if he were considering something and scanned the

crowd of Shaedes he had just let in to his castle.

“I’m inclined to cooperate, High Shaede. But you mentioned ‘dealing’ with my brother? What, pray tell, does that entail?” Amira squeezed my hand as we both sensed Edmyn’s magic turn sharp like a knife. It was easy to forget how lethal he could be when I wanted to trust him so badly. His magic was searching for something, and it wasn’t being gentle about it.

Farris stepped up beside me, his silvery eyes almost glowing in the dark. “I have means to kill Prince Ciaran. If you lead me to him, this war will be over.”

It took Edmyn a minute to take in what Farris was trying to tell him, but then he burst out laughing with a harsh chortle that made the candlelight in the room waver. “A silver Shaede?!” he exclaimed. Lord Vale looked confused. “My stars, we haven’t seen one of those in ages!” He laughed, slapping his leg in jest. “This is clearly your work.” He gestured to me, and I felt my cheeks flush. “What are you going to do, Silver? Beat my brother to death with a proverb or maybe a really heavy encyclopedia?”

“You don’t have to be such an asshole,” I muttered. We didn’t have time for this.

“Do I not amuse you, Little Prism?” Edmyn pouted, a little bit of the gleam coming back to his eyes. “I was under the assumption I was created for your amusement and for that reason alone.” I didn’t dare look at Farris, who was trying his best to remain unmoved. But Edmyn’s words made my legs weak. I didn’t know if I was sharing his warmth through our bond or if I was just feeling the heat of my desire overtaking all the other functions in my body, but my leather armor started to feel like it was smothering me. There were just too many layers between us.

“Okay, we get it,” Leyanna said with exasperation, coming forward. “Your little love triangle isn’t a happy one right now. But now is not the time to hash it out. Are we



killing zombies today or not?”

Edmyn smiled and said, “You must be Leyanna.”

I stifled a laugh. This was not funny; this whole situation was dire. But I think the tension was getting to me. Edmyn turned to Farris and said, “You see?” He pointed to me. “I do amuse. I amuse quite well.”

Farris rolled his eyes, trying to avoid conflict but clearly unimpressed with Edmyn’s jesting. Edmyn left a playful smirk rest upon his lips and gestured for the group of us to follow him out of the throne room.

“Lord Vale, come with me. Markis, stay back and keep an eye on the castle in case Ciaran comes back. Take guards with you.” Markis turned on his heel and went back toward the throne room without a word. “I will help you,” Edmyn said as we trailed behind him, weaving down dark hallways I used to have memorized. Everything looked extra dark now and confounding, but it was easy to follow Edmyn by the sound of his low voice reverberating against the walls. “And I will even protect you if I can. But I can make no guarantees of safety. Ciaran’s got the shadow beasts all on the prowl. As far as I can tell, he has two lords with him and a human servant who calls herself Morticia.”

Farris snorted. “As in the Addams Family?”

“Is that some sort of ancient Shaede nobility you are going to bore us about?” Edmyn asked with exasperation. “I knew a silver Shaede once, and he was insufferable, always spouting off little factoids that had literally nothing to do with the task at hand. Let me guess, the House of Adams was the first faerie family to boil Leggen’s moss to cure Mushroom Toe.”

It was Farris’s turn to startle us with a laugh. “No. But sadly, I have been blessed with

the knowledge of who did.”

A welcome silence followed until we turned a corner, and I recognized the small gray door that would exit out to the twisted path that led down to the castle crops and gardens.

“All right, Amira,” called out Edmyn once we were outside. She shuffled forward and stared at his boots. “Don’t look too forlorn, my dear. I love him too, but his way will never sustain a life worth living. There will only be death and destruction.”

“I know,” she said as she accepted his embrace. The wind blew around us, and the smell of death hung in the air. “The farthest tunnel from here is on the far end of the swamp.”

“Okay, let’s start there and work our way back,” said Edmyn. He opened a portal, and we all crossed through.

Leyanna couldn’t hide her disgust with the swamp. Glory didn’t seem to be enjoying being in such close proximity to it either. The murky water bubbled and made gurgling noises as if it were a living thing. The ground that surrounded it was liquid mud and absorbed our every step with a squelch. Amira led us to a fallen log and told Edmyn that the entrance was right on the other side. Edmyn spelled the area to uncover the glamour, and almost instantly, an enormous, cavernous hole appeared. He held up his palm and searched for Ciaran with his magic. I sensed nothing living. He started a spell I had never seen before and chanted words in a language completely foreign to me. Glory leaned over to me and whispered, “It’s desecration magic.”

Farris leaned back and added, “The language is old Corynthian. I doubt the dragons even remember it.”

Glory glared at him.

The ground heaved under our feet and you could hear and feel the earth turn into itself underground. We watched in awe as the entrance to the tunnel filled up with the dusty soil of the region and in moments it was like the tunnel had never even existed.

“One down, four more to go,” Edmyn said brightly. “The dead are truly at rest now. I made sure of it.” It was weird to live your whole life thinking there was only one kind of dead only to learn later on that it could be a lot more complicated than that.

Amira was giving directions to the next tunnel when, out of the acrid swamp, burst a giant frog-like creature with snapping claws on its front feet and a pinching scorpion-like tail attached to its back. Once it made landfall, it scurried quickly over to us and darted at us viciously, testing the range of its pincer. I felt Edmyn’s magic lash out, but before the spell hit the shadow beast, Farris’s enormous sword slashed forward, beheading the revolting creature in one fell swoop.

Edmyn looked mildly impressed, as did Dru—as did we all. The warriors we had brought with us decided they would create a circle around us as we traveled, just in case we had any more unexpected shadow beast encounters. Luckily, the second and third tunnels were void of any unwanted visitors. At each location, we waited, anticipating Edmyn to tell us that Ciaran was inside. We braced ourselves to be overrun by the zombies. But everything was quiet and still. There were even murmurs of encouragement from our group to Edmyn, and small cheers when he turned more earth in on itself and laid the dead to rest. There was little time to mourn them, these dead fae and humans who were forced to sacrifice their lives for whatever sick torment Ciaran had imagined for them .

Amira was sad but resolute. Her heart had already broken when Ciaran left her at the Shaede Court, but if she had had any hope that there might be a chance to reconcile the situation, it faded quickly with each tunnel visited, for each tunnel was a reminder

of the pure evil to which she had bonded herself.

As we reached the fourth site, I noticed Edmyn had begun to look tired. He raked his hand through his hair, and when his palm went up to search the tunnel, I saw his muscles strain and his eyes try extra hard to focus. He remained as composed as possible, but turned to us with raised eyebrows.

“These bodies are animated. Ciaran isn’t down there, but they are all alive. There must be ten thousand, maybe more. He must have them corralled or spelled to stay underground until he needs them. I think the lords and human servants are down there too.”

“Can you still seal the tunnel?” I asked. We were all thinking the same thing. Ten thousand zombies would take a lot of magic to destroy, and it was magic we didn’t have.

“I can seal it, but they’re undead. They’ll just climb out of the earth again.” We were so close to accomplishing the first part of our mission. So close to destroying one of Ciaran’s largest weapons against us. We couldn’t fail now.

“Seal it,” said Farris, with a confidence that no one else possessed at the moment. “Seal the tunnel and let them dig themselves out. We portal quickly to the next location and pray we have enough time to seal that tunnel and take care of Ciaran before we are overrun by his progeny.”

“Everyone knows spells die with their casters,” said Glory, reluctantly agreeing with Farris. “I just hope you really know what you are doing.”

Edmyn also looked at Farris, perhaps for the first time really seeing him. “Though he doesn’t deserve it, will his death be honorable, Silver?”

Farris sauntered up to Edmyn, placing a firm hand on his shoulder. There were probably courtiers that had lived at the Night Court for over a thousand years who wouldn't dare touch a Dark Prince, but we all watched as Edmyn's shoulders relaxed, and I felt their magic intermingle and recognize the piece of my soul that they each possessed. Farris spoke with gentleness. "I can promise you it will be swift, and it will be fair."

Edmyn bowed low before Farris, turned toward the tunnel entrance, and began to chant.

### CHAPTER 26

We crossed the fifth portal into pandemonium.

Large winged hawks with long, scaled necks and mismatched feet like griffins, clawed at the sky above us. More of those frog monsters were hopping around the space frantically, their pincers looking to make contact with flesh. At least ten of the wolf-like shadow beasts, like the one that had attacked Farris in the alleyway, circled us immediately, their hungry growls loud enough to make the ground quake.

We had popped out on the hillside near where Edmyn and I ended up after the walk we took among his crops. The access to this tunnel was no longer glamoured, and out of it crawled the undead two at a time. There wasn't time to discuss any sort of strategy or plan—we drew our weapons and began to fight.

Dru and Farris, followed by the green warriors, charged forward at the wolf beasts, beating them back with swift strokes of sword and dagger. A flying beast swooped down, wailing its battle cry, trying to pick off Glory, but she spun around quickly at just the right moment and sliced off one of its back paws, causing warm blood to rain down on us. Lennyx and Leyanna had moved toward the zombies, hacking at them one by one. Limbs and heads started rolling down the hill as we ineptly attempted to overtake our enemies. Edmyn did his part by throwing a protective shield around us, but that was all the magic he had left to give. If he had been a living Shaede, he would have gone white by now, or worse. But whatever darkness held on to his life force had a death grip and made him able to keep eking out just enough magic to blanket us with some protection.

Amira, Lord Vale, and I were defending ourselves against three of the enormous toad-like shadow beasts, but it was so difficult to fight and move backward up a hill at the same time. The two years of combat training we all received as children were never going to be enough in a battle like this. While Glory was wielding her sword at the closest frog beast to us, its companion made a quick advance and lashed out with its stinger at me, only to find Edmyn's shield hovering over our bodies and no way to break it.

It was forty or so minutes of terror and exhaustion, and parrying and hacking, until we finally earned a reprieve from the shadow beasts. Their oozing carcasses lie in dark heaps scattered along the hill like giant, black, bleeding boulders. One hawk beast that managed to evade our blades decided to flee and could be heard screeching somewhere far off in the distance. Edmyn's face had become almost ashen with fatigue. At some point, I caught him staggering over to the body of a brutalized wolf beast lying dead nearby and saw him punch a hole in its abdomen, scoop out handfuls of blood and shiny entrails, and consume them from his own hands. Dark red blood ran from his mouth as his shields held and his magic continued to stretch to its limits, the whole scene becoming more and more macabre with every passing minute. All of us were elbow-deep in blood and viscera, destined to climb that hill for eternity. For every ten zombies we killed, ten more arrived, and we were never able to make any progress forward.

Then a light flashed from over the hill on the other side. We all recognized it at once for what it was. It even attracted the attention of the undead and sent them pivoting from their endless pursuit of us toward the light source with renewed enthusiasm.

"It's a portal!" I yelled, "Run!"

We clambered up the rest of the hill, our bodies aching, our lungs spent. The zombies were not even interested in us anymore; they had a new task. When we reached the precipice, we were looking down a gradual slope where a giant portal had opened,

showing a scene on the other side that I did not recognize, mountains against a violet sky. And there was Ciaran, looking possessed but in perfect health, encouraging his scourge to cross the threshold and wreak havoc elsewhere.

“Stop!” Edmyn bellowed. He whipped his magic at Ciaran’s doorway but could not force it closed. Ciaran looked up at us, lined up to watch him dispatch his horrors, laughing hysterically and blind to the evil that had overtaken him.

Amira dropped to her knees. “Please, Ciaran,” she pleaded, tears streaming down her blood splattered face. The sound of her voice calling to him echoed over the hills like a dirge, as if they weren’t separated by inches but by entire worlds. Even from a distance, I could see the love in his eyes for my sister, but for him, it wasn’t enough to leave his hate behind. Edmyn took a few steps down the hill when a different sound echoed through the bleak gray day. Was it thunder?

We all mechanically turned in the direction of the rumbling and saw a cloud of dust not nearly far enough away, approaching very quickly. It wasn’t weather—it was the sound of the thousands and thousands of undead from the fourth tunnel that had managed to free themselves from the dirt in which Edmyn had entombed them. They were now rushing toward us, extremely pissed off and with a taste for our flesh on their desiccating lips.

“That’s not good,” said Leyanna. She grabbed Lennyx by the collar of his armor and smashed her lips on his. “Just in case this is where we die,” she said, smiling. Poor Lennyx had no time to react. It would be mere minutes before they were upon us, and I wasn’t even sure Edmyn had enough magic to portal us away.

I looked at Farris, wondering if I had led him to his death. If perhaps I should steal one last kiss before we, too, were overrun. But his eyes weren’t afraid, and there was no sense of urgency to them. In fact, they were glowing again, and maybe a little sad. He turned from me and walked over to where Amira knelt, her head now touching the



ground before her, her body heaving with uncontrollable sobs .

Farris tenderly lifted her head and whispered something in her ear. She looked at him warmly, spoke something in return, and then turned to look at me, smiling through the tears that fell like rain. Then he snapped her neck, and her body went limp in his arms.

“NO!” I screamed and ran over to her, diving onto the ground. I collected as much of her ragdoll body as my muscles allowed into my lap and looked up at Farris, who stood there, empathy saturating every detail on his face.

Simultaneously, Edmyn was shouting Ciaran’s name as he went flying down to his brother. I turned to see Ciaran’s body fall to the ground in a heap. The portal disappeared as if it had never been, and the Shadowlands fell silent. The dead went dead again.

“Why?!” I shouted at Farris, my eyes blurry and burning with tears mixed with blood and dust. “How could you?”

The others were still watching above us, their faces a painful mix of shock, compassion, and elation.

“He’s dead!” exclaimed Edmyn, openly weeping over his brother’s corpse.

I was too tired to walk, so I crawled. I abandoned my sister’s cold body and started crawling to Edmyn. On my hands and knees, I grabbed handfuls of that itchy brown grass and pulled myself toward him with everything I had left. He saw me coming and gently laid Ciaran’s head on the ground and met me halfway. We knelt in an embrace that was laced with sorrow, love, and commiseration. There were no words. We had both lost this war.

Edmyn took my head in his hands and kissed me. His dark lashes, laden with tears, felt like extra kisses on my cheeks. There was a little movement in the earth, which caused us to break the kiss and look toward where Ciaran's body lay.

Everybody gasped as his body disintegrated into dust. Then, as if a funnel had opened up in the earth, the ground swirled and pulled his remains in deep, eventually settling into a smooth pile of fresh chalky soil with a tiny green sapling protruding boldly in its place.

Edmyn got up and pulled me to my feet. I followed him over to the tiny plant, and we gazed at it in silence for a few moments, his arm around my waist, steadying my tired legs. Even in the few moments we stood watching it, it looked like it had already grown half an inch.

"It's growing fast," I said, at a complete loss for meaningful words.

"Yes." Edmyn smirked sadly, an errant tear falling from his jaw. "Knowing Ciaran, he will grow like a weed and try his best to overcome this crop with his shade entirely."

I heard his bitterness and knew that healing took time. "I think this might be a good tree," I offered. "A healthy one that bears healing fruit or something."

"Or poison," he spat, turning away from the sapling and looking at me. "I'm sorry for everything," he said, suddenly impassioned. "For my brother, for your parents, for your sister, your realm. Everything."

"His sins are not yours, Edmyn."

"I should not love you as much as I do. It is not fair to either of us."

“Since when does the Night Court care about fairness?” I smiled sadly.

“Since now,” he answered, his tone serious. “Things will be different.”

“You cannot leave now, can you?” I asked, already knowing the answer. That mythical place on the other side of the tyrannical reign of his brother, the secret scenario I desired that I only shared with myself, was a world in which I looked out from the throne at the High Shaede Court and saw both Edmyn and Farris smiling up at me. It was a fantasy, but it was mine.

He bowed down to lay a gentle kiss on my forehead, but instead of confirming the truth, he said, “Tell me you love me, Little Prism.”

Was there anything that this man asked me that I wouldn’t do?

“I love you, Edmyn.”

“And I love you,” he said in a voice low and even, heavy with feeling. “I love you the way the moon loves the sun. And I will be in endless pursuit of you. Every morning you wake, although I might not be there, a part of you—the part that has always shone on me and given me purpose—will always be with me. Even if I fade into the darkness, I will shine again—and again, and again and again for you, my love.”

My tears began again. “We’re forever intertwined, you and I. ”

“I trust you will treat me kindly.” He kissed my hand, but he might as well have been kissing the most intimate parts of me. Our bond was so that he could make me feel what he wanted me to feel. And in that moment, as I looked at him, he was no longer a Dark Prince forced into the shadows by his brother, but a Dark King with a smile that promised all the dark, vicious, and gloriously wicked things I no longer feared.

Farris approached, and I was suddenly reminded that Edmyn and I had been mourning and kissing with a full audience.

“Ah, your silver pet,” Edmyn said, loud enough for Farris to hear.

“I know that it doesn’t change anything,” Farris began, seemingly unfazed by seeing us together, “but I am truly sorry. For both your losses.”

“Farris, how?” My anger had turned to awe. “How did you know their life forces were linked?”

He did not look like a man who had just won a war. There was no evidence of triumph on his face or in his voice when he spoke. “Amira had found two copies of Sandrell’s letters, but the ancient Shaedes had the entire correspondence. Sandrell suspected for years that the bond she had created with her Viking lover was so strong that if he got wounded in battle, she could feel his pain. But when he started to die of old age, that was when she really felt it. Her power weakened, and she died with him—happily, mind you.”

“Her letter made it sound like suicide,” I said. “And she thought the Balance was punishing her.”

“Not exactly,” said Farris. “The Balance wasn’t angry with her and other Nymphs for using that spell and creating special refinements. The Balance blesses any union that offers more good into the world. But the Balance couldn’t sever the bonds forged by the Nymphs, and they were dying. Sandrell’s letters are not the only account of Nymphs blessed with refinement magic, falling in love or transforming beings for spite, and then perishing right along with them. Faeries were dying—that was what upset the Balance. Eventually, the Nymphs died off, and the Balance concealed that type of magic to protect the rest of the species.”

“So if I die...” I started, but couldn’t say it .

“Then we all die,” said Farris. “All three of us.”

I glanced up at Amira’s tiny body folded over on the hill. “She knew, didn’t she?” I asked.

Farris nodded. “I told her what I was going to do before I took her life. I wanted her to know that her death would hold significant meaning. She thanked me, actually. She said she prayed often for Ciaran to be at peace.” Edmyn’s eyes welled up again. “Again, I am sorry it had to go this way.”

I left Edmyn’s side and jumped into Farris’s arms. I wished I could comfort him. He walked on scene and I turned him into a homicidal hero who had to fight beasts, kill family members, and watch me be in love with another man. The only thing I could offer him was part of my heart, and with everything he had been through, that didn’t seem nearly enough.

“I love you,” I whispered into his silver waves that were matted and stained with drying blood.

“And I you,” he echoed.

“I think I will bury Amira beside Ciaran, if that is all right with you,” asked Edmyn, interrupting our embrace. It was fitting, and so I agreed. By his side was where I was sure she would have wanted to remain. “Why don’t you both go back with Lord Vale? You all need access to your magic to heal. I will take care of Amira and this tunnel. I’ll also need to address my court. This will be a shock to everyone.”

Edmyn crossed over to Farris, and they grasped forearms in a way that made it more than a handshake. “Take care of our girl,” he said boldly.

Farris's silver eyes intensely bore into Edmyn's as he replied, "Like our lives depended on it." He took my hand and led me away as the hawk beast shrieked its lament far above in a sea of clouds and sunless sky.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:30 am*

It was impossible to share a mirror with Leyanna, who kept elbowing me in the shoulder as she combed and re-combed her fire-red hair. I gave up and flopped down in one of the high backed, oversized chairs that took up space in my enormous new High Shaede living quarters. Leyanna had her own rooms but insisted on getting ready with me and then proceeded to raid my closet and monopolize my combs and now my mirror.

“It’s a little bit weird, though, isn’t it?” she asked her own reflection as she rummaged through my vanity and started using my perfume. “Who would have thought... Maybe your parents won’t be the only wedded High Shaedes in faerie history after all.”

“Relax,” I grumbled. “It’s your first official outing together, and you’re not even going alone.”

“It may be our first outing, but we’ve been spending plenty of time together indoors .” She turned around, hoping to find me embarrassed, but if she only knew the intensity of which Farris and I approached the time we spent indoors and sometimes outdoors, on the roof, behind the scrolls in the library ...

“But I don’t know,” she continued, full of nervous energy. “There is just something about Lennyx. He calms me down, which sometimes I like and sometimes I don’t... but he is a great kisser. And at least I didn’t fuck him and accidentally turn him into an arugula plant, a hedge bird, or a—” I chuckled a pillow at her in an effort to get her to stop, but a part of me welcomed the teasing. It was easier to talk about it with humor than trying to pretend it didn’t happen at all.

I smiled watching her primp and fuss over her reflection, quite happy that her and Lennyx had found some common ground—that ground being that he was slightly obsessed with her and didn't mind being bossed around by her one bit. It was fun to watch him attempt to tame her, and after so much stress, danger, and loss, their romance was like a cool salve on a burn, and we were all in various stages of needing healing.

Besides Lennyx and Leyanna and their budding relationship, lots of things had changed at the Shaede Court since we had saved the realm from the Dark Prince. We all moved into our own rooms in the palace and had regular meetings to discuss what was going on in the Seam and answers to problems that actually had reasonable solutions.

Farris and Dru kept disappearing to practice a list of concentrated battle magic spells that he found during some of his extensive exploration of the Room of Records. He had spent nearly all of our High Shaede meeting times in there alone, roving over documents and living his best life. Otherwise, we spent our time together exploring the castle grounds. I even took him to Pellshaeven one weekend, where we spent two glorious afternoons dipping our feet in the pools and bathing in the rain.

In addition to her training sessions with Farris, Dru routinely left the palace on excursions to hunt down rare materials to enhance weapons at court. Although the realm had seen peace for all of our short lifetimes, the conflict with Ciaran opened everyone's eyes to just how quickly things could change. She was determined to make our palace as safe as it could be, but that included upping our offenses. And when she wasn't dealing with the possible horrors of our future, she was spending a lot of time with her mother. When High Shaedes die, whether by choice or by force, the families pick a tree to bury them under, and that tree watches over them till the end of days. If a tree is cut down, its neighbor takes up its pledge. It is why some say the Corewood Forest has such a generous canopy and is so in tune with what the palace and faeries need, they're roots are sewn together with the best of us, and Dru



and her mother spent many hours sitting together and taking comfort in the shade of Brilan's tree.

Glory was still coming to terms with somehow living up to the expectations of all her parents had wanted her to be, but also becoming her own person—one who needed hobbies and friends and more independence. She still spent more time in the Room of Records than even Farris but had randomly taken up painting her favorite animals and creatures the way she saw them. They were sights to behold, actually, and I smiled every time I passed one of her bright and cheery paintings on display in the hallway that connected our rooms. When Dru, Leyanna, and I wanted to get together for some girl time, we started inviting her to come along, and just last week she made it through an entire conversation without correcting someone or mentioning her parents. It almost felt like we had always been together; how could we not have been friends? Everything started to have an air of normalcy about it, an ease and contentedness.

There was a knock at the door, and Leyanna spastically combed through her hair one, two, three more times. She was wearing a gauzy red dress that framed her ample cleavage and left little to the imagination of her undergarments. It was a bit much for a picnic at dusklight, but I wasn't going to say anything; otherwise, we'd never make it out of there. Glory had told us about a spring well in the Corewood where she had enchanted all the fish with starlight. It sounded dreamlike, and we were eager to go check it out.

I opened the door to Lennyx, who seemed to be stuck in permanent surprise that Leyanna was happy to see him. He complimented her, and she glowed. I stuck my head out, searching the hallways for Farris.

"Opal, he might live right next to me, but I am not his keeper," Lennyx chided playfully and leaned in to kiss his girl. In an effort to make him feel more at home, and maybe even as a gesture of gratitude for all he did for the realm, the High Shadies all agreed Farris should get his own set of rooms at the palace, even if he

spent every night in my bed.

I could feel him before I could see him. My magic relished in the fact that he was nearing, and suddenly he was coming through the door looking shimmery and perfect and equally happy to see me.

“Are you ready?” Farris asked, his hand in his pocket. He had taken to wearing loose fitting linen pants and gossamer tunics in gray-and-white tones, unless he was dressed to fight Dru. But it didn’t matter what he wore. He was always attracting attention everywhere we went. Every time I introduced him to someone at court, never mind that he saved the realm from certain doom, people stared at him like some kind of mystical object and then looked at me like something to be feared. I was so far from caring what anyone thought anymore. I knew what we had accomplished, I knew what we had sacrificed, and I knew that we were doing the Balance’s work and serving the realm to the best of our abilities. There was freedom in confidence, and Edmyn and Farris had helped me find mine.

We headed to the kitchens to collect what was needed for our picnic and then took the main entrance out of the palace to portal deep in the Corewood. For good measure, we had agreed to keep the palace defenses up, which meant portaling was still disabled in and around the grounds. The moon was not yet up, so the Corewood was framed in the dusty pinks, purples, and oranges of another perfect sunset.

Farris and I were walking a few paces behind the new couple, holding hands and trying to spot the glowing lizards and other wildlife, when a furry black bat swooped down above our heads, its wings flapping frantically, trying to hover. In its tiny claws was an envelope, which it happily released into my hand and then flew away.

“What is that?” asked Lennyx, perhaps worried that something was going to interrupt his special night. But we were all tense—experiencing severe trauma did that to you. We had all found a rhythm in daily life, but was there ever true relaxation when you

had seen the kind of evil that was out there?

I turned the envelope over in my hand and noticed its seal was very clearly the image of a Moonflower set in black wax. We hadn't heard from the Night Court since we had left it, but there wasn't a day that had passed that Edmyn and the empty throne beside him didn't weave their way into my thoughts.

I broke the seal and read its contents aloud, hoping my voice didn't betray my emotions.

"Dear Shaedes of the High Seat, the Shadowlands have found peace during this long month, healing from Ciaran's treacheries and making other changes to ensure a more lasting and intimate relationship with the other courts of the realm. Might I test our new friendship soon and accept at long last the unspoken invitation that was given to me on the night we warred with the dead?" Then silently, I read the part addressed only to me. "And a note to Opaline—the fruit from Ciaran's tree is sweet indeed. I shall bring you some, Little Prism. I look forward to it gracing your lips." I finished the final line out loud. "Your servant, the Moon King."

My throat was suddenly dry, and my heart quickened. His words brought heat to my face and to other, more intimate places. Craving Edmyn had become like breathing oxygen—it was involuntary and vital to my survival.

"Well, I guess we aren't going to be able to slither out of that deal," said Leyanna. "'Unspoken invitation.' He'd better not end up being more trouble than his brother. But I guess we pretty much all became allies on that hillside, so entertain the Moon King we must."

"Without him, we would have never made it through the Shadowlands," said Lennyx. "We need to be better than the High Shaedes that came before us; we owe him a chance."

Leyanna pouted, but ultimately conceded by wrapping her arms around him and kissing him passionately.

I held the letter to my chest like it was a forbidden treasure as we continued walking to the portal spot. Farris was quiet but untroubled.

“You know,” I said quietly. “It just dawned on me that you could have killed Amira at any time. Why not do it here at the palace and save us all from the danger of the Shadowlands?”

“It would have been more expedient,” he admitted, “but she deserved to see him one last time. Being separated from him was torture to her soul. No one deserves to live in that state, or die in it, for that matter.” I paused, really thinking about that for a moment. He seemed to understand the bond and the Renaissance Spell more than the rest of us, but the compassion he exercised toward Amira must have come from his humanity. It was a piece of him that no spell could erase.

“My soul is affected by being separated from Edmyn, but I am not tortured—not like Amira was. I miss him terribly, and the bond makes my soul ache, but I can bear it,” I explained. “Why do you think that is?”

He grabbed my hand and looked at me from the corner of his eye wearing his crooked smile and said, “Because you have me.”

Up ahead, Lennyx made a portal spin to life. The giant swirl of light cast electric shadows on the trees and caused wildlife to scatter. I clung to Farris as we crossed the portal, whose silver eyes still promised the playful, reckless, carefree things that only a human could. If he could be content with the fact that I existed with a foot in two different worlds, I could enter the heart of the Corewood and enjoy this night.

### BONUS CONTENT

#### EDMYN'S CHAPTER 19

I had seen the evil that was out there, and found it wanting.

Shit. I did not need lines from Draku's overly-depressing diary tormenting my mind right now. What I needed was sleep—only that would undoubtedly elude me right alongside whatever was muting the effects of this toxic spell I'd spent a century concocting to use against my brother.

But what happens, Edmyn, if your plan fails?

Fuck me. It wouldn't do to mull over Opal's words either. That would do nothing but send a strange mixture of anxiety and exhilaration tearing through me. I felt like a man possessed. Only any memory of my Little Prism—any errant thought of her soft skin brushing mine, any memory of her curious eyes locking onto my face with interest, any vision of her strange iridescent shaede tucked sweetly into my bed — well, these were things I had begun to plead incessantly to the Balance never to exorcise from my mind.

I spat on the berries that I had tormented into a state of exquisite lethality and put the glamour back in place. She'd been right to doubt me. Of course she should never trust a word out of my mouth and should find zero solace in my assurances that I, in any way, could protect her from the blind hatred and limitless ambition of my brother. Just because I meant it and my intention was pure didn't make it true. I spoke dark words and invited Death to a partnership on many an occasion. The monster I'd

become was no where near the hero she deserved, but the selfish beast inside still devoured her trust like a sumptuous feast that I'd do anything to taste again. Her goodness was the closest I'd been to feeling sunshine on my face in one thousand years, and I was prepared to torture the only family I had left in this world to see that her light was never in danger of dimming.

Turning to head back up the winding path to the castle, I searched the sky for the moon. It was up there. Somewhere. Whatever ghost of my yellow shaede that still remained, stirred inside and continually messed with my internal rhythms. My eyes were forever forced to witness life with a gray haze—the only gloom available in the dark and dreary Shadowlands—but I was still somehow aware of the passing of time. I could sense the Earth's constant rotation. I could feel the pull of one minute to the next and the relentless cycle of light giving way to the dark. After which, I could feel the Night breaking away to allow the day to shine once more, even if I couldn't see it.

Ciaran didn't see it—the bigger picture. The only world he would see was the one he created and now revolved around him. But he was actually quite small. He was no star. And long ago I wondered what exactly it would take to bring down his tiny universe.

I wasn't that young when my parents died, but time had made a fool out of me. Was I ever anything more than I am now? Ciaran was my caretaker. He was the one who was supposed to instill in me the qualities I'd need to survive this life. In a court where young Naturals were to be seen and not heard unless their shaede developed, he was all that I had. Unfortunately, the only tools he seemed to possess were ones to build walls, not relationships. The only skills he wanted to impart to his little brother were ones rooted in bitterness and not-so-quiet hate. It was only until I found myself away from him on conversancy that I experienced anything different. And now those memories faded just as dark as the memories of our parents, and I wondered if my desire to rid our lands of his tyranny had less to do with a hope for peace throughout the Seam, and more to do with the hate and revenge that he had so adeptly instructed that I learn.

My sleeves billowed in a stagnant breeze that smelled like damp earth and dung. My most recent half-hearted attempts to assist Ciaran with wrangling the shadow beasts had earned me another soiled set of garments and the guarantee of a soak in a hot bath. My left sleeve was torn and my pants were ruined. There was little that could have soured my mood further in the wake of being forced to spend these last few days away from Opal with little to show for it, but ruining another pair of pants had turned me from sullen to sulky.

I was beyond redemption by the time I threw my tired limbs into the bath. I allowed the hot water to scald my senses clean from the self-loathing and the morbid reminiscing about my past. There was no room for any of it. Not when something so perfect and so fearless was currently inhabiting my living spaces. Not when her very existence fueled a sense of hope to thrum in my still heart. I had not been a man of faith for many centuries, but something about her magic mingled with mine in a way that was every bit unnatural as it was pre-ordained.

I nestled into the corner of the rough rectangular pool and stretched my arms wide. Resting my head against the cool edge of the stone floor, I closed my eyes and dreamed of her.

From the moment I first spotted her in the throne room of the Shaede Palace, it was as if my eyes had found their true purpose in life. If they were not meant to gaze on such beauty, if their truest function was not to memorize every expression that crossed her face and every curve of her body, then I didn't need or want them. I drank her in, greedily. And when it became apparent that I had also attracted her attention—was there anything that could have stood between us? Her loyalty to her people, her bravery in the face of a tirade of horrors that Ciaran would attempt to shower down upon her—it was almost as if she welcomed it. Or perhaps... she felt as though she deserved it.

Her eyes had been sad long before Ciaran spoke his evil plans into existence. Something deep inside threatened her peace, something that had little to do with the

war that was looming before her. And damn if I didn't want to save her from it. Damn me harder for thinking I had the right to.

I sighed deeply and spread my legs beneath the steaming waters as my cock hardened despite myself. Damn me most because of what I wouldn't do to make her truly mine.

Henrick had always been and always would be an easy target for my anger. Constantly inserting himself between me and my brother was dangerous; he was a favorite only because of how imbecilic his true nature was in blindly following any of Ciaran's orders no matter their flavor. Inserting himself in between me and Opal would be a mistake on an atomic level. As in, if he or any other thought to touch her in a way she did not desire, I'd not hesitate to force him to dig himself his own grave with his own fucking teeth. Then I'd personally scorch the earth that entombed him daily, to assure that his putrid and vile remains stayed nothing but ash trying to meld itself back together, only to burn again.

Perhaps I had spent too much time ruminating on this. Perhaps not. It was easier to fuel an already passionate dislike than to focus on the ever-growing feeling that Opal meant so much more to me than she would ever know.

Seeing her in the throne room this evening, experiencing the concern that searched my face for answers I just didn't have, aching to embrace or console in a way I just couldn't comprehend...I did not recognize this feeling of tenderness that was growing inside me. It felt parasitic in nature yet held the promise of a euphoria if I would just give in. Ciaran may have had a certain degree of power over us all, but giving in to whatever fondness plagued me now seemed thoroughly unwise given that I had planned this overthrow for an unfathomable amount of time.

I submerged quickly, letting the acidic smell of lemons to saturate every inch of my aching body.

It wasn't going to work. Somehow, no matter how carefully I had orchestrated every



detail of my plan, no matter how much my limping faith whispered that my path was the righteous one, no matter how powerful my magic had become over the years, my brother now slept peacefully beside Amira, rejuvenating in mind, body and magic, and there was nothing I could do to slow down time. In mere hours, he would see that I defied him—or at the very least, he would seek to dispose of Opal for all that she didn't bring to his table. Those berries would never see the light of day, and all my work will have been for nothing.

I'd have to fight him.

I'd have to spend an eternity fighting him. But as I reemerged from the water and ran a tense hand through my tangled hair, fatigue set in fast and hard, and I tried to imagine a world where I had enough energy and magic to battle him daily. To die and rise again just to keep his wickedness occupied, to absorb the full focus of his hate and fury. I would accept this life-sentence if it was what it took to keep Opal safe. And perhaps this was the life-sentence I deserved.

I pushed myself up and out of the bath using magic to dry my body and hair instantaneously, too tired to put on clothes or bother with a towel. I donned a satin black robe and tied it around my waste, leaving all my soiled clothes behind for servants who would find them in the morning.

Being lost in eternal night did make for some strange castle behavior, but my walk to my chambers was silent and undisturbed. Although dark lords and ladies were known to be social on and off throughout all hours of the day and night, I didn't encounter a single dark faerie or human servant as my bare feet padded along the carpet that rolled a pathway to my bedroom door.

The door opened with a tiny creak that one would have thought was a lion's roar with the way that Opal shot up in my bed. Surprise was clearly reflected on both our faces as I made my way into the warm, fire-lit room. Her hair and skin shimmered and played with every dancing shadow, picking up the hint of a myriad of colors that left

me practically spellbound. Her friend, the purple Shaede, snored quietly beside her.

I resisted the urge to stare and stalked over to the chaise lounge, falling into the plush cushion and trying to stifle an involuntary sigh. Ciaran was not the only one whose body begged for rest. I could feel her watching me from the shadows, though now, at this distance, and with the fire waning, it was almost impossible to make out the features of her face.

“What are you still doing up?” I asked. Clearly the dream realm evaded her. Ciaran’s abrupt return had unnerved us all and I’m sure sleep felt more like a luxury than a necessity at this point.

“I couldn’t sleep.” Her body shifted in the darkness. “Where have you been these past few days?”

A better man would have ignored the worry in her voice. I should have dissuaded her from feeling anything for a dark, murderous soul like mine. But instead, I did no such thing.

“Most of the time I was out in the Shadowlands, wandering around and being of no help to Ciaran. But the other part of the time I was busy tending to those damned berries. They are not ready. They need at least another day, maybe two.” Bitterness tore through me. I failed her and she deserved to know it.

“And Ciaran is ready to act now, isn’t he?” Of course her next cause for concern would fall on her people. She wasn’t even going to bother entertaining what this would mean for her own well-being. How the probability of her eminent death was as sure and solid as the wall of clouds that blocked the dark ones from morning light.

“Ciaran needed some time to recuperate both physically and magically after his prolonged struggles with the shadow beasts, but he is adamant about me walking in the sun tomorrow morning. Before breakfast, before anything else.” I labored hard to

keep the fury of emotions out of my voice but soon failed that too. “I had always thought I would get a chance to slip him the berries before that happened, but there is no way of accomplishing that now. Not without setting off his hyper sense of paranoia, and then there will be no way of getting close to him. He is already certain someone is to blame for the shadow beast fiasco. That meeting with the dark lords earlier was less of a meeting and more of an interrogation tribunal.” I tore at the curls that hung heavy across my forehead like a weighty crown of a hundred broken promises. Then, remembering our heated exchange from the other day where she challenged my abilities and almost made me seduce her against my bedroom wall, I admitted the painful truth into the night like a dying man’s last prayer, “This is the first time I feel as if perhaps I am not an equal match for my brother. Fate favors him. That spell failed sooner than I anticipated. He will see tomorrow morning that I have defied him, and he will take up his cause against the Shaedes with betrayal sowing fresh rage in his heart, and I will not be able to stop him.”

I closed my eyes for lack of a better thing to do. I couldn’t touch her—that would be blasphemy. I couldn’t comfort her—I didn’t know how. I couldn’t apologize—no words existed that could articulate the sentiment. But I couldn’t lie to her either—she deserved so much more than that. She’d earned the truth. And now the coward in me shielded myself from what I could only imagine would be despair seeping into every feature of her lovely face.

Minutes of supreme silence passed between us. For the first time in centuries I prayed to the Balance for forgiveness. I prayed for Opal’s salvation, for the safety of her people, and for a path through this mess that my own flesh and blood had made. I prayed until I was certain I was sleeping, because only in my darkest and most delicious dreams would my Little Prism climb onto my lap and gaze down on me with a look that would strip any man down to nothing.

My hand, which would never be able to resist touching her when she was this near, clung to the back of her neck and drew her closer.

“What is this, Little Prism?” I asked. Was the ragged breath that managed to string together those five words my voice? I could barely hear it against the deafening pulse of her frantic heartbeat. A lifetime of perfectly manicured expressions and movements threatened to shatter in an instant. The feel of her warm body pressed against mine was enough to startle me into silence—and yet, the part of me that instinctually was driven toward the dangerous would not yield. “Do not start fires you cannot tame.”

“You once said that I belonged to you,” she whispered, emboldened by a courage I would forever be in awe of. “Prove it.”

A fucking lightning bolt jolted through me. If this was a dream, I never wanted to wake up. And if it was real and somehow I managed to hold the entire world in my cursed hands, I was certain this woman could not truly know what she was starting and with whom.

I could break her. I could tarnish her spirit. If we did this, if I gave in to the feelings I’d been trying to ignore, I would be taking something from her that I could never give back, and it might break us both in the end.

But the way her legs spread for me, the way she perched herself directly over my groin and caused every hardened inch of me to twitch for her, and her expression locked on mine with an intensity that practically begged for me to give in. Perhaps just a taste of the pinkish shade of her lips, and I might be able to think straight once more.

I guided her mouth toward mine, savoring the way her breath ghosted my face. Even just being this close to her felt like some kind of gift. Why me? I silently cursed the Balance. Why would something so pure and fragile be put in my path, a path that could only lead to devastation?

Our lips met with a cataclysmic surge, crippling my defenses and destroying all my

disparaging inner voices. The only thing I heard was her gasp at my touch. The only thing I felt was her fingers curling around my hair. The only thing I saw when I roved my hands down her back and then upward to caress her perfect breasts through her thin nightgown was desire. Two gray eyes that changed in the light, fluttering their lashes in ecstasy, and promising to give me the world.

I didn't deserve it.

"Do you know what you are doing?" I asked with great restraint. She shifted slightly and my rigid cock threatened release at the mere thought of kissing her again. "You do not need to be a hero. I will do my best to protect you, no matter the cost." Weak promises. She was about to give me the ability to walk in the daylight, and I was about to destroy her.

However, something resolute set upon on her face. I noticed that it had been a long time since I'd seen the sadness in her eyes. It had long since been replaced with something harder, something darker, and although it pained me to admit that the Shadowlands had changed her, I quite adored her for it .

"I'm no hero, Edmyn. I'm just yours. I've come to know you, and now I can't imagine a world without you."

My body reacted violently to her words, and I almost couldn't take it anymore. The Balance's own special steward of powerful forgotten magic, straddling my hips, and speaking words into existence that I had never heard before, directed at me. I ran a hand through her hair as if a part of me still couldn't believe this was real. I just needed to touch her. There was so much more to learn about this woman and so many more reasons why none of this made sense. Cursed creatures like me didn't belong in the same realm as an angel like her—let alone the same room. And yet, all the magic in the room felt tangible all of a sudden. As if it were nothing but raw possibility in the air. As if it were second chances and hopes and dreams somehow solidified. As if all we had to do was give in and delight in the magic, then everything we touched

could be ours.

No. Was I becoming drunk on her magic? I forced the words out of my mouth despite my yearning to pleasure this woman within an inch of what she could stand. “You think you know me now, but you didn’t know me then. And then was a very, very long time ago.”

All I could do was try to scare her away, to try to save her from her own misguided cravings. But the way her lips parted in a perfect O shape paired with her wetness slickening my robe and causing my cock to ache—I feared my efforts might be in vain.

I brushed my sharpest nail across her bottom lip and felt her grow wetter still. It struck me then, that although she had been the one to start this, I still had the opportunity to seduce her properly. I might not be the hero she deserved, but if this was actually happening and she saw the real me and did not shrink away, I might be able to at least become the monster she desired.

“There is more to the darkness than cursed magic and shadow beasts.” I breathed, taking my finger from her lip and running it along my own. I purposefully nicked the tip on one of my jagged fangs, causing the scent of my blood to fill the room. There was no turning back now. I painted her jawline with my blood and smeared it down the side of her neck in a rough stroke before leaning in to lick it. My tongue tasted fire, my blood its own special brand of poison, causing my body to tremor in pain but also in a heightened arousal. “The dark ones have managed to find the thinnest line between pleasure and pain. But I don’t want to scare you, Little Prism. You, whom I have already silently pledged a thousand of my lifetimes to protect. You, who deserve so much more than making love to a shadow.”

That might have been too much truth. I was a phantom heartbeat away from saying ‘I love you,’ and that might have scared her away more than my blood play ever could.

How absurd. It was folly for me to think the words, let alone be on the verge of saying them aloud. More foolish still, to entertain the hope of reciprocation.

But then she did the unthinkable. I watched with ravenous eyes as she clasped my finger in her delicate hand and slowly brought the tip to her lips. I involuntarily shuddered with pleasure as she licked the blood off the tip in one smooth glide of her tongue. I reveled in the beauty of it all. The ecstasy of it all. And I allowed myself one selfish moment to take in the steely look of determination on her face as my blood made its scorching pass down her pretty little throat. What I wouldn't do to shove more of me down that throat and give her a real taste of all I had to offer.

But ingesting my cursed blood was an egregious act, one that could damn her to my same fate had someone ended her life in that moment. With barely more than a drop in her system, I waved its lingering effects away with my magic, soothing the burn and absolutely mystified by this opalescent creature I had somehow managed to ensnare. She gifted too much, and my heart—though calcified over years due to neglect and abuse—turned fragile once more and threatened to break. I was not worthy of this sacrifice. My blood on her lips was an offering I couldn't accept. So I tightened the grip I kept firmly on the back of her neck, fisting some of that gorgeous hair, and yanked—hard. She gasped, a perfect reaction that sent a wave of enthrallment straight to my suffering cock.

“I am not afraid of you,” she said. And I believed her. I don't know if I believed her only because I wanted to, or because the way she continued to press herself against me despite the oppressive hold I had on her suggested anything but fear.

Could this be real?

I let go only to gaze upon the reality before me. Fuck if this didn't turn out to be some sort of trick played on us by the Balance—but I couldn't be sure, and I didn't care. I broke out in a smile, shaking my head a little in awe of all she had endured. Bewildered by all that she stood to lose and yet—she was choosing me. She was

choosing us. And suddenly everything that seemed wrong about this situation didn't matter. Opal gazed upon my face in what was left of the candlelight, and she saw me. Not the piteous cursed monster of the Night Court and not Ciaran's quiet shadow—just me .

I waved the curtains closed that hung heavy around my dressing area with a flick of my wrist and a quick and somewhat anxious surge of magic. There was just enough light left to make out her bemused expression; she was not backing down.

“What about Glory?” she asked.

I smiled wide and answered, “Sleep spell.” And then was promptly rewarded by the vision of her drawing her nightdress up over her head and casting it to the ground.

There was little restraint left in me once she revealed the perfection of her naked body to me and began untying my robe. She ran her hands across my bare chest, clearly savoring the feel of my skin beneath her fingers, and as I watched her with adoration, I almost forgot that it was I who wanted to be doing the seducing.

A fair fight didn't exist in the Shadowlands and without her magic, she was easy prey. I quickly outmaneuvered her with my magic, exchanging places with her in one aggressive motion. She now lay with her back flat on the cushion. I knelt on the other end, kneeling her legs apart and wedging myself closer to her. The look of surprise on her face was all the encouragement I needed. I disrobed and allowed her hungry eyes to feast on all that was to be her undoing.

Stars, I could have gazed at her watching me for an eternity. Her expression filled me with value where only moments before there was none. And as the beginnings of a spell danced around us—an ancient and mischievous magic that knew no limits—I wondered if the feeling coursing through me, wanting to claim this woman as my own, was what it felt like to be alive.



I leaned forward, steadying myself against the chaise as I feathered her body with kisses. Tasting her was everything I had always hoped it would be, but it was clear almost immediately that my mouth roving over hers, dragging down the side of her neck and burying into her chest, would never be enough. The erratic sounds of her breathing paired with her gentle moans of pleasure would never be enough. I wanted to make her scream my name.

I forced her wrists together and spelled them to remain high above her head. I wanted uninhibited access to every inch of her skin that was calling me to worship. If her magic had ever been trapped inside a cage, it had long since been liberated, if only for the sole purpose to bring me to my knees. And I was more than willing to comply.

I had seen the way she eyed my hands on more than one occasion. There was nothing I could do to appease their claw-like appearance even if I had wanted to—and I didn't want to. A certain amount of menace is needed to keep these other dark fae in line, and I had had to wield these hands against others on more than one occasion. But now, as she trembled before me for all the right reasons, I relished the opportunity to show her just how versatile these hands could be. I traced the line of her collarbone and moved southward, drawing a slow, tantalizing path down her chest all the way to her navel. I played with the idea of going farther but didn't want this to be over too soon. We certainly didn't have forever, but I wanted to make it feel like we did. And the way her body reacted to every inch my nails came into contact with, did nothing but make my need greater and my desire to prolong this moment that much more intense.

Opal, however, was becoming frustrated in the most delightful way. Watching her struggle against my gentle spell work brought me too much enjoyment, and desire boiled like magma in my veins. She brought her legs up and wrapped them around my waist, somehow freeing her hands and grasping for me to close the rest of the distance between us .

I smiled at my greedy little Shaede, knowing full well that she could handle so much

more. “You are not ready yet, Little Prism. Do not invite a devil in without getting something in return.”

Gently unhooking her limbs from around me, I watched her make a move as though she was about to sit up, but my unholy work had only just begun. My magic slammed her back against the cushion, and I maneuvered myself to the floor, wrenching her body closer to me by a not-so-gentle grip on her hips. She submitted so beautifully, and it was all I ever wanted—to forge the type of bond that no other earthly force could touch. She was mine, and I was going to make her believe it, just as she had ordained it.

I started with kisses that ran up her thigh line and nuzzled against delicate parts of her flesh that I wanted to believe now belonged solely to me. I made note of two delicately designed tattoos positioned so high on her inner leg that it felt like finding secret treasure. I wondered what else I would discover as I strove to explore all of her, but every inch I travelled felt like I was getting closer and closer to home.

I spread her legs further still and enthusiastically set to finish what I started. Massaging her legs and pinning her wide, I worked her most intimate places with a tongue that was more weapon than tool. Stroking and adoring in a possessive way that did nothing but augment the tension in both our bodies. Several times she whispered my name while her body quaked with delayed pleasure and her heavy pants said all the things her mouth could not. I took her to the edge of all that she craved from me, only to pause, and then start again. Torture seemed too harsh a word and her release was imminent, but I received too much personal satisfaction in watching her writhe for me. So I fucked her with my mouth until she begged.

“I can’t,” she said. Her hands flew to my head and fought for some semblance of control. “Please.”

And there it was.

Hearing her whimper her breathy plea into the night, I decided, would forever be my favorite hymn. And I was all too willing to give in. I employed magic to reposition her in a way that made it easier to enjoy her. With effort, I tried to suppress my eagerness, delivering the slightest of smiles as I came to kneel before her on the bench of the chaise. I reached for one of her hands and pressed her palm against my rigid cock.

“Is this what you want?” I threatened to spasm by her touch alone.

“Yes,” she answered. And I closed my eyes for a moment to revel at the thought of being chosen. To appreciate this generous act and the courage it took for both of us to ignore all that would threaten anything we’d build and anyone that would stand in our way. Fuck them. I would bind myself to Opal’s light for any price it cost me, for this feeling she inspired inside me was worth trading a thousand lifetimes for a thousand deaths.

I used the last bit of self-control I had left to enter her slowly. Her face was captivatingly serene as I watched her take every inch of me with bated breath. I gripped the arm of the chaise for leverage and ignored the threat of intense and heavy magic swirling around us as I thrust into her as deep as her hips would allow. The sensation of us together, like this, brought an awareness of vibrancy to everything in the room. It might have been all candlelight and darkness and shadows, but even the hues of the fire balancing on a wick seemed amplified—vivid. Bright.

I entered her again and again, rewarded by the terror her nails caused all over my back. It was only fair that she tore me apart for all the sweet cruelty I’d delved out in turn. Her growing wetness urged me on, along with the way she gripped my forearms like she was trying to possess me. Her own hips started rolling in a way that told me she was close, and thank the stars she was, because I was about to fall over the edge myself. I heard my sharp breaths echo hers and became very aware of every muscle in my body screaming its fatigue. But I could not stop—would not stop—until I felt my Little Prism shatter with me inside her.

My name became an invocation. Edmyn. Edmyn. Like some kind of sacred rite. And then I felt her spasm around me, a quiet implosion that brought me with her in the most powerful way. It was as if my pleasure was tied to hers; she yanked it from me with brutal and beautiful force. Her arms wrapped around my core and held me tightly while the ground shook and the gloomy haze was lifted from my eyes. When I all but collapsed on her chest with my eyes closed, still nestled between her legs, somehow I knew I had been refined.

Something inside had shifted, and something broken had been mended.

Her fingers twirling bits of my hair brought me back to the moment, and I opened my eyes to see a beautiful halo of light encircling our bodies, a magical energy connecting us through a bond so powerful that it could actually be seen with the naked eye.

“How do you feel, my prince?” she asked. The happiness in her voice warmed ever part of me.

Words failed me. Magic moved me. Love changed me.

I forced my battered body to comply as I moved to press my palm against hers. When we touched, the halos kissed and became one, and as I pulled away, although the magic faded, I felt the bond remain.

“I feel as if it is I who now belongs to you.”