



# The Haven, the Hallow, & the Highborn (Roots of Magic #4)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** In facing her finest opponent, she will uncover her greatest strength.

Eedy Blackthorn wields a rare and mystical witch magic—she can become a conduit to harness the raw forces of lightning itself. But her abilities do not make up for her painful past. After a tragic accident claims her beloved father, Eedy inherits his seat on the mage-led council. Consumed by guilt over her father's death and determined to honor his legacy, she refuses to be silenced, no matter how often the male-dominated council disregards her suggestions.

When a mysterious disruption in magic threatens the kingdom's balance, Prince Caelum is sent to join the council. Discovering Eedy's identity reawakens a grudge tied to her late father, who ridiculed his family for years. With old wounds resurfacing, every council debate between them crackles with tension. As they clash over how to restore the magical order, their arguments become charged with something neither of them is willing to name.

With duty and destiny colliding, Eedy and Caelum must navigate their forbidden feelings for each other while racing to restore the kingdom's magic before the winter solstice. As the solution to the magical crisis becomes clear, the couple is faced with an impossible decision, one that will test the limits of Eedy's power and the depths of Caelum's heart.

Love, magic, and sacrifice intertwine in this rivals-to-lovers romantasy novella. This novella takes place a century before the start of the related Roots of Magic main series.

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

# Page 1

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## Chapter One

It was the edge of dawn when I heard it. Just before the sun could swallow all of night's lingering shadows, a deep, feral roar, like the bellow of an angry beast, echoed around me, tearing me from my sleep.

Lying in my narrow bed, heartbeat shuddering, I blinked into the inky darkness, listening. Another throaty growl reverberated above, rattling the panes of glass in our small cottage.

I sighed, my pulse slowing as recognition flooded me.

Whenever thunder rumbled overhead like that, like a mountain falling upon us, that was my signal.

I needed to head toward the cliffs.

I sat up, rubbing my fingers against my temples. With each blink, the fog of sleep gave way to a heavy ache that settled deep in my chest. I tried to push it down, but it clung stubbornly, as it always did. The pressure was strongest in the mornings, the first moments of waking always spent remembering what I had lost.

What had left me.

The autumn chill made it harder to leave the warmth of my bed. I wanted to roll over and bury my head under my pillow, but the storm beckoned me with another booming wail, and I couldn't ignore it. With a grimace, I shed my heavy blankets and

stood.

My dog, Mannix, was already awake, sitting near the door, his ears perked, and his tail wagging, whooshing like a frantic broom against the floor. He blended into the darkness with his coal-black fur, minus the streak of white that trailed from his forehead down to his nose.

“All right, boy,” I muttered, tugging on my boots and grabbing my satchel and cloak. “Let’s go before the storm moves on. She sounds like a moody one.”

Before leaving, I glanced over at my mother, still sleeping in her corner of the room, her breathing steady, her face peaceful. My throat constricted, though, when I noted the hollow space beside her.

Where my father should’ve been.

My fingers grazed the silver ring looped through a chain around my neck while the rest of me remained frozen in place.

Mannix let out a soft whine, shattering the moment and saving me before my thoughts had a chance to spiral into a darker place. A suffocating place. A place where even a bellowing storm couldn’t rouse me.

I opened the door and led us outside.

Immediately, the tightness in my chest eased. In the small confines of our cottage, I could get swept away in dangerous thoughts and guilty reminders, but out here, in the wild, with the storm rolling in and the sound of the sea not too far off, I found solace.

Living in Naohm, the most northern point in the kingdom of Eyre, meant being surrounded by endless, unexplored lands. It was easy to feel like the only person in

the world.

I loved it.

A rush of excitement coursed through me as the first clap of lightning streaked across the dark sky. It was powerful and beautiful and fierce. It was everything I wanted to be but wasn't. Would never be.

But it made me feel alive when I got to hold it, if only for a few moments.

Capturing lightning wasn't the most impressive power for a witch, but it was something. Much better than lying in my bed, drowning in thoughts of my father's absence or, even worse, of another council meeting I'd have to endure in his place.

Hallows be, the council. There was a meeting later today about the growing instability of magic. It had begun as minor interruptions in the most southern regions of Eyre, sputtering out every now and then when a witch or mage called on it. Now, it was happening with more frequency and spreading farther north. Naohm, a known stronghold of magic users, hadn't experienced any major issues yet, but it was clear at this point that the problem wasn't intermittent and wouldn't fix itself.

In my short four months on the council, though, I'd quickly learned that proactive decision-making wasn't their strong suit. They were much better at pointlessly bickering and complaining about the weather.

Thunder rumbled viciously overhead as we passed the short stone wall that surrounded our home, dragging my attention back to the storm. Mannix darted ahead a few paces on the well-trodden trail toward the cliffs, but he always circled back. I couldn't blame his impatience; he surely acquired that trait from me.

Halfway up the trail, I paused, wiping away the sweat that had sprouted on my

forehead. I used the brief respite to glance down the ridge toward the rest of the town, and that's when I saw it. A tent, large and elaborate, far too gaudy for our simple village. I frowned, squinting at the maroon-and-gold royal banners fluttering in the wind.

So, he'd arrived in Naohm.

I turned away and kept walking, ignoring the fresh tightening in my chest. The prince's presence here was a distraction, nothing more. The magic was off and instead of focusing on finding a solution, the council had decided to drag a royal into this mess. It made no sense. The last thing we needed was someone with no knowledge of magic meddling in it.

Father would not have been pleased. He'd never liked the royal family and made it well known to anyone who would listen how inefficient they were at running the kingdom. I couldn't think of one good reason to have disagreed with him. They only made choices that filled their coffers, not for the benefit of Eyre as a whole.

But none of that mattered right now. The sky was rumbling with an urgency that matched my own. I pushed myself harder, forcing my steps along the narrow path toward the cliffs. I wasn't about to let some spoiled highborn get under my skin.

Lightning first. Princes later.

Mannix barked, snapping my full focus back to the task at hand.

"Calm down, Mannix," I mumbled. "The lightning won't strike any faster just because you're eager for it."

Funny, I should tell myself the same .

I readjusted the strap of my satchel and continued while Mannix darted ahead once more, a shadowy ghost against the darkening sky. The wind picked up as we got closer to the edge, whipping strands of my hair into my face, but I kept going.

When we reached the top, Mannix circled the area, his nose to the ground again as he explored. I checked the metal rods I'd planted long ago in the rocky soil, making sure they were stable and properly aligned. Their only purpose was to attract the lightning. Once it struck, my magic and I would do the rest.

I bent down to the grassy earth to unload the lanterns stored in my satchel. I lined all three of them up a short distance from the rods.

My targets.

The storm above trembled with promise. I stretched out my hands, feeling the familiar hum of energy beneath my skin, waiting. This part always felt like I was reaching out to something sacred, something hallowed, waiting only to pull it down and contain it.

Mannix plopped down at a safe distance, his eyes eager, waiting for the show. He knew the routine by now.

And he did not have to wait long.

The first strike came swiftly, a sharp crack splitting the air. The rod did its job, drawing the lightning down. I threw my hands out, palms open, reaching for the bolt. Magic answered my call, thrumming through my body, rippling up my arms, and sparking at my fingertips. It allowed me to grip the wild energy of the lightning, to pull it inward, commanding it to submit. Every muscle in my body grew taut as I funneled the raw power into myself. The act was both terrifying and exhilarating, to battle against a force that was as old as time itself.

A small grin formed on my lips as the power surrendered, becoming fluid and malleable in my grasp. With a sharp turn, I thrust my hands toward a waiting lantern at my side, releasing the lightning in a controlled stream. It leaped into the enchanted glass, twisting and writhing before settling into a brilliant, eternal burn. My breath left me in a shaky exhale, the tension in my body loosening as the lantern's steady glow illuminated the gloomy dawn around me.

I watched the flame, steady now, and felt a rare, fleeting sense of satisfaction. My shoulders sagged as the rush of magic faded. I might not be able to solve my bigger problems, but this...this I could do.

Mannix barked twice, as if in approval, and I smiled.

Maybe it wasn't much—these lanterns, which could give light for up to one ring—but it was something I'd learned my conduit magic could do. It kept me grounded. It gave me purpose, even when I yearned to be something more .

The second strike went just as well, and I beamed at the two flickering lights.

While waiting for my third catch, the clouds let loose, and swaths of rain drenched us. I wiped my slick hair out of my face. I needed this last lantern.

The clouds churned above, and the air buzzed with energy.

“You have more for me,” I whispered, “I know it.”

The rain had soaked my clothes, and I shivered in response to the cold and the wet. Still, I waited.

When the third strike came, though, it did not go as planned. I called to the magic again, but it was slow to respond. Where moments before it had raced through me

like wildfire, now it thickened in my veins like cold honey. Still, I reached out, determined to catch the lightning again, but instead of the smooth connection I'd gotten with the first two catches, this time the energy reared back—crackling, feral.

Uncontrollable.

The rod trembled violently in the ground, sparking before the lightning surged in all directions. An offshoot of the bolt hit the tree Mannix was sheltering under, causing a branch to collapse inches from him. Mannix yelped and jumped back, his ears flat against his head.

I cursed under my breath, the acrid smell of scorched earth filling my nose as I bent to examine the rod. Jagged cracks spiderwebbed across the iron's once-smooth surface. Sturdy enough to weather countless storms before, the rod now looked like it would crumble if I touched it. It wasn't the heat from the lightning that had caused this, though.

My heart pounded as I stared at the damage. I pressed a hand to the ground, my fingers brushing the singed grass, and I could feel it—an undercurrent of energy shuddering below the surface. Uneven. Off-balance.

Magic.

The disruption had reached Naohm.

Mannix padded over cautiously in the downpour, nudging my hand with his nose. I gave him a quick, reassuring pat, though my mind was racing.

The kingdom of Eyre wasn't known for its fertile land or pleasant weather. Magic was relied on for growing food and keeping disease at bay. What if it continued to deteriorate? What if it didn't stop until it was all dried up?



Without it, crops would fail. Sickness would erupt. People would die.

In a daze, I gathered the first two lit lanterns and the remaining empty one and stuffed them into my satchel. Mannix stayed close, still wary of the charged air around us. I tried to ignore the view ahead of me, where, even with the pelting rain, I could still see the royal banners flapping in the distance.

This was not how my morning was supposed to go. And if the magic's erratic behavior was any hint, I had no reason to believe a pampered prince would make the rest of the day any better.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

### Chapter Two

When I threw open the door to our cottage, rain-slick and shivering, my mother immediately took over.

“Oh, love, get inside,” she admonished, her old rocking chair groaning as she rose from it and set her book down. “Why you insist on drowning yourself out there for a little light, I’ll never know.”

I plopped myself at our small table, leaving a puddle under me as I rummaged through my bag for the two lit lanterns. I slammed them on the table, watching the cottage erupt in a bright glow.

“Does this look like a little light to you?”

She shielded her eyes, throwing a blanket at me. “You know what I meant. Don’t got to be an arse about it.”

I scowled and pulled the blanket around my soaked shoulders, the newfound warmth coaxing out the chill that had started to settle into my bones. Meanwhile, Mannix shook off beside the door, droplets of rain spraying everywhere. With a quick circling of his favorite blanket, he settled near the hearth where a small fire crackled.

“I thought old Mrs. Ravenstone could use a new one,” I went on, pulling the blanket tighter around me. “The last one I gave her went out, and she said she’s been lost without it. That there’s no candle or oil lamp that compares to it.”

My mother gave a soft chuckle, shaking her head. Dark brown, wavy hair like mine framed her face, though hers was streaked with white. She slid a steaming cup of tea toward me as she sat down at the table too. Her deep brown eyes, still sharp as ever, fixed on me.

“And I’m sure Mrs. Ravenstone is grateful, but you’re not made of storm clouds yourself. You’ll catch your death out there one day if you’re not careful. You want to leave your mother here on this gods-forsaken cliffside alone?”

Mannix whined from his cozy spot on the floor, his head tilting to the side. I sipped my tea, smirking.

My mother raised an eyebrow at him. “Oh, I know you’d be here, but unless you’ve figured out how to chop firewood, we’d be in a sorry state, wouldn’t we?”

It was true I’d taken up most of my father’s chores since he’d been gone. Chopping wood, mending the roof, maintaining our stone wall. Frankly, I liked having physical tasks to keep my mind busy.

But my mother was strong. Resilient. I’m sure she could handle them, too, if one day I wasn’t around to do it.

My heart galloped at the thought. One day. Of being out in the world and making a real change, having a real purpose...instead of spending my days ensuring people like Mrs. Ravenstone had the proper lighting so as not to mistake a knitting needle for a fork again.

“I felt it while I was out there,” I murmured. My mother didn’t reply, but I knew she was listening, her breath held. “The ley line,” I continued, reliving the memory of how the magic had rumbled underneath me. “It was weak. It faltered when I tried to light the third lantern. The problem has truly reached Naohm now.”

I glanced, then, at the worn, thick, leather-bound book sitting on our mantel, filled with my father's notes on magic and the ley lines he'd devoted his life to studying. Every minute that wasn't reserved for his council duties, he'd spent chasing new theories about how magic worked, how it flowed.

The general belief was that magic lived in the user, but my father argued that it lived outside of us, a power that coursed under our feet that we could call upon. That connected us all.

I'd tried to review it as often as I could, tried to see what I could add to his thoughts, to keep his work alive. But everything about the book—the feel of the cracked leather, the smell of dried ink, the familiar scribbles I knew as his handwriting—made my heart quiver if I looked at it for too long.

“Magic moves like a river, Eedy,” he'd once told me, his eyes alight with confidence. “It flows beneath the surface, quiet but powerful. Sometimes, it gathers in places. We must map the spots where it's strongest. To learn how it works before someone else with ill intention does.”

Ley lines.

His research. His obsession.

“You need to bring this forward to the council,” my mother said. “Tell them what you experienced.”

I set my cup down, watching the steam curl upward. She wasn't wrong, but it didn't matter. “You know everyone can't feel the ley lines like I can. Father couldn't even sense them; he had to use physical signs like the etherose growing nearby to map them. And even if they did believe me, they'll ignore it because I'm his daughter.”

A heavy silence settled between us.

“Your father was a very passionate man, Eedy, no shame in that,” she said after a few moments.

“Mother, he punched Baldric Emberford at the last council meeting he attended,” I groaned.

“Well, yes,” my mother huffed, “but that old geezer deserved it. He wouldn’t even let your father finish reporting on his latest findings!”

I crossed my arms over my chest, but a grin still escaped. What I would’ve given to have seen that.

“He was a brilliant man, but he never learned how to ease people into a new idea. He always wanted to get right down to the truth of things instead of buttering people up to it,” my mother went on, curling her fingers tightly around her teacup. “But he did predict this instability a few rings ago, and they didn’t listen to him then. Maybe now they need a new voice.”

I clenched my jaw. The council had never been interested in what I had to say.

The only reason I was even a part of the meetings was because of the law of succession of a council seat, that it goes to the first-born child upon a member’s death, not because they wanted me there. In their eyes, I was just my father’s placeholder. One they’d only have to deal with a little longer until membership came up to a vote again during the summer solstice in seven months.

I sighed, leaning back in my chair. “Oh, they have a new voice now, just not the right one. A prince with no understanding of magic—what could he possibly add to the discussion? They’ll defer to him because of his title and the power that comes with it,

as if that makes him capable of fixing something he knows nothing about.”

Centuries ago, the first council of mages decreed that highborns could neither wield magic nor marry those who did—a safeguard against the rise of an untouchable ruler, too powerful to challenge or control. Little did they know, ordinary men were more than capable of devastating corruption.

And yet, even though highborns had never been able to use magic, they thought one could help us fix it when it was broken?

My mother frowned. “We may be some of the few who can wield it, Eedy, but let’s not forget that magic is here for the benefit of everyone, hmm? And, as far as the prince is concerned, maybe you’re judging him too harshly before you’ve even met the poor lad to see what he’s like.”

I scoffed. “You didn’t like the royal family either, not when Father was alive.”

“Your father had his reasons, and I stood by him,” she said, looking away, her voice softening. “But no one’s life is ever easy, Eedy. I’m sure he’s had his own hardships.”

“He’s just going to be another spoiled highborn,” I muttered, “thinking he can waltz in and fix things without understanding a damn thing about it. I felt the magic unraveling, and all they want to do is play politics.”

My mother sighed but didn’t press further. Instead, she reached her hand out, hovering it over the nearby kettle. Her fingers swayed, and I watched as a faint shimmer of heat glowed around the kettle’s base. I braced, waiting for the magic to falter like it had on me earlier, but this time, it held.

A few seconds later, the water inside began to boil again, even without a fire beneath

it.

“I’ll top off your tea,” she said casually, as if performing such a task with ease didn’t spur jealousy in me from time to time. Her magic had always been subtle but practical, manipulating the temperature of objects—keeping water warm, drying herbs quickly, or cooling food in an instant. It was something she could call on at any moment, and the magic obeyed. I had to wait for lightning to strike before I could do anything.

If I could summon a bolt at will, I’d wager a lot more people in Naohm would think twice before crossing my path.

I stared down at the table. “Father would’ve been able to figure it out. He always said the ley lines were the key to everything, but he didn’t have enough time to prove it.” I let out a frustrated sigh while rubbing my temples. “If the council could just put aside their pride and listen, maybe there’d be a chance.”

“You know how people are,” she replied. “They rarely want to admit they might be wrong.”

The council—and most of the kingdom—believed that magic was something inherited, a force passed through generations like a family heirloom. To them, it wasn’t a source shared between us. But I knew better.

I leaned forward, my father’s ring slipping out from beneath my shirt. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, Mother.”

She reached out, placing a hand on mine, but her eyes were focused on the silver chain bobbing against my throat. “You’re more like him than you realize, Eedy. Sometimes, it’s not about being the loudest voice in the room. It’s about being the one willing to do what needs to be done.”

Her words rattled around inside me like the storm still raging outside. I swallowed, feeling the weight of them, though I didn't know what else I could do . The magic was breaking down. The council wouldn't listen. And I wasn't my father.

Mannix nudged my knee, and I rubbed the scruff around his neck as I thought. If my father had been right, I couldn't keep standing by, waiting for the council to take me seriously. The meeting was in a few hours, and if I didn't get them to listen, soon there might not be any magic left to save.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

### Chapter Three

When I stepped into the chamber of the High Council of Magi later that day, the cavernous room already echoed with chairs scraping across stone and a steady stream of hushed discussion. A few heads turned as I entered, eyes flicking toward me briefly before glazing over.

The dismissive looks still enraged me, no matter how many times it happened. But this was the highest council of magic users in all of Eyre, after all. Why bother acknowledging me when they didn't take me seriously?

The sixteen-seat council was, typically, made up of all men, each of them bearing the sign of their status: a thick gold ring etched with ancient runes, worn with pride on their right hand. They gestured with them as they spoke, the rings gleaming in the everflame torchlights I'd had installed.

And then there was me.

My father's ring, too large for my fingers, hung on a chain around my neck. Sometimes I wore it out of duty and other times just to have something solid to hold on to when my grief was too much. More times than not, though, it felt like a millstone holding me in place than a mark of authority.

I made my way to the usual seat left for me at the end of the long oak table—the one furthest from the center. I folded my hands in my lap, forcing down the anxiety curling in my chest, reminding myself to stay calm. I was here, at least. My father had gotten me that far, even if they didn't want to acknowledge it.

I'd arrived at the meeting on time, but the discord was already well underway. They spoke in low voices about the growing issues with the magic, but it was clear no one had any real answers. Only theories.

I waited for a pause, eager for the right moment to speak, to tell them about my own experience just this morning and how it further proved my father's ley line theory. Heart racing, I sat on the edge of my chair, ready to cut in after a small lull in the clamor of voices when?—

The Baldric Emberford turned and looked straight at me.

One of the oldest councilmen, his silver hair hung to his collar, framing a weathered face and hazel eyes that attempted to be friendly. He seemed gentle enough, a grandfatherly figure in appearance, but I knew how easily his gaze could drift past me.

“Miss Blackthorn?” he said curtly.

The room quieted.

I wanted to point at myself in confirmation since they rarely acknowledged me, but I squeezed my hands firmly in my lap instead. What was happening? Were they asking for my opinion? Were they so desperate that they would entertain a young witch's thoughts for once?

“Yes,” I said, clearing my throat as more of them curved their gazes in my direction. “Yes, I have some news about the magic. Just this morning, I felt the disruption when I was?—”

“Would you be so kind as to fetch the prince?” he interrupted. “It seems he's not yet graced us with his presence.”

The words were polite, but the tone made it clear.

Fetch.

They didn't want to hear my thoughts. I was nothing more than an errand girl to them. Even though they were the ones who had summoned this prince while I voted against it at the last meeting, it didn't stop them from sending me . Why would it? I wasn't here for my mind or my magic. Just for show.

No matter, I wouldn't let them see it bother me. With my jaw clenched, I stood.

Offering a stiff nod, I turned and left the chamber, biting back the flare of resentment surging in my chest. I ground my teeth as I walked out, keeping my vulgar mutterings as quiet as possible.

This prince better be shitting his brains out on his royal throne to explain his absence, or I'd have his head.

Honestly, the fact that he didn't have the decency to make it to a midday meeting—and the whole reason he was here in the first place—was beyond me.

The sun was higher in the sky now, though it did little to warm the chill in the air. I blinked at the sudden brightness as I made my way toward the spectacle of a tent in the distance. Mannix, who had been resting outside of the council chamber, got up to trot by my side.

It was official: a dog had better manners than grown mages and crown princes.

As I got closer to the tent, steeling myself for an unsolicited confrontation with a royal, I noticed a figure slipping out—a young healer witch who lived here in Naohm.

Her face was flushed as she hastily adjusted her cloak. Our eyes met for a moment before she pulled up her hood over her fire-red hair and scurried away.

Of course. Prince Caelum was late because he'd been entertaining visitors .

Disgust churned in my stomach. Wasn't he betrothed to the daughter of some duke? It was becoming quite clear that his commitments meant absolutely nothing to him.

Either way, I didn't have time for this. We had a kingdom possibly on the brink of magical collapse, and here he was, indulging in pleasures while the rest of us scrambled to keep everything from falling apart.

I marched up to the entrance of his tent, every step making my head throb, but my pride pushed me forward. I didn't even bother announcing myself or stop to think of the scene I might stumble into. Instead, I shoved aside the gaudy tent flaps serving as a door and stormed inside.

"Your Highness, I've come to escort you to—" I stopped short, my mouth pressing into a hard line as I took in the sight before me.

Prince Caelum, wearing an unbuttoned linen shirt, lounged in bed on a pile of plush pillows, looking far too comfortable for someone who had responsibilities that affected a whole kingdom. He glanced up when I entered, his piercing blue eyes a mixture of surprise and amusement.

"Another visitor already?" he drawled, sitting up slowly with a wince, causing the maroon silk sheets resting over him to expose more of his toned abdomen. His blond hair was properly tousled, clearly from his most recent romp. "I didn't realize such a small and remote area of Eyre has such a large supply of agreeable women."

I crossed my arms, averting my gaze as every move he made caused more precarious

sheet moving. I wanted to strangle him with the damn fabric, but I took a deep breath, holding my scorching anger in. This was the prince, after all. I couldn't tell him how much of an idiot I thought he was, could I?

"You're expected at the council meeting," I announced. "I'm here to escort you there."

Though I didn't turn back to look at him, I could feel him grinning. "Escort me, you say? And here I thought the council sent you as a proper welcoming gift."

Caught off guard, I rounded my gaze back on him. "Excuse me?" I snarled before I could reconsider my tone.

He leaned back against the headboard with a smirk that made my blood boil, studying me more intently now that my controlled veneer had cracked.

"A jest," he said smoothly, waving his hand at me, as if my outrage could be swatted away like a simple housefly. "Now, come. Let me entertain my newest visitor properly. We both know that meeting is going to be an absolute bore. Please, sit." He motioned to a chair near the bed. "I insist."

The word hung between us like a guillotine.

Insist .

An order if ever I heard one. And from the prince himself, at that. He cocked an eyebrow, upping the ante, waiting for my response, waiting for me to cave to his command and fall in line.

Fetch . Insist .

My hands curled into fists at my sides. My control was hanging by the tiniest of threads, yet, still, it prevailed.

I'd had too much practice dealing with childish men.

"As much as I would love to sit in your company," I replied, as cold and contained as I could manage, "you're already committed to be at the council meeting right now. You need to get dressed and do your duty."

I let that word hang like a noose.

When I saw the subtle flex in his jaw and the smallest indent appear between his brows, I savored it with a wicked delight.

Serves him right, the condescending arse.

Much to my irritation, though, he grinned widely, and—dare I say—into a more genuine smile, a dimple appearing in his right cheek.

He tilted his head, staring at me while long fingers traced idle patterns along his silken sheets. "You're quite the little tempest, aren't you? All storm and spark."

My stomach tightened involuntarily at the lowering timbre of his voice, watching the misty blue of his eyes swirl into a darker shade before he continued.

"It's a shame you're only here to drag me away from this very comfortable bed of mine."

Heat flared in my cheeks, not from embarrassment but from sheer fury. I took a step toward him, but not to comply.

Oh, no.

“The only thing little about me,” I hissed back, “is my patience for highborn rakes like you .”

As soon as I said it, my eyes grew wide in disbelief.

I had just called the crown prince of Eyre a rake.

To his face.

His smile turned slick then, reveling in my mistake, staring at me like a cat who’d cornered a mouse.

“Is that so, Miss...?”

My heart still ricocheted in my chest from my outburst. I needed to escape the suffocating confines of this tent. Immediately.

“Blackthorn,” I choked out, backing up as I spoke. “Now, please get dressed and meet us at the council chamber in five minutes. I’m sure you don’t want me to have to come back and find you still in an indecent way.”

He gave me a slow, exaggerated nod, as if I were amusing him. As if he wanted to play with me more until he grew bored and ate me whole. “Something tells me it wouldn’t ruin your day to see me in a more indecent way, Tempest.”

I turned sharply on my heel, then, blood pounding in my ears, but his commanding voice followed me out of the tent.

“See you soon, Miss Blackthorn .”

I didn't glance back, even though he said my surname with a new edge to his voice. I refused to give him the satisfaction.

Mannix trotted after me as I made my way back toward the council, grumbling at my side.

How had the prince unraveled me so quickly?

I tried to shake off the encounter, but my blood still burned from his infuriating grin, his teasing words lingering just beneath my skin like a maddening itch.

The way he'd made me shed my controlled mask and be so reckless as to openly insult a member of the royal family...I didn't know what had come over me, but I needed to get a hold of myself.

He'd be gone soon enough when he was done pretending to have anything worthy to contribute to the magic problem. Then, if I was lucky, I would never have to see his arrogant, smug face ever again.

When I arrived back at the council and sat in my seat, they didn't even look up from their discussion.

Good.

My head was still swimming from my haughty exchange with the crown prince of Eyre. Sweat beaded on the back of my neck, and my throat was tight.

To my surprise, however, it only took a few short minutes for the council to realize they had to interact with me once more to get the information they wanted.

"Well, is he coming?" Baldric asked, finally honoring me with a passing glance, even



as annoyance flashed across his wrinkled face.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to find my control once more as I blinked away the prince's obnoxious smirk from the back of my eyelids.

"He'll be here soon if he knows what's good for him," I answered coolly.

And for the first time in that hollow, dusty room, amidst a wave of shocked councilmen faces, I smiled.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

### Chapter Four

The moment the door swung open, the chatter died, and every gaze shifted toward Prince Caelum as he—finally—stepped inside. Dressed in a dark blue, tailored tunic and polished boots, he moved with confidence as he sauntered toward the front. His blue eyes flitted about with ease, as if this meeting were only a minor interruption, and soon he could get back to being absolutely useless again.

I clenched my hands under the table, watching as the council members fumbled over themselves to pull out a chair or pour him a glass of water or offer to bring in something to eat.

He didn't even need to say anything to be in control. Respected. It was just served up like a plump, roasted pig on a platter. And yet here I was, in a constant battle to get these halfwit mages to pay attention to a single word I said.

It was infuriating.

Still, if this highborn fool was waiting for me to grovel at his feet like the rest of these shameless councilmen, he'd be waiting until the sun burned up, until the realm froze over, until his smug, handsome face shriveled to dust...

And then he'd wait some more.

My resolve on that matter was comforting, so I crossed my arms in front of me, waiting to hear him flounder about the topic of magic.

Caelum remained standing despite multiple chairs being offered to him, letting his height over the others reaffirm his authority. “High Council of the Magi,” he addressed us, his voice smooth. “Forgive my tardiness. I was preoccupied with another task that needed my immediate attention.”

Right. I flattened my lips together so as not to have another outburst. Getting laid before noon definitely needed his full attention.

A few councilmen shifted in their seats nodding, eager to please. Baldric Emberford leaned forward with a grin. “Of course, Your Highness. We’re honored to have you here with us today.”

Caelum waved a hand with a primed smile. “The honor is entirely mine, as it always is when I find myself in the presence of such esteemed minds.”

A ripple of delighted murmurs spread across the table.

How much shameless bootlicking would I be expected to endure?

“Do you not agree, Miss Blackthorn?” Caelum asked as I finished an intense eye roll to find him staring me down.

Caught off guard by him yet again, my cheeks burned, and I fumbled with the hem of my skirts. “Of course, I...agree,” I said, my voice sounding unusually high-pitched in the deadly quiet. “There have been many bright thinkers on this council. My father being one of them.”

Caelum’s smile tightened, still the picture of diplomacy, but there was a sharpness in his gaze as it moved from me. I slumped back in my chair.

“Right,” he continued. “So, since the majority of us here are quick-witted”—he

glanced once more at me, oh, the nerve —“I think we can skip the formalities and get to the heart of the matter, yes?”

He placed both hands on the table, leaning toward his audience. “Eyre’s magic is broken, and it’s only growing worse. We’ve all seen the effects. Failing crops where water mages could not summon it during a drought, outbreaks of disease when healers could not cure. And if we cannot rely on our fire mages for this coming winter, it could be brutal, especially for you Northerners.”

He turned to start a slow walk around the table as he continued. “Now, I won’t pretend to be the expert in this room. That’s why I’ve been humbly invited here—to learn from the best. But before we dive into solutions, I’d like to hear the current state of things. What do we know so far?”

There was a pause, the councilmen exchanging glances, until Cormac Verdane, one of the younger mages always eager to prove his worth, cleared his throat and shuffled a plethora of papers in front of him. “Well, Your Highness, for the past two rings, some witches and mages have found their ability to call on magic weakened. We’ve noted that the further south and east one ventures in the kingdom, the worse it gets. Villages as far as Kieve just sent word last month that they have...no access to magic at all.”

Caelum nodded, listening. But it wasn’t just his unwavering attention that had the council captivated. It was the way he tilted his head in concern, his calm demeanor, the charm in his smirk—it all worked to disarm them. There was so much more than just making a collective decision based on facts here; there was a delicate dance of politics too.

And I hated politics.

Ronan Dunmore, another councilman, nodded along while adjusting his glasses.

“Perhaps the bloodlines themselves are weakening. If fewer magical unions are happening, it would explain the dilution. I know in the south, magical users only marrying each other isn’t as high a priority.”

I gritted my teeth, resisting the urge to interject. They were always so concerned with keeping the bloodlines strong and pure. They couldn’t fathom that magic could be something external that we draw from, that we all pull from the same mystical vein, because that meant admitting the problem was outside of the people who used it.

Caelum folded his arms. “I’m not sure that’s it, Mage Dunmore,” he murmured. “The only facts point to it being location-based. It’s as if it’s drying up somewhere, like a river being dammed.”

I gnawed on my bottom lip, hating how he used the analogy of a river like my father always had. His eyes flicked toward me again, that same glint of knowing—of deliberate challenge—sparkling behind them. I held his stare, refusing to blink.

“Now,” Caelum continued, sweeping his gaze around the room once more, “whatever is causing this disruption threatens more than just your small village here at Naohm.” His voice dropped a notch. “It threatens the entire kingdom of Eyre.”

The council nodded along, their eyes growing wide. They all knew the troublesome magic was a big issue, but the prince of the realm was now laying at their feet the consequences if they failed. Worried brows and deep frown lines erupted along each councilman’s face. They’d gone through their theories, dissected reports, and yet no real answers had emerged.

Imagine that.

Baldric cleared his throat, holding up a hand. “One possible theory, Your Highness. It could be a personal imbalance. Something we can rectify, perhaps, with”—he paused,

smoothing out a nearby scroll—“a widespread burning of sage over every magic user.”

I barely stifled a groan. This highly esteemed mage thought we were going to cure magic by burning a bit of sage? Was that really the best he could come up with?

I sank deeper into my chair, fully expecting the prince to latch on to such a useless idea since his only real purpose here was to orchestrate the circus this council meeting was becoming.

But instead, Caelum rubbed his hand over his mouth while nodding, his eyes pinched tight.

Was he trying not to laugh?

The prince composed himself enough to move his palms back down to the table to drum his fingers on it, as if carefully thinking. “A noble suggestion, Mage Emberford, and certainly one rooted in tradition. However, I’m not sure we have that large a supply of sage to attempt such a task.”

The council nodded in agreement.

“Perhaps instead of jumping to herbal remedies,” he went on, “we should begin by examining any patterns we can find first. We need to understand where these disruptions are happening, when they started, and how fast they’re spreading. Think of it as a puzzle to unlock. The facts are the pieces; we just need to fit them together.”

I blinked in surprise. This was...logical. Strategic. He was effortlessly brushing off Emberford’s foolishness and redirecting the conversation in a way that made sense. And one that aligned exactly with it being tied to my father’s ley lines theory. The skin along my arms prickled at the thought.

Cormac nodded fervently. “Yes, Your Highness. A most astute suggestion. We have reports from several regions. We could easily compile it for your review in a short time.”

“I’d like a map, specifically,” Caelum replied, his tone shifting from friendly to authoritative, like a commander giving orders. “I want to see this disturbance in our kingdom. Let’s start there. We need facts before we can speculate further. And,” he added with a faint smirk, “before we start dousing all of our people in sage.”

A few council members chuckled, nodding along as if the prince had led them to the most brilliant solution.

“Well said, Your Highness,” Cormac chimed in. “We can adjourn for now, gather the necessary reports, and reconvene tomorrow to?—”

“If you’re all so interested in reports and data,” I cut in, rising from my seat to gain some semblance of attention. “I have plenty of my father’s research that ties directly with these issues.”

A hush fell over the room as all eyes turned to me, including Caelum’s. His easy smile faltered for a moment, but he quickly recovered, his blue eyes bright.

“I’m sorry, Miss Blackthorn,” Caelum said. “Does this speculative research provide an immediate solution?”

My fingers curled into fists at my side as he raised one mocking eyebrow, leering down at me, and all I could think about was how satisfying it would be to slap that look off his face.

This was not like the councilmen, with their lucid gazes passing over me as if I didn’t exist. This prince was staring right into the heart of me, challenging my very core.

The storm brewing inside of me, the lightning I could barely tame each day.

Now, it struck.

“I believe if we follow it instead of needlessly delaying action so you can laze about in bed some more, it can lead to the right solution.”

Gasps and grumbles unfolded around the table.

“You forget your place, Miss Blackthorn,” Baldric Emberford retorted, his hazel eyes narrowing at me. “Show some respect.”

I clenched my teeth, but before I could respond, Caelum raised a hand, calming the appalled chatter. “It’s all right, Mage Emberford. It’s not her fault. It runs in her blood to speak ill of the royal family.”

So, it was my father’s opinion of royals that irked him. Once he’d heard my surname, I’d gone from a target he wanted to bed to having one painted on my back.

His gaze narrowed in on me once more, taunting, inviting me to dig myself deeper. “So then,” he continued, leaning forward, “you propose we chase these wild theories of your father’s instead?”

The weight of the council’s stares pressed down on me. My throat tightened, but I forced myself to stand tall, refusing to let him intimidate me.

“They’re not wild theories,” I said, my voice firm. “He spent rings researching it. He gave his life—” I paused, not wanting my voice to break with emotion right when I finally had the floor. Not while this pompous prince was trying to pressure me into shutting my mouth.



I took a deep breath. “If we don’t take it seriously, we might miss the key to solving this entire crisis.”

The room grew tense, the silence stretching as Caelum’s unwavering gaze bore into me. “Perhaps we should consider all options and take a look at your father’s speculations ,” he finally replied. “Right after we’ve reviewed the current—and corroborated—data, of course.”

A few of the councilmen chuckled, but the sting of his words hit me like a slap. The implication was clear: he had the power to brush me aside.

“Of course,” I muttered. “I’ll bring a copy over for you to review.”

Taking a seat, Caelum leaned back in his chair, clearly satisfied with his results. “Now, as we were saying, let’s meet at the same time tomorrow, and I will ensure I have my schedule cleared so as not to be late again.”

I could feel the tension building in my chest as the other mages got up to leave, my frustration boiling beneath the surface. It wasn’t just that Caelum had won them over so easily—it was how I could already see him stomping all over my father’s research.

It seemed the prince held onto grudges as tightly as he did to this calm and collected mask he wore.

Who was he, really?

A lazy and spoiled boy in fancy clothes, obviously.

I stood to leave, but a shadow crossed over me, urging me to glance up. And there he was, right in front of me, staring me down. His eyes locked onto mine—keen and calculating, as if he were trying to see straight into my head so he could use what he

found there against me.

“Blackthorn, is it?” he said with a measured tone, one eyebrow raised. “I should’ve known by how you stormed into my tent.”

“I’m happy to know my name precedes me,” I said, forcing myself not to blink.

He smirked at my defiance. “Your father thought all highborns were a waste of time and air. If I recall correctly, he once said it was like farm animals were running this kingdom.”

I held my chin up, matching his glare. “So far, you’ve done little to prove him wrong.”

He leaned in closer, his eyes sparking with eagerness. “I suppose we shall see, then, who the council sides with tomorrow. I wonder how it will feel, Miss Blackthorn, to be bested by a goat.”

I crossed my arms so my pounding heart wouldn’t beat out of my chest. “I believe you’d be the pig in this analogy, Your Highness.”

He squinted at me, lip curling, until he finally huffed and sauntered out of the chamber.

I sighed, the tension draining from my body. A small smile managed to form, though I quickly let it slip away.

There was no way around it at this point: I would not be making friends with Caelum Ashford anytime soon. And if I couldn’t convince the rest of the council about my father’s research at the next meeting, they would move forward on some wild goose chase that was subject to a childish prince’s whims.

I bit the inside of my cheek. He wasn't an idiot, though, that much was clear. He had a sharp mind, able to cut through the nonsense these rambling mages so easily fell into. But there was still that smugness, that air of superiority, as though he relished being the cleverest man in the room.

And the worst part? He just might be.

But I was no man.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

### Chapter Five

Early morning light had begun to creep over Naohm, and already I was feeling the weight of the day pressing down on me.

Sleep had eluded me last night, so instead of spending the dark hours tossing and turning, I'd hunched over our small table, copying my father's research onto fresh parchment. Each page was a way of keeping his work alive. Of keeping him alive.

I'd repeated this to myself, blinking in the glow of the everflame lantern next to me. And yet, staring at it now in the golden splash of sunlight, I wasn't convinced Prince Caelum would read a single word of it.

My stomach churned with doubt—and fury.

Still, I shrugged on my cloak and marched down the hill to find out. The wind tugged at the royal banners as I approached, snapping in the gales like a warning alarm signaling my arrival. I reached the prince's tent and paused, taking a deep breath.

No guards. No servants to stop me. Just like before.

My body was wound tight like a spring. I was ready for a fight, my words already sharpened and prepared to cut through whatever condescending comment he was going to throw at me next. I gripped the stack of papers tighter, my knuckles turning white. If he mocked this too...well, I wouldn't be held responsible for what I might say or do.

I pushed through the flaps of the tent, heartbeat in my throat, my mouth already opening to defend myself?—

But the tent was empty.

I stopped, deflating. For a moment, I stood there, dazed. Where was he this early?

The disappointment that followed surprised me, but I shook it off. This was much better. Ideal, actually. I didn't need to fight with him; I could leave the research and get out of here.

With the prince's absence, though, I took the opportunity to glance around, taking in everything I hadn't noticed the first time. I'd expected...well, excess. Clothes strewn about, mounds of picked over food wasted, maybe some empty wine bottles, the kind of mess that screamed extravagance.

But the space was neat. Organized, even. Maps spread across a small table, books stacked with care, and a few candles near them burned down to stubs, as if he'd been up all night reviewing things. It almost appeared studious. Like this was the tent of a man who planned, not someone who lavished in every luxury his title afforded.

So, he might not be overly indulgent; he was still an arse. And a rake.

I would leave my father's research and pray he could put that obnoxiously sharp mind to use and connect the dots right in front of him in these pages.

I took a few more steps in, my brow furrowing. Even the bed was crisply made—although, surely, not by him. I hadn't seen servants bustling about, but I must've just missed them. He probably didn't even eat without someone spoon feeding him.

Confident that he'd take a long, unnecessary nap before joining us for the council meeting, I decided his bed was a safe enough spot as any to leave my father's findings.

Grumbling, I took the last few strides toward it. I glanced down at the neatly copied pages in my hands, hesitating. I knew I had to surrender them to have a chance at this council meeting for anyone to listen, but it felt like handing over a private piece of my life, leaving me open to more ridicule and mockery. And why did it have to be him that reviewed it first?

If they only knew how much my father gave for this information...

It had to be done.

As I placed the pages against the prince's perfectly fluffed pillow, something else hit me—a scent. I tried to ignore the way it settled in my chest, quickening my heartbeat. It smelled like fresh pine needles and a touch of leather. Clean. Crisp.

And annoyingly good.

I took another breath, my body relaxing. How was it possible for someone so infuriating to smell like this ?

As I pulled my hand away, my fingers brushed against the soft, silken sheets longer than necessary. They did look inviting, which made me scowl even harder.

Hallows be, stop it, Eedy. He's a prince, what did you think he'd smell like? Swamp water and sulfur?

Yanking my hand away as if the bed would catch fire from my burning gaze, I straightened and hurried back out of the tent. I hadn't come here to notice how

welcoming his damn bed looked or how his scent settled around me like a balm against my fraying edges.

But as I threw aside the tent flaps to leave, I collided hard with something very solid—or rather, someone .

Prince Caelum stood before me, his blond hair disheveled, his brows raised in surprise. He wore leather gloves, and his maroon cloak billowed in the wind, the hem damp from morning dew. The sharp breeze assaulted me with his scent once more—the pine and the leather.

I gritted my teeth. “Where have you been?”

He cocked his head, his expression cool. “I was taking a morning walk along the cliffside,” he said, his tone measured. “Watching the wild sea puts things into perspective. Helps me think. Am I allowed to wander Naohm, or do you disapprove of that as well?”

“Disapprove?” I scoffed, heat rising to my cheeks. “No, of course not. I just—” I hesitated, realizing how accusatory I’d sounded. I didn’t have any business demanding to know the whereabouts of the crown prince of Eyre.

“And why were you in my tent?” he said, eyebrows furrowing.

I straightened, grasping for composure. “I was delivering my father’s research. For you to review. And you weren’t here. Obviously. So, I left it. On your bed. For you.”

Gods, I was rambling. I bit the inside of my cheek to stop myself.

His lips quirked. My fumbling amused him. His blue eyes sparkled with mischief, and my blood galloped through my veins again. I’d come ready to match his wit with

my own, and it seemed I was still craving the chance. But as his lips parted to reply, movement behind him caught my eye. A slender figure emerged from the path beyond, her fire-red hair catching the morning light. Recognition struck like a bolt of lightning: the woman who'd snuck from his tent the day before.

The prince's features smoothed over when he turned and noticed her too. "Ah, Lira," he said, her name rolling off his tongue with ease, as if they'd known each other far longer than the few days he'd been in Naohm.

My stomach twisted in irritation. He didn't bother to explain the situation; he didn't have to. The wide, cocky smile he was bludgeoning me with told me exactly what I needed to know.

"Well, Miss Blackthorn, Lira and I have...things to tend to," he said. The healer blushed, twirling a red strand with her dainty finger. "I'll do my best to look at your father's work afterward."

"Of course, Your Highness," I shot back, snidely. "If you would be so kind as to show up on time for the council meeting later, though, I'm sure we'd all appreciate it."

I didn't wait for a response, turning on my heel and marching away. My heart thudded in my chest and red-hot blood churned in my veins.

Fresh air hit me as I wandered back to our cottage, and I inhaled deeply. Better. I didn't want one molecule of his pompous scent left to linger anywhere near me.

I'd delivered the research. My part was done. Now for the encore.

By the time the council gathered again later that day, I had regained my composure—at least outwardly. Still, my mind spun, weighing every possible



outcome of this meeting.

I kept my eyes on the doorway as the others took their seats, and sure enough, Prince Caelum arrived fashionably late once more. Just seeing him made my jaw clench and my blood boil. It made me crush the apathetic mask I'd worn in this room for too long.

Today, I wouldn't let him control the narrative. The men had done enough talking.

As soon as he'd settled at the head of the table opposite of me, I took my chance to speak before he hijacked the meeting again and drove it right off a pointless cliff.

"Your Highness," I said, forcing my voice to remain steady as I stood and addressed him. "Did you have a chance to review the research I brought you this morning? I'm very interested to hear your thoughts."

His blue eyes flicked toward me, the hint of a crease forming between his brows. "Perused it, briefly," he replied, his tone neutral. "Interesting, but speculative, at best."

I swallowed the retort of outrage burning on my tongue, my fingers curling like talons to grip the edge of the table. He hadn't read it properly then. Or worse, he had and didn't care.

"It's not speculation," I said firmly. "It's based on many rings of study. My father's work could provide the key to fixing this. Did his markers not align with the disturbances in the maps you received from Councilman Verdane?"

Before Caelum could respond, Baldric's condescending voice broke in. "I believe the prince has done his due diligence and reviewed your father's research, as this council has also done in the past. Now, we must move on?—"

My jaw clenched, but Caelum waved a hand, stopping Baldric's blathering. "There's no harm in listening," he said, his voice light. "She's clearly getting to a specific point, right?"

The council sputtered; all eyes now fixed on me.

I cleared my throat and smoothed back a few loose strands of hair behind my ears, trying to find a calm spot in my stormy mind. This was my chance—one I rarely got—and I needed to make it count. For myself. For my father's memory.

"Like my father," I started, "I believe the ley line is like a river of magic flowing beneath our feet. Therefore, there must be something disrupting the flow. My father's working theory, before he passed away, was that disturbances in the magic could be caused by onyxwood forests." I paused, trying to meet their stares with as much confidence as I could muster before continuing. "Perhaps we can look to clear one of these forests and see if it can restore the magic flow in the areas nearby."

The silence that followed was thick with disbelief. Baldric finally scoffed, shaking his head. "Clear an entire forest, Miss Blackthorn? These forests have been here for centuries. Why would they affect the magic now?"

My thoughts scrambled to recall my father's notes. One idea was that their roots had grown deeper with time. Another was that the ley lines had shifted to flow under them more regularly. Admittedly, though, my father didn't have many notes on if the ley lines could move.

I opened my mouth to argue about these possibilities, but Caelum cut in, his attention shifting to the rest of the room. "That's a thoughtful solution, Miss Blackthorn. I appreciate every suggestion provided on this council, as I cannot possibly put this confounding puzzle together all by myself."

He was patronizing me, just like he had the other councilmen. But instead of making me feel satisfied with my contribution, I only wanted to strangle him. I lowered myself to my seat, imagining the wondrous sound he might make if there were a storm nearby for me to zap him with.

He started his pacing of the room as he had the last time, working up to deliver the real direction he wanted this meeting to take. “I’ve been thinking on this all night, and I have to wonder if there’s a more direct way to get the answers we need,” he said, leaning against one of the pillars in the room, looking infuriatingly relaxed. “The fae have always been deeply connected to the magic of this land. If something is wrong, they’ll know why.”

The council’s reaction was surprisingly mixed, some nodding in agreement while others looked reluctant to the suggestion.

I stared at him, barely able to keep my frustration in check.

He wanted to venture into Velarune, the realm of the fae? Did he have any idea how dangerous they could be? He was suggesting we throw ourselves at the mercy of creatures who viewed us as inferior and expendable. They had sequestered themselves to the farthest western point in Eyre, and it was best that we left them there, undisturbed. One should not poke a bee’s nest for the fun of it.

“You want to go to the fae for help?” I retorted, surprised at how much outrage I allowed to seep into my voice. “They’re notorious for twisting words and making bargains that will leave you worse off than before.”

Caelum smirked. “Well, it’s better than chopping down a whole innocent forest based on your father’s unproven theories.”

The jab stung, but I held my ground. “Of course you’d say that. Dismissing his work

is easier than understanding it.”

Caelum’s grin faltered, his blue eyes narrowing. There was something deeper behind that look than just a grudge—resentment, jealousy? I couldn’t tell.

Baldric cleared his throat, oscillating a worried gaze between me and the prince. “Your Highness, the fae are unpredictable. If you approach them without the proper precautions, you could walk into a dangerous trap.”

“Exactly,” I said sharply, before anyone else could butt in. “You’ve never dealt with the fae. They don’t care about titles or crowns. They care about control and power, and if we go into their realm unprepared, they’ll take advantage of it.”

The room went silent again, the council exchanging uneasy glances.

Caelum, however, wasn’t fazed. In fact, a small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “You’ve met the fae before, haven’t you?” he asked, tilting his head as he studied me. “That’s why you’re so...cautious.”

I hesitated, my heart pounding in my chest. “Yes,” I admitted. “Once. My father and I sought out the fae when we were researching the ley lines. But they never gave us any real information.”

“But...you’re still alive,” he pointed out, eyebrows raised. “And maybe your father just didn’t ask the right questions.”

The council shifted, suddenly more interested. I could feel their gazes slide over me, considering me for the first time as something more than an irritable understudy.

Baldric leaned forward, his tone more thoughtful now. “We do need someone who knows the terrain, someone who has experience if the fae decide to play games.”

Caelum's smirk faded into a scowl. He didn't want me coming with him. It was obvious in the way his jaw tightened, the way his fingers drummed against the table that he'd come to sit at again.

"She's hardly the best candidate," Caelum said through gritted teeth. "She's against the idea from the start."

Even though I was horrified by the plan they were trying to put into place, to see the control slipping from the prince's fingers was the sweetest sight.

"Who else, Your Highness?" Cormac Verdane countered. "You can't go alone. The fae don't care about royal decrees or titles. Miss Blackthorn has dealt with them before. It would be foolish not to take advantage of that."

This whole conversation is foolish.

I clenched my hands in my lap, heart pounding as I tried to keep my face neutral. I just needed to wait long enough for the prince to insist someone else join him, and?—

Caelum stood, his jaw tight. "Fine. We shall leave tomorrow," he said, not looking in my direction. "And if Miss Blackthorn thinks she can make the journey, she can accompany me as my guide. All in favor?"

Every council member except for me raised their hand.

Without waiting for another word, Caelum gave a curt nod and strode out of the chamber. The decision had been made. The council had their solution. And I was left with no say in the matter.

"Miss Blackthorn," Baldric said as I sat there stunned, "do not worry about your time away. We'll make sure the council continues our investigation here while you're

gone. We shall update you upon your return of any decisions made in your absence.”

The rest of them nodded along with tight smiles.

I could barely breathe. The council had just managed to kill two birds with one stone. The prince and I could handle the magical crisis for them, and at the same time, they’d also ensured I was out of the way while they continued with their useless debates on other matters.

My legs were lead as I left the chamber and stepped into the brisk air outside. I didn’t know how to process what had just happened. I was being sent to deal with the fae, something I had only done once, and under my father’s guidance. And for what? So the prince could play explorer in Velarune?

The wind whipped through the courtyard as I walked away from the chamber. I barely felt it. The council had made their decision, but they would not command me to do anything.

My father had taught me: I had a choice, always . And now I had to make it.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

### Chapter Six

I knew if I stayed in the village any longer, my frustration would boil over, and each one of those arrogant fools would find themselves on the wrong end of my wrath. Not that they didn't deserve every drop of it, but indulging my anger wouldn't change the impossible choice I'd been forced into: join the insufferable prince to see if the fae would cough up any insight into the unstable magic or tell the High Council of Magi and Eyre's royal heir exactly where they could shove their demands.

So, I did what I always did when the world felt too stifling: I fled, to the one place that still brought me peace.

The hollow tree on the highest cliff of Naohm.

Once I reached the base of the path that led up to the tree, I stared up at the rocky terrain before me. The climb was steep, the path narrow and winding as it cut into the cliffside. The wind whipped past me, tugging at my cloak as if trying to pull me backward, urging me to stop this madness.

But I couldn't stop.

I'd been climbing this trail since I was ten rings old, my father showing me the safest way to navigate the loose stones and sharp drops. But today, with everything weighing on my mind, each step proved heavier, more treacherous. I had to be careful. One wrong move, and I'd tumble to my death, just like?—

I pushed the thought away, focusing on the path ahead.

Mannix had wanted to join me, but I'd ordered him back to stay with my mother. It was too dangerous for him, too dangerous for anyone, really. And yet, I needed this place. Needed the solitude. Despite the nightmare of a climb, the peace waiting at the top for me was worth it.

The closer I got, the more anxious I became for its relief. Familiar sounds rang around me: the rhythmic crash of waves far below, the call of gulls circling overhead, the roar of the wind in my ears.

Here, away from the village, it was easy to forget all the things nagging at my thoughts, my focus only on survival. It was just me and the wind and the rock and my resolve to reach the tree.

Near the top, the trail narrowed into a precarious ledge, forcing me to press my back against the rock as I shuffled sideways, my heart hammering in my chest. I gripped at the stone wall behind me, my fingers always looking for purchase on the rough surface in case I slipped. I couldn't look down, fearing I'd give up if I did. The drop was so far, and the ocean churned below, happy to claim another Blackthorn member in its endless depths.

My blood raced through my veins as I rounded the last corner and finally, there it was.

The tree sat on a plateau, its gnarled roots piercing into the surrounding stone floor. It had a wide, hollowed trunk, and its bark was dark and weathered. Still, the canopy above was lush and green, stretching toward the sky in defiance of its barren home.

It shouldn't have survived here, in the harsh winds and salt air, but it had.

Just like me.



I'd been brought to this tree on the first day of my life. My mother told me the story once, her voice reverent, as if the memory itself was as fragile as I'd been that day. When I'd been born in our cottage, I hadn't cried out as expected. My breaths had been labored and shallow, and no matter what the healers tried, it hadn't helped.

Desperation drove my father to climb this very cliff, carrying me in his arms. Even though he hadn't begun his research yet, he'd felt the strong pull of magic swirling around this place when he'd explored it. My mother told me he'd laid me gently inside the tree's hollow belly and prayed—begged—to the five hallowed gods, to magic, to whoever or whatever would listen.

Cradled within its ancient trunk, it was then that I'd let out my first cry—as if the tree itself had breathed life into me.

And since the moment I could climb, I'd returned here with him, drawn by something I couldn't name. At first, it was just to follow my father, to be close to him as he poured over his findings. But as I grew, it became more than that. Here, at the highest point in the kingdom, the tree called to me, the same way his research called to him, its presence grounding me when nothing else could.

Even now, standing here with the wind tugging at my cloak and the waves roaring far below, I could feel it. I stumbled forward, my breath ragged in my lungs from the effort to get here. My feet slowed as I approached the tree, its hollowed center creating a natural shelter.

My haven.

I ducked under the low branches and stepped inside the carved-out space, my body relaxing for the first time since leaving the council.

This place had been ours—mine and my father's. A refuge from the world where we

used to talk, to think, to speculate, to just... breathe . The one place he'd brought me when the weight of his research and the pressures of the council had become too much.

We were going to explore all of Eyre together. We were going to uncover the cause for the minor interruptions and ensure the land always had the magic it needed to survive. He'd even discovered cases of those not born with magic accessing it later on, and he was sure they all had a connection to the ley line.

But then, he'd stopped letting me come with him to investigate. And shortly after, he was gone.

I sank down onto the soft patch of moss at the base of the tree, pulling my knees to my chest and resting my head against the bark. The air here smelled of earth and salt and something older, something I could never quite describe, only feel .

I closed my eyes and let the stillness wrap around me like a warm blanket. Here, under the canopy of the tree, I could hear my father's voice. His words, always so full of passion and conviction, echoed in the back of my mind.

"We must convince the council of the ley lines, Eedy," he'd said, standing right where I sat now, his eyes focused and determined. "If they would devote more resources to understanding it, then we could better align ourselves to protect it in the future. Just like any other natural resource, it needs to be cared for."

If the prince would've helped me in that endeavor, we might've been able to persuade them once and for all. Instead, he was set on his petty grudge and apparently had a personal interest in traipsing through Velarune.

To visit the fae.

Long ago, when the world was much younger, people who could access magic split into two groups of thought when it came to helping humans without this gift.

There were those who wanted to stay and work alongside their non-magical brothers and sisters: waechen—to wait in the ancient tongue. Later, that morphed into just witch for both male and female until more recently when the men insisted on a separate name.

Mage.

The word for magic itself. As if being called magic would lend them the ability to hold more of it.

And then there were others, those who held the strongest ties to magic, who no longer wanted to help the weaker humans. Who wanted to make their own world dripping with magical excess. They pulled at their ears endlessly from the constant arguing of these inferior humans, and eventually they left to establish their own separate realm. They were called faeverine—to forsake.

Later, known as the fae.

But, as time went on, they became more than just selfish; they became cruel, and their cruelty made them dangerous. The High Council of Magi forged a covenant with the fae while they still held equal footing and outnumbered them two-to-one. The agreement granted the fae their own land—Velarune—but also erected an unyielding boundary they could not cross.

Now, they prowled that invisible line like a starved wildcat, waiting for the moment the realm grew weak enough to slip through. I could see the greed growing in their wicked, glittering eyes the last time I'd been there. If I dared to venture back into their domain, they could do far worse than withhold information.

If I were being honest with myself, I'd guess they knew about the ley lines. They were the strongest users of magic, after all. It was just a matter of if they were willing to share.

Or maybe I wasn't sure I wanted to hear what they had to say.

The memory of my first visit to the fae with my father surfaced, unbidden. I still remembered how the darkened mists of their realm swirled and shimmered around us, the air crackling with power. My father, ever focused, had questioned them relentlessly about the ley lines: their purpose, their patterns, their connection to Eyre.

But the fae never gave away anything for free.

The king of the fae had been intrigued by my father's knowledge and had offered a trade: information about how my father tracked these ley lines in exchange for my father's use of the fae's Pool of Desire, a gathering of water at the very center of their realm that gave one clarity on the most important thing in their life.

A shiver crawled down my spine as I remembered the moment the deal was struck—the king's gaze settling on me over my father's shoulder, piercing and unrelenting, as if he were examining me down to my very bones.

After my father handed over all his information, he was led to the Pool of Desire. The fae made me stand farther back, unwilling to let me catch a glimpse of its power. I watched as my father leaned over the edge, the water bubbling and misting with a silent fury.

After only a few seconds of gazing into the pool, he stumbled back, his eyes wide and his breath ragged. My father wanted to leave immediately afterward.

I'd asked him what the pool had told him, but my father had waved it off, his hand

tightening protectively around my shoulder. “Just fae theatrics,” he’d murmured, leading me away. “I should’ve known better.”

But I’d caught the tremor in his voice, the way his fingers clenched harder than necessary into my skin. As we left their shimmering world, I noticed the deep furrow in my father’s brow, the way he avoided meeting my eyes.

He hadn’t been the same after that. Investigating the ley lines became more than an interest. It became an obsession. One he then wanted to do alone.

If my father couldn’t escape unscathed from the fae’s dangerous mind games, what hope did I have with a clueless prince tagging along?

But we needed answers. The council wouldn’t listen to me; I was nothing more than my father’s unruly shadow. And yet, if we didn’t fix the magic soon, I wouldn’t be the only one who suffered. The entire kingdom of Eyre could crumble.

If my father was right and the ley lines were the answer, the fae—no matter how dangerous they were—might have the missing pieces.

If we could get them to talk.

I sat there for hours, the wind rustling the leaves above, the sea murmuring below. There was a thrum of something sacred that ran through this tree. Something about it could regulate my mood, take the storm inside and disperse the chaos running rampant within me. It was so easy to get lost here. So easy to let the weight of everything slip away.

But I couldn’t hide forever. No matter how much I wanted to stay, wrapped in the safety of this place, I had to return.

I had to face the fae again.

Beneath my resolve, though, resentment simmered. Still, I would go, but not because the council ordered it. Not because of the prince's smug arrogance. I would go because if there was even a chance my father was right, I owed it to him to find out.

This wasn't about winning or losing against a royal. It was about finding the truth. And if the truth happened to confirm my father's theories in the process, it would still be a decent consolation prize.

With a sigh, I pushed myself to my feet, brushing the dirt from my cloak. The climb down wouldn't be any easier, but I was steadier now with the decision made.

I took one last look at the hollow tree, its branches swaying gently in the breeze, before turning back toward the path.

The journey down was slow, deliberate, but I knew the way well enough. And as I reached the bottom of the trail, the weight of the new task settled over me.

The sun was setting as I entered the village, and Mannix met me, his tail wagging. I bent for a moment to run a hand through his shaggy fur, grateful that I could always count on his unwavering resolve to be by my side.

"Shall we head back, then?" I said, straightening to start the trudge up the path that led home.

He barked in agreement and ran ahead to alert my mother of our arrival. The wind picked up as I walked, tousling my hair into tangles around my face.

"Eedy?" my mother's voice called out into the settling darkness as I neared our cottage. She stood in the doorway, her dark hair framed by the fire inside, her sharp

eyes watching me closely. I could see the concern etched into her face even from a distance.

I took a deep breath and made my way toward her. Mannix, eager to escape the biting wind, squeezed past her into the warmth of the cottage.

“Have you heard?” I said as I approached, assuming the news of the council’s decision had already spread through the village like wildfire.

“I have,” she said as she stepped aside to let me in, closing the heavy door behind us to block out the cold. I hadn’t realized how chilled I’d gotten until I felt the glorious heat of the hearth radiating against my back.

I met her gaze in the confines of our cottage, the firelight tinting the white streaks in her hair gold. Age had etched lines on her face, but she looked even more beautiful for it. There was a strength in her I’d always admired, a quiet resilience that had kept her going, even after losing my father. And now, she used that same strength to harden herself for what her only daughter would say next.

“I’m going,” I said before she could ask, my voice firm.

“I know,” she said, taking a deep breath. “If anyone was going to do this, it was always going to be you.”

Her words lingered in the air, and for the first time since leaving the council chamber, there was a flicker of something other than anger inside of me.

Determination.

“I knew this day would come, Eedy. It was only a matter of time,” she said, nodding with furrowed brows. “It’s in your bones. The call to adventure. Like your father.”

I never thought of it that way, but there was something to it. There was a flutter in my belly at the thought of doing something dangerous and unpredictable. Of relying on my wits and the strength of my spirit to guide me.

But then I remembered what adventure had resulted in for my father, and I frowned.

“I’m not leaving forever,” I emphasized, fondling the cold ring around my neck. She needed to know I would never leave those I loved behind. “I’ll be back before you know it. I promise.”

She shook her head at that, moving quickly to embrace me, her body warm and soft, whiffs of tea and herbs lingering around her.

“Oh, love, what a funny thing to promise,” she whispered, her voice wobbling. “Every moment you are gone will be well-accounted for in this old heart of mine.”

I squeezed her harder to match the tightening in my throat. And with her hug—and blessing—the decision was final.

I would go. I would face the fae again. And I would prove my father had had the answers all along.



## Page 7

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### Chapter Seven

The next morning, the fresh, earthy scent of dew filled the air near our designated meeting place as I stood beside my horse, Sorsha, securing the last of my supplies. I ran my hand over my full name printed into the leather of my saddle bag, a gift from my father many rings ago. The last time I'd used it I'd snuck out after him when he'd left for another solo trip. My heart ached at the thought of how I'd stumbled home days later, blurry-eyed, leading two horses back by myself...

I chewed the inside of my cheek, sparking pain, a distraction from the haunting memory.

Around me, the council members had gathered, whispering in hushed tones as they waited to see Prince Caelum off. None of them paid me much mind, of course. They were all here for him, as though he were embarking on some glorious crusade rather than a foolish trip that could very well end in disaster.

My mother's warm and steady hand fell upon my shoulder, a balm to the anxious fire simmering beneath my skin. She gave me a sidelong smile as Mannix's tail thumped lovingly against my legs.

"Remember, Eedy, you have plenty of wit to hold your own against anyone, prince or not." She winked. "If your father were here, he'd be giving you pointers on how to really goad a royal—whilst also advising you not to throw him off a cliff."

I snorted. "So, a gentle shove would be okay?"

Her eyes sparkled. “I’d say that’s open to interpretation.”

I squeezed her hand, the ache in my chest easing slightly even as every thought of my father made the ring around my neck hang heavier. “Thank you, Mother.”

I’d just finished tightening the straps on my saddlebags when the distinct sound of hoofbeats rang across the hillside. I didn’t need to turn around to know it was the prince; the council’s reaction said it all. They straightened up in unison, fawning over his arrival with their excessive reverence.

Mannix let out a low grumble at the pathetic spectacle, which I couldn’t agree with more.

The prince dismounted with his usual effortless grace, his polished leather boots hitting the ground with a soft thud. Council members shuffled forward, offering words of admiration and well-wishes, while Caelum nodded in acceptance, his golden hair glinting in the morning sunlight.

“Your Highness,” Baldric Emberford said, his simpering words rising above the rest. “May the gods watch over you on this vital mission. The kingdom is so very fortunate to have you leading this endeavor.”

It took everything in me not to gag.

Caelum gave Baldric a smooth, practiced smile. “Thank you, Mage Emberford,” he said. “And may the council continue your further investigations in my absence. After all, this is a team effort, is it not?”

Baldric nodded, a flush creeping up his neck as he stammered, “Indeed, Your Highness. Indeed, it is. We shall do our part.”

With that, Caelum extricated himself from the council's reverent circle and strode toward me. I steeled myself, expecting a flippant remark, but instead, his expression softened as he approached, his gaze settling on Mannix and my mother at my side. My mother rested a protective hand on my shoulder once more.

"Lady Blackthorn, I presume?" Caelum said, giving her a respectful bow of his head. "Your daughter has shown much tenacity in the short time I've known her. I wonder if I have you to thank for that?"

My mother's hand tightened on my shoulder once more as she raised her chin, her eyes narrowing. "Well, I'd say that stubborn streak is actually her father's gift," she said, a touch of pride in her voice. "He was a man who believed in his cause, no matter what anyone said."

Caelum's eyes flicked toward me. His brow crinkled and his lips pursed, as if he was warring with himself on how to reply.

"He sounds like a...remarkable man," he finally said, straightening to his full height while clasping his hands behind his back. "I can only imagine the courage it took for him to hold to his beliefs in the face of adversity. You must miss him dearly."

His brow furrowed deeper, his blue eyes filling with an unnamable emotion.

Well, this was a new low for him, faking sympathy. I knew the king—his father—had been sick for some time, but he was still alive. I eyed the prince warily, knowing in my gut he was not a fan of my father. He had no right to stand there and pretend like he understood the tragedy it had been to lose him.

My mother's posture, however, relaxed, her gaze warming as she offered him a tentative smile. "We do. Every day." She glanced at me, her eyes misty. "But Eedy...she carries so much of his strength. Though, as I'm sure you're aware, a

tempered tongue was not part of the inheritance.”

“I’ve noted that,” Caelum said with a soft chuckle, snapping out of his pity gaze. “However, a quick mind is needed, especially if we are to outwit the fae. I’m happy to have your daughter with me on this journey.”

Oh, I’m sure he was happy. About as happy as a wildcat tossed into a freezing river.

Still, my mother’s cheeks flushed. “That’s a good viewpoint to have, Your Highness. You shall do well to not forget it.”

I rolled my eyes at what I was witnessing.

“Too bad the fae can’t be charmed to death, or we’d be set,” I muttered before I could think better of it.

Caelum turned the full focus of his blue eyes on me, flashing a grin. “Oh, I’m not above trying, Miss Blackthorn. Charm can be its own type of magic.” He stepped closer, his tone lowered. “It has opened many locked doors for me in the past.”

My traitorous blood pulsed faster in my veins, so I countered by squinting at him in disdain. His cool, piney scent was wafting off him in spades, and I coughed, stepping away from him and back to fumble with my supplies.

Hallows be, how am I going to make it through multiple days in this man’s company? He was already making me burn up in fury.

My mother gave me a gentle nudge after Caelum said goodbye to her, suppressing a smile. “Maybe you should give him a chance, Eedy. You might find he’s more than you’d expected.”

I forced a laugh, casting a sidelong look at Caelum as he mounted his horse once more in the distance. It was typical of him—controlled, polished, every word chosen with purpose. But a hint of doubt itched at the back of my mind, having watched him interact with my mother. Maybe there were other layers to him. Could there be something genuine in his sympathy, in the soft way he spoke to her? It was strange to see him like that, even stranger that my mother seemed to be buying into it.

On second thought, no. This was the prince. He knew exactly how to charm people, knew how to make them feel seen and heard, as if their lives mattered in his world. It was all part of his upbringing, of the facade he used to disarm everyone around him so he could persuade them to do what he wanted. He'd spent his whole life learning to be likable, to make people swoon with a smile and a well-placed compliment. Just because he had my mother hooked didn't make any of it genuine.

No, I already knew all the layers of Prince Caelum, and I did not like a single one.

With a final pat to Mannix and a quick hug to my mother, I adjusted Sorsha's reins, preparing to mount when I noticed Baldric Emberford making his way toward me.

Hallows be, what now?

"Miss Blackthorn," he said as he approached, "a quick word before you leave."

I sighed. "Make it quick, Mage Emberford. We don't want to keep the prince waiting for his grand excursion into Velarune."

He ignored my sarcasm, stepping closer. "You'll be traveling closely with His Highness, and as a member of this council—and with your father gone—I feel it falls on me to remind you of the law."

"The law?" I arched an eyebrow.

“Yes,” he said, his smile tightening. “Highborns and those with magic—such as yourself—cannot intermingle beyond the boundaries of duty. I trust you understand that.”

My grip on Sorsha’s reins tightened, the leather creaking beneath my fingers. “I wasn’t planning to intermingle with anyone.”

“Good,” Baldric said, his voice dropping lower, as if sharing some great wisdom. “It’s a woman’s responsibility to ensure these boundaries remain intact. Men can be weak to temptation, even a prince. He’s exceptionally charming; that’s not your fault. But I’d hate for you to bring shame upon yourself—our village—by letting things get out of hand.”

“If you think I need to be babysat, Mage Emberford, you’re welcome to join us,” I said through gritted teeth.

“I don’t think that will be necessary. Just keep it in mind, Miss Blackthorn. I don’t want to have to dismiss you from the council for inappropriate behavior.”

With a curt nod, he turned and walked away, leaving me simmering with fury.

The nerve of that high-handed coward.

I climbed onto Sorsha, my hands gripping the reins so tightly my knuckles ached. My mother caught my eye from the hilltop, her comforting presence grounding me just enough to swallow down the storm inside, but Baldric’s words echoed in my mind as Caelum rode up next to me.

“Well, Miss Blackthorn,” Caelum said, his eyes sparkling once more with their usual mischief, “it seems you’re ready to go, yes? I must admit, I half expected to find you still fumbling with your saddlebags until midday.”

I shot him a glare, not in the mood. “I’d be more concerned about whether you remember how to ride a horse, Your Highness. This isn’t a royal procession with someone to guide you the whole way.”

Caelum grinned wide, revealing his dimples. Too bad they were on the most annoying man in the kingdom. “Oh, don’t fret one bit about me. I’m quite a seasoned rider.”

“I’m sure,” I muttered. “Most of them probably ended with you lounging in a lavish hunting lodge. This will not be like that.”

He tsked at me. “Jealous, are we? I didn’t peg you as the type.”

“Jealous? Why would I be jealous of a betrothed man who still beds a girl in every village.”

A muscle in his jaw feathered at the mention of his engagement, but he recovered quickly.

“A girl, Miss Blackthorn? As in only one?” He scoffed as he circled Sorsha and me on his horse. “Give me a little credit. I am a prince, after all. And a generous one at that. I don’t limit the number of visitors who want to provide me comfort while I’m so far from home.”

Unbelievable. He was unbelievable. I had to travel for how long with this infuriating rake of a man?

I opened my mouth to fire back, but before I could, Ronan Dunmore stepped forward, holding a glowing acorn between his fingers. His eyes were solely on Caelum.

“Your Highness,” Ronan said, bowing, “I’ve prepared a portal to transport you and

Miss Blackthorn closer to the fae's borders. The journey would take a few weeks otherwise."

Caelum accepted the enchanted acorn with a nod. "Thank you, Mage Dunmore. Always so dependable."

Ronan handed a second acorn to me, this one wrapped in a small cloth.

"This will bring you back when your visit is complete," he said, his voice clipped and formal. "Simply pop the top off and throw it in front of your path when you're ready to return."

I took it and tucked it into my satchel. "Understood."

With the enchanted acorns prepared, it was time.

Giving the council one last charming smile, Caelum addressed the crowd for our departure. "Thank you, esteemed mages, for your guidance and confidence in this mission. Rest assured, Miss Blackthorn and I will return with answers."

I huffed under my breath, shaking my head. It would be a success if we both returned in one piece, let alone with information.

Finally, Caelum popped off the top and tossed the first acorn onto the ground ahead of us. The earth shimmered, the air rippled, and a glowing portal formed on the path ahead of us.

Caelum waved his hand in the air, urging me forward. "After you, Miss Blackthorn."

With a final glance at the council, at my mother waving, and Mannix whimpering from the small hillside nearby, I spurred Sorsha on and rode through the portal first.



The calming sensation of magic washed over me as we crossed the threshold, like spring sunlight and damp grass. But soon, the scent of salt crawled up my nose, and the light dimmed until there was only darkness.

### Chapter Eight

I had to give Ronan Dunmore credit: He knew his magic. He'd deposited us at the most western point of the kingdom, right near the border of the fae territory.

After blinking away the dark spots from my vision, I nudged Sorsha forward, keeping my eyes peeled for anything unusual on the quiet stretch of the road ahead of us. Caelum rode beside me, his posture relaxed, as though we were out for a leisurely ride through the countryside. And then, of course, he opened his mouth.

"I've been reading up on the fae," Caelum said, his voice carrying its usual smugness. "They're bound by certain rules—agreements. It's all about wordplay, riddles, bargains. I'm very good at riddles."

I scoffed, glancing at him. "You're basing your entire strategy on what? Books you've read? You think the fae will behave exactly as those stories say?"

"They're not just stories," he said in a clipped tone, his brow furrowing. "These are well-documented encounters with the fae. I've studied their weaknesses, what they desire, how they negotiate. We should offer something they want in return for information about the magic. We will need to come up with what that something is, though."

I shook my head. We were less than an hour into this trip, and my patience was already wearing thin. "Books can only tell you so much. You cannot plan things with the fae because they're not predictable. Whatever bargains you're thinking of making, they'll twist it to their advantage in ways you can't imagine."

Caelum's sharp blue eyes flicked toward me. "What would you suggest, then, Miss Blackthorn? With all your experience from one visit."

I met his stare, not backing down. "Don't make any promises. Don't offer them anything you're not willing to lose. And above all, don't believe for a second that you can outsmart them."

He tilted his head, assessing my recommendations. To my surprise, he nodded. "Fair enough. I'll follow your lead—for now."

The tension between us didn't disappear, but something had shifted. I never expected him to concede to anything I said, but here he was, doing it. I guess there was a flicker of intelligence in that golden head of his that his bloated ego hadn't yet snuffed out.

I hesitated then cleared my throat with another request while I had him pliable. "If that's the case, maybe we can drop the formalities. This isn't exactly a council meeting, and we need to be on more equal ground if we're going to trust each other."

Plus, saying Your Highness every five minutes was going to push me over the edge.

A flicker of amusement crossed his face. "Oh? I didn't know you were so eager to have my name on your tongue."

"Gods, forget it." I growled as I urged Sorsha forward in a hurry. Never mind the fae being dangerous, I was going to punch the crown prince of Eyre right in his smartarse mouth before night fell.

He caught up with me, spurring his horse to fall in line again next to mine while he stammered out an apology. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for. I'm usually much better behaved around...when I'm..." He paused, his teasing edge gone. "You may

call me Caelum. Really. I'd prefer it."

I huffed, keeping my attention on the path even though I yearned to watch him grovel. "Fine. Caelum. But save your witty replies for the fae. We're going to need every bit of it."

A long silence, but I could feel the grin radiating off him even before he spoke. "So, Eedy. You think I'm witty?"

But before I could talk my way out of answering, I pulled Sorsha to a stop at the changing scenery.

The surrounding trees were getting taller, more gnarled and twisted. I glanced up, noting how the branches interlocked above us, like skeletal fingers forming an arched canopy.

We were closing in on the fae border.

Velarune.

I kept my mind alert as I pressed Sorsha onward once more and took deep, soothing breaths.

Meanwhile, Caelum was a steady presence beside me, his eyes wide and his mouth open in wonder, like a child in a sweet shop.

Gods, help me.

As we reached the border, the air pulsed, and the ground beneath us flickered in an ethereal glow. Jagged ivory stones, like the teeth of a giant, rose from the ground on the boundary line. Ancient runes were carved deep into their sides.

“Last chance to turn back,” I murmured, glancing over at the prince.

“And miss out on the chance to be tricked, drugged, or roped into an eternal bargain?” Caelum offered a wide smile. “I think not.”

Without waiting for my reply, he nudged his horse forward, crossing the glowing line into Velarune. I followed him with a heavy sigh.

Now that we’d crossed over, we were in the fae territory and under their rules. The fae were held by an ancient magical agreement to not venture beyond this line, so all we needed to do was get the information and get back across it.

Easier said than done.

“Keep close and stay alert,” I warned Caelum. “They will not let us go far without some challenge.”

Caelum grinned. “Excellent. I love a good game.”

I shot him a glare. “This isn’t a game,” I hissed. “They could lead us in circles for days if they really want to.”

He raised his eyebrows, still smiling. “Oh, I don’t doubt it. But would that be all that bad? I mean, look at this place—it’s pure magic.”

I had to admit he wasn’t wrong. The magic here thrummed like a living heartbeat, wild and unrestrained. The ground shimmered underfoot with patches of color that seemed to breathe, shifting from green to blue to violet. Glowing veins crawled up the trees and prickly, harsh leaves burst from their branches. I could see why he was fascinated, just as I had once been.

A thick mist began to curl around us then, rising from the ground like a mystical tide. Sorsha whinnied, clearly spooked by the strangeness of it.

“Shhh, girl, it’s okay,” I said, patting her mane while my own heart skipped in worry.

Within moments, it obscured our path entirely, the world narrowing to a few feet in any direction. I strained my eyes, recognizing this as one of the fae’s first tricks from the last time I was here: a mist that disoriented travelers, making them forget which way they’d come. But last time, my father had guided us out of it, and he hadn’t exactly left an instruction manual on how he did it.

“Stay right behind me,” I told Caelum, guiding Sorsha forward. I kept my pace slow and steady. Every few steps, the mist would clear enough to reveal a glimpse of the path ahead, only for it to twist and turn again, leading us back to where we’d started.

I bit back my frustration. This is what the fae wanted. At best, it was meant to get us to leave. At worst, they would lead us to our doom.

“You’ve done this before, right?” Caelum asked. “Because it’s not feeling like it.”

“Once,” I replied, not taking my eyes off the flickering trees. “And I had my father to lead me the last time.”

Caelum hummed softly, as though the twisting paths and shifting trees were amusing instead of maddening. His horse picked its way beside mine, its steps sure, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he truly understood the danger or if he was too curious to care.

“I’m guessing your father kept you on the most boring path,” Caelum remarked with his nose in the air. “Probably avoided anything remotely exciting.”

My jaw clenched. “He was practical. He understood what he was up against.”

“Of course,” Caelum replied. “I just think caution can have its limits. Sometimes, pushing forward can be more fruitful than holding back.”

Without warning, Caelum spurred his horse ahead, disappearing into the mist.

I bit back a screech at his utter stupidity, forcing myself to follow him at a gallop to keep up. Let him think he knew better. The fae would teach him his lesson soon enough.

Ideally, before his arrogance got us both killed.

At last, the mist thinned, and the ground leveled into an open grove where—thank the gods—Caelum and his horse were stationed, waiting for me.

“I found someone to ask for directions,” he called out as I approached, clearly pleased with himself.

At the center of the grove stood a figure: a tall fae, elegant and slender. His eyes glimmered with an unsettling brightness, a blend of gold and icy blue.

I’d be inclined to call him beautiful, but when I noted the sharp tips of his ears, I remembered how deadly that beauty could be.

“Greetings, wanderers,” he drawled playfully, like he was about to tell a joke I wouldn’t find amusing at all. He smiled, his eyes lingering on Caelum, and then on me, sizing us up. “Venturing into realms where humans rarely tread. Is it bravery or foolishness?”

Caelum shifted in his saddle, his posture straightening. I held my breath; I knew

enough of fae to recognize a test was coming.

“If you wish to pass through our domain,” the fae continued, “you must answer a question.” His lips curled a little further, his eyes squinting a little deeper.

Caelum leaned forward in his saddle, his eyes wide and eager. “Well, then,” he said, “you have us with bated breath. Give us your best riddle, and let’s see if it’s worth all this fanfare.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and bit the inside of my cheek. Our first encounter, and he was already instigating them. I would not survive the night.

The fae’s smile widened, revealing perfect, sharp teeth. “Ah, a bold one,” he purred. “Very well, princeling. Here is your question: What can you get into that puts you in a tight spot, but if you choose to become it, all will fear what you might plot?”

My pulse quickened. Fae riddles were notoriously tricky, and what would happen if we couldn’t figure it out?

I was about to ask the fae to repeat it one more time, but, to my horror, Caelum was already opening his mouth to answer.

“Trouble, of course,” he replied with a lazy grin.

The fae’s eyes flashed with approval, and he let out a low chuckle, a sound both dark and delighted. “A quick tongue. Well done, princeling.” He inclined his head. “If trouble is what you seek, you’ll find plenty of it beyond these woods.” He stepped back, sweeping an elegant hand toward the path beyond. “Proceed, bold wanderers. The real tricks are yet to come.”

I blinked in surprise, my mind still trying to catch up to what had just happened as we



both ushered our horses forward.

Caelum caught my expression, smirking. “What? Did you think I’d be stumped?”

I scoffed, masking my surprise. “It was just...very fast.”

Caelum raised an eyebrow, his grin deepening. “That was a pretty easy one, to be honest. My uncle has a fascination with fae riddles. On occasion, he’d make me answer them before I’d get dinner.”

“And if you didn’t answer correctly?”

“Then I was in quite a sorry—and hungry—spot, wasn’t I?” He laughed, but there was a tightness in his eyes. He was playing this off as a joke, but my instincts told me he’d just revealed a cold truth. I knew he’d stayed with his Uncle Tobias—his father’s brother—most of his life as a ward, but I’d never heard of anything improper going on there.

I turned away, focusing on the path ahead, but I couldn’t shake how off guard he always made me. First, I’d finally admitted to myself that he had more than just a flicker of intelligence. And now a touch of hardship as well?

“Let’s keep moving,” I said, keeping my tone brisk as I prodded Sorsha forward.

He followed, but as we continued down the path, I caught myself staring at the prince next to me, trying to untangle the riddle he seemed to be forming into.

And that answer might be even more dangerous than anything the fae had in store.

### Chapter Nine

As we descended a slight slope, the landscape shifted, growing even more enchanting. The thick trees gave way to open glades where odd flora bloomed in bright colors—yellows, reds, and oranges with roots that slithered around them.

A whispering sound drifted past, almost like laughter, curling through the trees. Goosebumps rose along my arms, and I had the distinct feeling of being watched. Ahead, the path curved, and a faint, haunting melody beckoned us forward.

Once we cleared the bend, it came into view: On a raised dais of moss-covered boulders, a throne of twisted vines and crystal glimmered beneath the dappled light, and on it sat the fae king himself.

King Thalion .

The name hovered in my mind like a spell. His presence was unmistakable, even more arresting than I remembered. He was beautiful in the way the fae always were—otherworldly, meant to draw you in before they split you in two. Silver hair cascaded over his shoulders, and a crown woven from dark vines and ivy rested atop his head.

A shiver ran through me as Caelum and I dismounted to approach the dais. I'd seen the king once before, a shadowed figure standing at my father's side. Even then, I was wary of him. Now, under that same scrutiny, the weight of his gaze made me consider turning back.

“Wanderers,” King Thalion spoke as we got closer, his voice smooth, like the whisper of water over stone. “It is a rare day indeed that we entertain mortals in our court. To what do we owe this pleasure ?” His eyes sharpened on me.

I glanced over at Caelum, who gave me a quick nod, keeping to his word to let me lead.

I took a steadying breath, stepping forward. “My name is Eedy Blackthorn, a member of the High Council of Magi in Naohm, and this is the crown prince of Eyre, Caelum Ashford. We’re here to seek answers about the magic.” I willed my voice not to waver. “It’s unraveling throughout Eyre, and we need to understand why, so we can fix it.”

The fae king smiled, but it held little sincerity. “The health of magic in the mortal realm is of little concern to us, girl. It flows freely and without issue here. And yet...” He nodded toward a towering figure off to his right. The figure moved closer into the light, revealing an ancient fae, his eyes as dark as the shadows at his feet.

“What do you think of them, Solimir?” the king murmured, leaning forward on his throne.

Solimir’s gaze swept over us, assessing, lingering a second longer on me before shifting back to Caelum. While he studied us, I took in his weathered face, marked by lines etched deep from centuries of existence. His skin held the faintest hue of silver, as if kissed by moonlight, and a jagged scar slashed down from his left eyebrow to his cheekbone, stark against his otherwise perfect skin.

Without a word, he reached into his robes and drew out a slender knife, the blade black as midnight. Both Caelum and I stiffened, backpedaling away from the dais. But, unknown to us, a hoard of other fae had crept up from behind. We were surrounded.

Solimir noted our fear, and that made him smile.

“Relax, mortals,” he said, his voice husky, as if he rarely spoke. “A taste of your blood is all I require. Nothing more. I must understand who stands before us, in flesh and essence.”

He stepped down from the dais and lifted the blade toward Caelum first. The prince shot him a hard look but offered his hand, jaw clenched. With a swift motion, Solimir nicked his palm, catching a few drops of blood on the tip of his blade. He lifted it to his lips, tasting it with a strange, far-off look.

“A highborn, yes, but otherwise mortal,” he murmured. “Though...a little saltier than most.” He raised an eyebrow at Caelum, as if expecting an explanation.

Caelum shrugged, a wry smile tugging at his lips. “Must be all the salted pork I had back in Naohm.”

Solimir’s mouth quirked, though he didn’t deign to respond. Instead, he turned to me, his expression shifting to something darker. “And now you .”

He motioned with the knife, and I extended my hand. The blade was cold as it sliced across my skin, sharp enough that I barely felt it until my own blood welled in my palm.

As Solimir took my blood to his mouth, though, the change in his face was immediate. His eyes widened, a flicker of something raw and mystical sparking within them. He looked at me as though he were seeing something impossible.

“ Mage ,” he whispered, his voice thick with reverence. He sniffed the air intently, nodding.

I stiffened, irritation flaring up inside me. “Only men with the gift of magic are called mages,” I replied curtly, the word souring my mood. “I’m a witch .”

But the old fae shook his head, an unsettling smile creeping across his face. “ Mage ,” Solimir said again, his voice growing firmer, as though he was stating an undeniable truth. His stare didn’t waver, and for a moment, I thought I also caught concern in his milky eyes.

King Thalion raised an eyebrow, his gaze flicking between the old fae and me. “I’m sure you are aware that is the ancient word for magic itself,” he explained, his tone light but his eyes intent on me. “And that is what he sees in you: a vibrant connection to magic, strong and undiluted.”

Caelum shifted beside me. I clenched my fists, trying to shake the strange mix of pride and unease erupting under my skin. It made little sense. I’d never held any magic inside of me; I could only use it when lightning was nearby for me to control. That gift was hardly impressive enough to make this old fae look at me with such awe.

The fae king’s gaze narrowed as he stood. “You would do well to forget the problems of the mortal world and stay here with us, Miss Blackthorn. I remember you now from your previous visit. Just two rings ago, with your father, yes?”

My pulse raced through my veins, but I kept my face neutral. “That’s correct,” I replied evenly.

King Thalion’s lips curved upward. “He was an interesting one, your father,” he said. “You were underdeveloped then, still a youth in your power. But now...”

His eyes roamed over me, the way weak men often looked at things they wished to claim as their own. It made my skin crawl.

“Now, the connection is noticeably stronger.” He turned away, his voice dropping to a murmur, as if he spoke only for himself. “Yes, much stronger now.”

The king sat back down on his throne, curling his long fingers tight against the edges of his stone armrests. “You have all that is needed to be one of the fae: power, beauty, and a fierce spirit.” He leaned forward, his eyes gleaming. “You could be...beautifully cruel.”

I swallowed, fighting the discomfort churning in my stomach. I didn’t want to be praised by the fae, the beings who only cared for themselves and nothing more. But I could not deny a part of me was intrigued with their interest. Did I have more power than I knew of? If they could show me the way, could I be something more ? And if yes, at what cost?

Caelum cleared his throat, staring at me with concern before stepping forward. “Your Majesty, as gracious as your compliments are of Miss Blackthorn, we’re here for answers about the magic. That is what we came for, nothing more.” His voice held a forced politeness, but I could feel the tension radiating off him. Gone was the playful, lighthearted Caelum, and in his place was a commanding prince. “Perhaps we can return to discussing a fair exchange of knowledge?”

The fae king’s gaze flicked to Caelum, barely masking his disdain. “Mortals and their bargains,” he spat. “You are a fool to seek a deal with the fae.”

Caelum gave a slight bow, his face perfectly composed. “We only seek to learn from those who possess the wisdom we lack,” he replied, his voice smooth as silk. “I am sure your realm values the sharing of knowledge as much as our own.”

King Thalion’s lips quirked up, shaking his head as if in disbelief. “You’re a clever one, princeling. And you are correct in your thinking: Knowledge is power. But wisdom here is earned, not given freely.” He glanced at the other fae gathered

around, and for a heartbeat, I thought he might send us away empty-handed.

The king's smile widened as he leaned back on the throne. "You will stay with us tonight." His declaration rang through the grove. "We will host a revelry in your honor as it is a rare and special thing to have a crown prince and a powerful witch in our company. In the morning, perhaps we shall speak of magic."

It was clear that "perhaps" was the most important word he'd spoken.

"And if we refuse?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. If they were only going to toy with us, I'd rather cut my losses and leave now. I could already feel it—the temptation. To learn more about what they saw in me.

My father's hollow face when he'd left this place flashed in my mind. What had he learned those many rings ago that made him change so much? It might be best to leave that knowledge buried with the fae.

"Refuse?" the king echoed, his eyes gleaming like two polished pieces of onyx. "If you want me to consider your request, you will surely consider mine." His stare locked onto me.

"It seems our evening plans are set," Caelum said under his breath with a sidelong glance, cradling his cut hand.

I nodded to the fae king, my only acknowledgment of his offer, even as a sinking feeling seeped into my bones.

King Thalion inclined his head, satisfaction dripping off his smile. "Then it is decided." He raised his hands, scanning the gathered crowd of his fellow fae. "Go now and prepare the festivities for our honored guests."

His eyes flitted over me once more before rising from his chair and making his way down the side of the boulders, deeper into Velarune, where we were expected to follow.

The fae that had surrounded us began to fade back into the shadows, but their eyes all lingered on me, oscillating between caution and curiosity. I shivered under their scrutiny, clenching my hands to keep steady.

What do they really think I could do?

Caelum leaned in, his usual, light tone edged with something sharper. “Well, that went well, I suppose. The king seemed rather taken by you.”

I caught the way his fingers flexed against his side, and the faint muscle in his jaw that twitched as he looked away.

“Taken with me?” I muttered. “They’re toying with us, Caelum. And misplaced interest in me doesn’t translate into answers about the magic drying up.”

He gave a quick shrug, though his eyes darkened as they drifted back to the now empty throne. “Well, maybe if they’re focused on you, we’ll get what we need from them more easily. Their fascination with you could be a distraction and work to our advantage.”

“Or it could be our downfall,” I said, keeping my voice low. “Their interests are never simple.”

He exhaled slowly, his attempt at a smile faltering. “Are anyone’s interests ever simple, Eedy?”

I scrambled for a logical reply, but when I turned to face him, his blue eyes pierced



through me, pinning my mouth shut.

### Chapter Ten

As we followed our escorts deeper into Velarune, the landscape shifted once more. Rising out of the hillside, half-hidden by jagged rocks and climbing vines, was a castle hewn into the stone, its towers and walls seamlessly melding into the white-faced mountain. A narrow, winding path led up to the entrance, flanked by twisted trees. The heady weight of magic still hung heavy in the air.

After a maze of turns and passageways inside the castle corridors, our two female fae guides finally stopped before a hall littered with heavy, ornate doors. They gestured toward two guest rooms, three doors down from each other.

“Rest now, wanderers,” the fae closest to me said, her voice tinkling like chimes in the wind. “We shall bring you proper clothes for the revelry soon.”

Then they left us, but not before giggling as they passed the prince.

I rolled my eyes, ready to throw open my door and sleep for a decade. But Caelum was still lingering outside his door, his expression unreadable as he glanced over at me. He fiddled with the bandages the female guides had provided us for our hands. He was hesitating, but I had no idea why.

I waited, wondering if he was about to say something important, a plan for tonight or a strategy to talk through, or just a haughty remark. Anything. But, instead, he gave a small nod, his usual mask slipping back into place.

“See you soon,” he said, his voice quieter than usual.

I nodded, exhaustion from the day's events pulling at me, and slipped into my room. After wrapping my cut hand, I collapsed on the bed, wishing to close my eyes for a moment, only to fall into a deep sleep for hours. When I awoke, an elaborate gown waited, hung on a post by the door.

Blinking away sleep, I got up to study it better in the flickering candlelight. It was a deep, forest-green dress, crafted from some light, flowing material. I frowned, taking in the low neckline and the delicate web of lace gloves to match. This was far from the simple, practical clothing I usually wore, and I wasn't sure how I felt about the fae having chosen something for me. Yet, there was something undeniably beautiful about it.

A tag hung from the sleeve, and I snatched it up to read it.

A dress worthy of the witch who will wear it.—Thalion

The king was laying it on thick. He clearly wanted to convince me to stay here in Velarune, but it still didn't make sense to me why.

Still, I was anxious to try it on.

Abandoning my traveling clothes in a pile on the floor, I shimmied into the soft dress, letting it settle around my body. A strand of my hair fell loose from the side braid I'd hastily plaited, brushing against my cheek as I surveyed my reflection in the polished mirror that hung on the back of my door. The dress hugged my form in a way that was foreign, like a lover's embrace. I'd had encounters with men, of course, but none of them had held me like this .

A strange thrill rattled through me at seeing myself like this—bold, powerful.

But feeling powerful and being powerful were two different things, I reminded

myself.

I tried to push down the small, stubborn voice that whispered to the very heart of me: What difference might you be able to make if you could harness more ? It was a dangerous road to wander down.

Father used to say that magic fused with a person's soul the moment they were born, shaping itself into something entirely unique. No two gifts were ever the same, just as no two souls ever were. While some wielded fire or bent water to their will, others found their magic manifesting in subtler ways, like my mother manipulating the temperature or me redirecting lightning. It was a deeply personal connection, an extension of oneself.

It was wrong of me to want more than I'd been given.

And yet, standing here, I couldn't shake the quaking frustration that no matter how hard I tried, it never seemed to be enough. Not to the council. Not to anyone. Power had a way of commanding respect without effort, and I had spent so long clawing for scraps of it.

Even before I joined the council, no one in the village ever thought I was worthy of going on the research trips with my father. They always scoffed at him, told him I was better left at home to tend to a husband and children. That I had no gift worthy of making a difference.

The thought left a bitter taste in my mouth, one that I swallowed down as I took one last look in the mirror, my hands tightening into fists.

A powerful witch , the fae king had called me. Perhaps, for one evening, I could be.

When I stepped out to meet Caelum, he was already waiting, dressed in a finely

tailored tunic and trousers that clung to him in all the right places. As he turned to face me, I caught the briefest flicker of surprise in his expression before he quickly schooled his face back into its usual smirk. Yet, his eyes betrayed him as they continued their trek over the dress, lingering at the low neckline and the bare curve of my shoulders.

“Try not to stare,” I muttered, but the thrill of capturing his attention didn’t escape me.

Caelum cleared his throat, blue eyes darting to meet mine. “I wasn’t staring,” he said smoothly, though the sudden flush in his cheeks told a different story. “It’s just...you should try not wearing bags for clothes more often, that’s all.”

“Right,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I’m sure this dress would hold up really well for everyday travel on horseback and up cliff sides.”

He nodded his head in agreement, his gaze turning soft. “Well, in any event, it suits you.”

Silence hummed between us, and his expression shifted back into the one he’d worn ever since entering Velarune: awe and wonder. Except, this time, he was only looking at me.

He offered his hand. “Would you do me the honor of attending my first fae revelry with me, Eedy?”

My heart ricocheted in my chest as I held his eyes with mine. He was doing it again, looking at me like he was trying to uncover what made me tick, but this time, it wasn’t to undermine me. It felt careful. Curious. Cautious. Like he didn’t want to scare me away with his staring, but at the same time, he couldn’t stop.

I nodded my head, not trusting my mouth to form the proper words. I was about to take his hand when I noticed something missing.

“Your cut from Solimir earlier, it’s already gone,” I said, yanking his hand closer to inspect it further.

“Is it?” he said, pulling away to look at his own palm, pretending to be confused.

I swear to the gods...

I held my pointer finger up to him like a blade, my blood boiling. “How long have we been here, and you’ve already sniffed out a fae healer to bed, is that it?”

He stared at my finger inches from his face as if it really might cut him.

“What can I say, I must have a type,” he said sheepishly.

Unbelievable.

I closed my eyes, taking a long pull of breath through my nose, attempting to calm myself.

But it didn’t work.

“Caelum, we need to stick together at this revelry. I can’t have you disappearing with every female fae that bats her long, perfect eyelashes at you.” I opened my eyes to stare him down for the last part. “I need to know I can rely on you.”

“Understood,” he replied, inclining his head. “I’m all yours tonight.”

A jolt coursed through me at his words, and I wanted to scream. Why was my

desperate heart quivering when he said anything with the slightest bit of insinuation? Could it be that I felt a pull toward him that ran deeper than all the surface layers I'd assumed about him, layers that were all turning out to be false?

Except for the rake part, I reminded myself hurriedly. He was still most definitely that.

I turned quickly on my heel and left that question behind me, where it belonged.

I followed the sound of music through the winding corridors until a few servants found us and guided us to the party. The space opened into a massive cavern, filled with glowing, pulsating colors. A waterfall cascaded down over the mouth of the cave, flowing into a pool that mirrored the strange lights above, casting shifting reflections over the gathered fae.

I scanned the room, noting the hypnotic sway of the dancers moving in time with the music. The fae danced with an unrestrained wildness, nothing like the careful, measured steps I'd seen in books or heard about from my father's stories from his trips to the capital city in Eyre. This was something far more primal.

I headed toward the edge of the room, hoping to keep out of sight, but Caelum caught my arm, pulling me back.

"Come on, Eedy," he said, eyes bright again. "When will we ever be at a fae revelry again? One dance won't kill us."

I studied the point where his hand grasped my arm. "This isn't exactly my idea of a relaxing night out, Caelum."

"Just one song." His palm slid down my arm to hold my hand. "For appearances, if nothing else. Surely, it's not good manners for us to seem unimpressed with their

party.”

Electricity shot from my fingers up my arm at his touch.

I sighed, loudly, but it didn't deter him.

“Come on,” he begged again, tugging at my palm, “or I might have to find a lovely female fae to dance with instead.” He arched an eyebrow, testing me.

I growled at his arrogance, marching out to the floor myself, dragging him behind me. One dance with this infuriating man, and that was it .

Once I'd led us to the center of the dancing fae, I turned to face him. The dancing area was draped in shadows, so it was hard to see him save for the pulse of colored lights every few seconds.

“Ready?” he said, taking the last step toward me, the humid air between us fleeing to make room. I nodded, biting the inside of my cheek as my stomach twisted in knots.

Why did he make me so bloody nervous?

One of his hands slid to my waist, his touch steady. Confident. The heat of his palm seeped through the fabric of my dress, igniting a slow burn that crept up my back. I lifted one hand to rest against his shoulder, the thin barrier of his tunic doing little to mask the firmness beneath it.

I dared to look into his eyes again, only to find him back at his games. He studied me with the perfect mixture of curiosity and challenge. Jaw clenched, I held my ground, refusing to be the first to look away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noted his other hand as it lifted, palm open, waiting.



Daring. When I finally took it, he gave the faintest squeeze, his thumb brushing lightly against my gloved knuckles.

As we started to sway, I maintained a careful distance between us, holding myself rigid to keep from leaning in too far. It didn't matter, though. This close to him, I was feeling things. Not only was his scent swirling around me, his presence alone carried a noticeable weight to it, filling in every crack and crevice of space around me.

"You're looking at me like you could rip me in two," he said with a smirk.

I sighed, trying to appear nonchalant despite the thrashing in my chest. "Lucky for you, that's not how my magic manifests."

He pursed his lips. "How does it manifest?"

"I can catch lightning. Redirect it. Capture it," I said, trying to focus on the rhythm of the dance and not the way his fingers pressed a bit more firmly against my waist.

His awe-and-wonder face resurfaced, his eyes alight. "What does that feel like?"

Just like this, I realized as a sharp thrill ran through me, stealing the air from my lungs. I cleared my throat, forcing the thought away. "It feels like being in complete control, for once. Of seeing something powerful and bending it to my will. Of wanting something and claiming it."

I hadn't meant to sound so raw, but once the words were out, I could do nothing to wrangle them back in. I risked another glance at him, expecting that insufferable smirk to return. Instead, his expression shifted. His hand fanned out across my hip, pulling me infinitesimally closer, his gaze steady and intent.

"Maybe you could show me one day," he murmured.

“Perhaps,” I breathed, my body on fire. I needed a distraction.

I glanced away from him, letting my eyes flit over the fae surrounding us. The other revelers used their whole bodies to dance, their movements free and uninhibited. We were like a timid candle amidst a raging wildfire, I realized. Two mortals clinging to etiquette in a place that celebrated chaos.

Caelum seemed to notice too. He leaned closer, his lips brushing the shell of my ear. “You know,” he murmured, a playful tease returning to his voice, “if we’re going to fit in here, we might have to adjust our style a bit.”

“Adjust how, exactly?” I asked, my heartbeat already racing at how close we were.

In response, he half spun me around, shifting so my back was against his chest. With my arms crossed in front of me, his hands found mine, guiding us as he moved in sync with the music’s relentless tempo. The loud drums pulsed through my chest.

“I...I don’t think this is a proper dance position,” I stammered, acutely aware of the steady wall of him pressed against my spine. My body yearned to relax against him, but I resisted, standing like an icicle instead.

He leaned in, his breath tickling my ear as he chuckled softly. “Tell me, Eedy. How many balls or soirées have you attended?”

“I don’t need to have attended any,” I muttered defensively. “I’ve seen enough illustrations in books.”

“Ah, books,” he mused. “Didn’t someone wise once say you can’t rely solely on books?”

I growled, having no better retort. I looked back at him over my shoulder to glare, but

his face was kiss-close, his tousled golden hair brushing against a few strands of my own that had slipped out of my braid.

His voice dropped. “Did you ever think you’d dance with him?”

“Who?” I demanded, watching a kaleidoscope of colored lights dance across his face.

“The greatest rival you’ve ever known.” He spun me again, so I faced him once more. He smiled, dimples and all, as he pulled me back in with both hands on my hips, squeezing out any space between us.

I scoffed, digging my nails into his shoulders to distract me from the heat rising in my cheeks. “You? My rival? And what do you rival me in?”

“Wit. Will. Strategy, perhaps?”

“Strategy?” I shot back as he spun me away. His adherence to the music’s tempo was irritatingly perfect. “You mean how you blunder into something without thinking it through?”

His smirk deepened as he pulled me back into him. “Better than waiting too long to make a move, like you.”

I strained against his embrace, but he held firm. “I need to understand the positives and negatives of a choice. It’s called being cautious.”

“And I’m being pragmatic,” he countered, leaning both of us into a low dip, his voice like silk against the crackling fire of my nerves. “I see a way to get what I want, and I take it.”

His words sent a shiver racing through me as he brought us back up. Still, I jerked my

chin up. “What a reckless way to live.”

“Reckless? Maybe,” he murmured, his eyes locking onto mine with a heat that stole my breath. “But I can promise you, Tempest, you’d never be bored.”

He twirled me again, and I was caught without a solid reply once more. He had me there. Caelum Ashford was many things: arrogant, pampered, cocky. But boring was not one of them.

With my mouth clamped shut, I let myself get swept into the thrum of the atmosphere. There was something undeniably magnetic about the way the prince moved, the way he commanded our dance. I knew whichever way he turned, twirled, or tugged me, it would be smooth and synced to the music’s rhythm. And with every new shift or twist in his arms, another bolt of excitement coursed through me.

I was losing myself to a man I hated. I hated him, right? Yes, I did. I did .

So, as the song came to an end, I pulled away, feigning indifference. “There. One dance. Now I’m going to stay out of trouble, and you should too.”

I slipped into the shadows along the outskirts of the cave, pressing my back against the cool, stone wall as I tried to gather myself. But the pulse of the revelry continued around me, and no matter how far I tried to retreat, the heat from Caelum’s touch still clung to my skin.

I just needed a moment, a breath of fresh air.

I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply. When I opened them, the sight of a commotion across the room caught my attention. My stomach twisted as I watched King Thalion stroll into the revelry, his every step moving the space like a ripple through water. The fae parted for him, their laughter fading into hushed murmurs as he passed.

He prowled through the party like a predator, calculated and untouchable. And then his gaze found me.

A weight settled over my chest, sharp and suffocating. My breath hitched, the pulse of the music falling away as my heart thundered in my ears.

The king's lips curved into a slow, knowing smile.

I pressed harder against the wall until the rough stone bit into my skin, my fingers curling into fists. Whatever game Thalion was playing, I had no interest in being a pawn. But with the fae, it didn't matter—once you were on their board, you joined in, or you were taken out.

### Chapter Eleven

I fidgeted with the lace of my gloves, the intricate threads catching on my restless movements. I hated feeling this exposed, this out of my element. My thoughts were spiraling, swept up in a furious torrent of doubt and fear.

A calming pine smell settled over me.

“Storming away really suits you,” said a familiar voice. Caelum was beside me again, leaning casually against the wall as if he hadn’t just rattled alive every nerve in my body.

I glared at him, but he only grinned, revealing a dimple as he scanned the crowd.

“You should talk to him,” Caelum said, nodding toward the king who was now mingling with other fae.

I stiffened. “What? Why?”

“Well, for one, I surely can’t talk to him. He thinks I’m a spoiled, dumb highborn.”

I smirked. “You don’t say?”

He ignored my jab. “But you . He’s interested in you, Eedy. That’s a rare kind of leverage. Use it.”

I frowned, the wheels turning in my head despite my reluctance. “You think I can just

stroll up to him and...what? Charm him?"

"You play the game," he said simply. "Show interest in his offer. Make him think he's in control while you're the one steering the conversation. You'd be surprised what people will share when they believe you're on their side."

I hesitated, my mind racing. King Thalion's sharp gaze still lingered in my memory. I wasn't sure I could face him, let alone get anything useful out of him.

"And you think that will work?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

He smiled faintly. "It's worked for me. A survival tactic, truly."

"Yes, but that's you," I scoffed, crossing my arms over my chest. "What makes you think I'd be any good at it?"

His eyes held mine, unwavering. "Because you've already proven you're sharper than you look. You've held your ground against that insufferable council. You've handled me." He grasped my upper arms on both sides and turned me away from him to face our target. "Trust me, you can handle him."

He squeezed my shoulders where his hands still lingered. "Like I said, though, you'll have to go alone. He'll only clench his mouth shut around me."

The idea of approaching the fae king sat like a rock in my stomach. I wasn't sure I could do what Caelum was asking. I wasn't a charmer; I was a thorn people pricked themselves on. Being likable was a skill I'd never mastered.

"You can do this, Eedy," he said, his warm breath fanning across my bare shoulder. "You're braver than you think."

I'd planned to stay under the radar during this revelry, to just make it out drug-free and alive. This was the last thing I wanted to do, but Caelum's unrelenting confidence lit me up like a hearty glass of wine.

I pulled a deep breath through my nose before replying. "Fine. Fine. I'll see what I can do."

"There's my tempest," he murmured in my ear, making my cheeks flare to a new level of heat. I tried to turn so I could properly smack him, but he held me firmly in place. "Save that fire for the king. I'll be right here if you need me."

With that, he gave me a soft push forward, and I marched away from the prince—and toward King Thalion.

The king immediately noted me strolling toward him and offered a wolfish smile. My steps faltered, but I remembered Caelum's words.

You are braver than you think.

I threw my shoulders back, reminding myself that I was a powerful witch, if only for tonight. He wanted something from me. I had leverage.

But as I closed in on the king, I caught a towering figure looming close out of the corner of my eye. The old ancient fae who'd sliced my hand open in the forest was watching me from across the room, his somber gaze sending a chill down my spine.

Solimir.

I froze in the middle of the cave hall, battling back the wave of dread that his attention stirred in me. What did he want? What did he know?



“Do not let Solimir cause you distress,” came a smooth voice, interrupting my spiraling thoughts. I turned to see King Thalion standing before me. He studied Solimir as well, a knowing smirk on his lips. “He is a descendant of the old god, Vayros. At times, he thinks he knows better than the rest of us. Even me. He doesn’t seem fond of letting go of old ways.”

“Old ways?” I asked as I watched Solimir slink away into the shadows near the edge of the waterfall. “He was staring at me like he expected me to burst into flames.”

The fae king chuckled. “In his eyes, you’re something close to divine—a dormant power waiting to be awakened. Solimir is stuck in ancient beliefs, bound to ideas of magic long forgotten. That it is all connected and that a balance must be found at all times. To him, your presence throws off the balance.”

I swallowed, my stomach churning. “And what do you see?” I asked, lifting my chin, challenging him to give me a straight answer.

King Thalion’s eyes roamed my face. “I see someone with untapped power, someone who could be an unstoppable force in the fae realm if she were willing to embrace it. No man could reign over you here. You’d be free. Powerful. Your own master.” He leaned in, his voice a whisper in my ear. “You could claim whatever you desired as your own.”

His words coiled around my thoughts, a tantalizing idea forming. I could have control, the freedom to live on my own terms, to seize what I wanted without hesitation. What would the council think of me then, if I held power like a fae? I could make them listen to me.

I took a breath, forcing myself to stay steady, even as my mind churned. I had spent so much of my life restrained, fighting to be heard, fighting to matter. The idea of not fighting anymore, of taking what was mine without asking permission...

The allure of it tingled in my veins, but then an image of Caelum flashed in my mind, grounding me.

Be bold. Be brave. Play the game. Caelum's advice echoed in my mind, and I let my lips curve into a faint smile. If Thalion wanted to play, I could at least try to keep up.

"Your offer interests me," I said, my voice light, testing the waters. "I'm tired of the boring and weak mages in Eyre. I'd love to learn more about what I could do here in the fae realm. Power is what I seek, but I'm also not a fool. What are you looking to get from me?"

His smile didn't falter, but his eyes narrowed just slightly, as if measuring how much to reveal. "The fae are an ancient race, Miss Blackthorn, and with age comes challenges. Stagnation, even. We need new blood, new strength to continue what has endured for centuries. You could be a part of that future. You could help shape it."

I kept my expression neutral, though my heart thudded painfully in my chest. New blood. The phrase stuck in my mind, sharp as a blade. Was that what this was about? Were the fae not as powerful as they once were? Were they losing their superior grip on the magic?

I held his gaze, letting a touch of flirtation creep into my tone. "And how do you know I wouldn't turn your world upside down, King Thalion? You said no one would rule over me."

His laugh was low and rich, a sound that prickled at my skin. "Perhaps that's exactly what Velarune needs right now. We do not shy away from a little chaos here."

My stomach churned at the weight of his words. They were clever, carefully constructed to appeal to both my ambition and curiosity. But I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being lured into a trap. His interest wasn't in me, it was in what I

could give to him and his realm.

Still, I let my smile linger, stepping closer. “It’s a tempting offer, Your Majesty. I’ll have to think about it.”

“Of course,” he said. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

My cheeks hurt from all the fake smiling, and I was ready to be done. I’d picked up that the fae world wasn’t as strong as it once was, and that was worth its weight in gold.

I peeked over his shoulder, my eyes scanning the room for Caelum. I needed the steadiness his presence brought, his sharp wit that could cut through the fae king’s intoxicating promises, potent as any faery wine.

Thalion stepped into my line of sight, his towering frame blocking my view. “You’re looking for the prince,” he stated. “I’m surprised, knowing your father’s opinion of the highborns of Eyre. Why you let them rule over you all is beyond my comprehension.”

I ignored him, stepping to the side again to continue my search.

Thalion chuckled. “That prince is a sunny day in spring without a care in the world. You are like winter. Unyielding to hardship. That mortal’s heart is too soft for someone like you.”

“I’d rather a soft heart than one made of stone,” I answered coolly, no longer interested in placating him.

“You are young,” the fae king said, nodding. “That is what one says when they do not know the value of a stone heart.” He circled me like a wolf looking for a weak spot.

“It lasts much longer.”

He stepped back then, the glint in his eyes softening as if he’d already won. “You have much to learn, Miss Blackthorn. I hope to have an eternity to teach you.”

I nodded, sweat breaking out along my neckline. “We shall see.”

As he walked away, I turned my gaze back to the crowd. I spotted Caelum a few moments later, making his way through the party goers, but something about his movements seemed off. His usually sharp gaze had taken on a hazy, unfocused look, and he was swaying slightly, a lazy smile on his face as two fae women argued on either side of him, one on each arm.

I rushed over, yanking him away from them. “Caelum, tell me you did not drink the wine.”

He blinked at me, offering a lopsided grin. “Do not fear, Eedy. I know not to touch faery wine,” he mumbled, his words slurring. “Just had one of those little cakes they offered. So many flavors.”

“Caelum,” I groaned, my anger bubbling up. He had read about the wine, but, of course, hadn’t considered that fae sweets could be just as dangerous.

One fae female reached for him again, cooing that he was far too pretty for the other one to have. She ran her hand along the opening of his now unbuttoned shirt, her long nails grazing over his chest.

Something snapped within me. I couldn’t stand watching them fawn over him in his dazed state, couldn’t stand the possessive way they looked at him, like they would eat him up and lick their fingers afterward.

My hands tingled with a rush of magic, and the cool weight of the water from the nearby waterfall responded to my fury. There was a connection there, like I had with lightning. It was a churning force that was waiting for my command. Without fully knowing what would happen, I pulled on that connection.

A sudden surge of water splashed over the fae women, sending them stumbling back, drenched and outraged.

I blinked a few times.

How had I done that?

Ignoring the shocked gasps erupting around us, I tugged Caelum away, guiding him back toward the path leading to our rooms. “Come on, let’s get you out of here before you get into more trouble,” I muttered, keeping my grip firm on his arm.

He stumbled along. “That was not very diplomatic of you, Eedy.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m sorry I’m not the model of diplomacy. That’s why you’re here, and why I can’t lose you to two ruthless fae tonight.”

As I hauled him through the winding corridors, I recited that to myself over and over.

I cannot lose him to the fae. I cannot lose him to the fae.

I cannot lose him ...

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*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:30 am*

### Chapter Twelve

“E edy Blackthorn, you must know that your eyes are an extraordinary color, right?”

There was something annoyingly endearing about Caelum’s drunken smile as he said it.

“Of course,” I scoffed, rolling said eyes as I dragged his inebriated body down the hall by the hand. “Every man loves a good mud-brown color.”

“No, no, no,” he whined, stumbling after me. “You are so off target I can’t even comprehend it.”

I turned right at the end of the hall toward the guest rooms while Caelum blathered on behind me, oblivious to my sole mission of finding his room and depositing him there as quickly as possible.

“There is a vanity in my aunt’s room made of the giant mahogany trees found only in the fair southern city of Keeve,” he continued.

We passed my room on the left. I believe his was three down from there...

“My eyes remind you of your aunt’s vanity?” I said, trying to placate him. “Charming.”

“No, you are not listening properly, Eedy. This vanity is stunning. And it has this beautiful pattern on the underside of it, as if it were inlaid with gold. But it’s much

too perfect to be made by a man. No, this is all-natural beauty.”

I swallowed hard, unsure if he was trying to compliment me or if this would eventually take a turn toward mockery once more.

“How do you know the underside of your aunt’s vanity so intimately?” I asked, finally finding his room and throwing the door open.

He almost fell to the floor when I released him but caught himself at the footboard of his bed.

“Oh, that. Quite simply, it was one of the best hiding places from my uncle. He wasn’t particularly happy that my father had finally produced an heir and that, furthermore, he had to babysit said heir who’d stolen his chance at being king one day.”

I watched him flop halfway onto his bed, his long legs still folded over the side. I came to stand by him to do one last check before departing, when, without warning, he grabbed my arm and yanked me so hard I had no choice but to fall on top of him.

He stared intensely into my eyes, cupping the back of my head to keep me still. My skull tingled under his touch, his fingers slipping further into my hair and gently coaxing me closer. I was embarrassingly aware of his firm muscles under my hands and the way the heat from his body was lighting me up inside.

“Yes. As I said, extraordinary,” he mumbled, his own pupils blown out wide, “just like you.”

My breath caught; his fingers were still tangled in my strands, massaging my scalp as his eyes continued their study of me. Even in his inebriated state, he still managed to seem so in control, so mesmerized with every feature of my face.

Every nerve ending on my skin ached for his fingers to explore next, and that's when I knew I had to move.

"Well, I'm so glad they aren't the boring brown I've always thought they were," I said, disentangling his hands from me while awkwardly pulling myself off him.

My traitorous body mourned the loss of his warm skin against mine, and every place we had touched thrummed for a few moments, even after I stood up and positioned myself at the footboard once more.

"Well, then," I announced, trying to stay on task. "I've helped you to your room, as promised. I will collect you in the morning once you've had ample time to sleep off this faery concoction you so idiotically ingested."

He slowly rolled to his side to fully face me once more. "Stay, Eedy."

I scoffed, heat rising to my cheeks. "I think that is the worst idea I've ever heard."

His eyes drooped, but he flung an arm out toward me, his palm open, his slender fingers beckoning me back to the bed. "Eedy. Please."

I squeezed my eyes shut and bit the inside of my cheek. How did I end up here? Stuck in the fae realm with a rake of a prince asking me to stay in his room for the night. How?

"Since you're intoxicated, I'll explain it slowly. You are engaged. To the daughter of a duke. To be married in the spring."

He blinked slowly up at me, unfazed. "I'm not going to do anything to you, Eedy," he said, exasperated.



My body bristled at his promise and a fire rumbled to life in my belly, burning up any butterflies that had even considered taking flight in there.

“Right. Of course,” I said, “because who could possibly want such a prickly, stubborn witch.”

“Who said I didn’t like prickly, stubborn things?”

“Nobody does.” I gritted my teeth, pinching the bridge of my nose. “It’s a universal fact.”

“I would like to challenge that fact.” He yawned, waving his pointer finger around wildly. “Insufficient data.”

I shook my head, clenching my lips into a tight line. I would not smile. I would not .

“Please, just stay,” he repeated. “I...don’t want to be alone.”

I would not. Could not. Absolutely not happening.

I sighed heavily. Then why am I still here?

I clung to the footboard, watching the smug prince of Eyre sprawled out on the bed completely unguarded. Helpless. Vulnerable.

I allowed myself to imagine him as a boy, hiding under the mahogany vanity in his aunt’s room, curled on the hard floor, cold and scared. Abandoned by family, people that were supposed to love and care for him. And still, he found something good in his hiding spot, the natural patterns and beauty in the inlaid and polished wood.

I saw him, clear and vibrant in my mind, placing a hand on a panel with his eyes wide

with awe. With wonder.

Until the next time his uncle found him and beat it out of him. That was the only way that story ended, even if he hadn't said it outright.

Right, then.

I sighed heavily as I shucked off my shoes into the corner of the room and tiptoed to the other side of the bed. I slipped in under the covers as best I could in the farthest, smallest corner of the bed, but because of the awkward angle at which Caelum was laying, his head still rested against my hip.

Hallows be, what would the council say? What would my father think?

I covered my face with my hands, mortified that he might somehow be able to see this from the afterlife. Me, curled up next to a pretentious royal because he told me my eyes reminded him of a piece of furniture.

While I lay there questioning my life decisions, there was movement next to me and soon a noticeable weight lay across my midsection.

I removed my hands from my face to find Caelum resting his head on me like his own exclusive pillow.

Of course he would not consider proper personal space in his current state.

"You're very soft for a prickly witch," he murmured against me.

"Noted," I said, barely able to breathe, unsure if for his sake or mine.

"Thank you for staying, Eedy," he whispered, his eyes closed, his furrowed brow

relaxing, his breaths falling into a steady, even pace until he finally fell asleep.

Somehow, it was a comfortable pressure, his head fitting nicely in the hollow dip of my stomach. The faint pulse of his heart tapped against my hip where his chest rested, and his cool pine scent engulfed me, reminding me of the crisp woodsy air that you only find in a dense forest.

His hair was tousled over his face and, like a moth to a flame, my fingers found themselves pushing the golden locks away so I could properly see the crown prince of Eyre sprawled on top of me.

Something small and fragile fluttered in my chest the longer I stared at him.

Soon, though, the weight and warmth of him on me caused my own eyes to grow heavy. I reached out and rested my hand on his shoulder before finally closing my eyes. In those hazy moments before sleep fully took me, I felt a sensation against the inside of my wrist, like tiny wings brushing against it, lighting the spot ablaze.

As I drifted off to sleep, I dared to imagine that it was another moth, only this one preferred a streak of pure lightning over an ordinary flame.

### Chapter Thirteen

The following morning, the events of last night's revelry still lingered on my mind as I walked out into the guest hall, my veins buzzing with anxiety. I had slipped out of Caelum's room in the early morning hours, determined to not face the inevitable awkwardness when he awoke. Though I was still troubled by the issue with the magic—and now complicated feelings for a particularly infuriating highborn—something else tugged at my thoughts.

The water incident.

I still didn't understand how I had done it. I'd never controlled anything other than a lightning strike before, yet I had bent it to my will like it was a thread and I was the needle, weaving it effortlessly into the annoying female faes. That wasn't how my magic worked—or at least, not how I thought it worked.

Had it been the fae magic surrounding me? Or was it something deeper, something I hadn't yet tapped into? I didn't like the idea of the fae knowing more about me than I did.

I shook the questions from my mind as I headed to Caelum's room, determined to focus on what mattered: answers from King Thalion. He had summoned us again, which meant we might finally make some headway on the magic issue—or be strung along even further. It truly could come down to whatever side of the immortal bed the king had woken up on today. All I knew was if we didn't leave this wretched realm soon, I might end up with more questions than I'd started with.

I knocked on Caelum's door, and he answered, looking slightly rumpled, wrapped in his traveling cloak already. At least we were on the same page there. He managed a crooked smile as he stepped out. "So...last night." He ran a hand through his hair, clearly searching for the right words. "I'm sorry you had to deal with, well, that . Those fae sweets really packed a punch."

I shrugged. "It's fine. I'm just glad you're okay."

"You didn't have to stay. I shouldn't have asked, it's just..." His eyes softened as he looked at me, hesitating before speaking again. "I can have dreadful nightmares when I'm alone." He glanced down as if something on his shoe was absolutely fascinating.

The admission caught me off guard. I struggled to keep my face neutral, knowing it wasn't something I could dwell on right now. We needed to focus on our mission. Nevertheless, my heart squeezed for Caelum while my blood rioted in my veins when I thought of his Uncle Tobias. I clenched my fists in fury.

If I ever see him in person, he better pray it's not storming.

"I was happy to help," I said instead, composing myself with a small smile. "We've been summoned by the fae king, though, so let's see what he has to say so we can leave."

He straightened, his princely mask sliding back on as he nodded. "Of course. Let's hope our gracious host is in the mood to share today."

"Yes, let's hope. I'd rather not spend another night here."

He offered a weak smile. "Yes, right. Me too."

We were escorted to the outdoor throne area once more. Up on the dais, looking

down on us, the fae king lounged on his throne, looking dangerously calm. Off to the side, though, our horses were tied to a tree, and my heart fluttered at the idea of riding out of here today.

Could we really be leaving soon? It all depended on how this next conversation went.

He greeted us as we approached. “Ah, my brave wanderers, have you enjoyed your stay so far?”

I bit back a scathing retort. “It’s been enlightening.”

The king’s laugh echoed through the open grove, a dark, velvety sound. “Indeed. And now, I assume you will want your answers regarding the ley lines.”

My heart skipped a beat at his directness. “The ley lines,” I choked out. “They’re real?”

Thalion inclined his head, his grin widening. “Of course.”

My mind erupted with questions, all while my heart brimmed with happiness. My father had been right. He was right.

But I straightened, remembering who I was dealing with. The fae were not generous beings, and he had not stated his price yet. It would do well to ask now before it was beyond something we could pay.

“I have more questions,” I stated, “but I need to know the cost before we continue.”

“Ever so clever to ask,” the fae king murmured, templing his fingers. “In return, we will require a small token of value.”

“What kind of token?” Caelum asked.

I blinked, surprised he had beat me to the question. Maybe he was finally catching on to surviving in the fae realm.

“The most precious thing you have with you here,” the fae king replied, his eyes glittering as they moved between us. “Something you would hesitate greatly to part with.”

I swallowed hard, cupping the ring at the base of my throat. My fingers brushed against the cool metal of my father’s ring, and I did hesitate. It was the one item of his I had left, the symbol of his position on the council, passed down to me after his death. But if this was the price we had to pay for the truth...

I glanced at Caelum, and he grinned with a quick nod. I wanted to ask what he would give, but it didn’t seem like a time where we could form a huddle and discuss our options. I’m sure he had some family heirloom on him to offer.

“Agreed,” I said, and Caelum echoed me, the deal struck.

“Excellent,” the fae king murmured, leaning back into his throne like he could relax now.

“Your father, Miss Blackthorn, was correct in his assumptions about the ley lines,” King Thalion offered. “There are places—locations scattered throughout this land—that can affect them, much like a dam can control the flow of a river. These places can either channel or regulate the magic, allowing it to be harnessed in different ways. We have one here in Velarune, at the top of our mountain.”

I nodded eagerly, stepping closer to the dais. “His theory before he died had been that the various onyxwood forests were suppressing these ley lines throughout the realm.

Is that the problem then?”

“As with every father, Miss Blackthorn, they don’t always have all the answers. The onyxwood forests are not causing the issues Eyre faces. While it’s true the wood has a unique quality that suppresses magic, it does not reach deep enough to cause the disturbances you’re experiencing.”

A chill slid down my spine. “If it’s not the onyxwood, then do you know what it is?”

The fae king leaned forward, a slow, predatory smile spreading across his face. “Why, us, of course.”

My heart shuddered as the realization set in. “You’re...you’re stealing the magic through the ley line?”

“Borrowing, my dear,” he corrected, feigning innocence. “We’re simply borrowing it, redirecting its flow to suit our needs. Magic can be a fickle thing, and we fae are deeply connected to its currents. The ley line is a source of great power, and our people are in need of more, as I mentioned last night.”

Caelum’s hands clenched into fists, and he stepped closer as well, his shoulder brushing mine. “And when is this ‘borrowing’ going to end?”

“Oh, it should break of its own accord by the winter solstice, when the magical flow is at its lowest,” the fae king replied. “But by then...well, let’s just say the damage to the flow in your human lands may be irreversible.”

King Thalion’s indifferent tone made my blood boil. This was all a game to him—a means of exercising power over a realm he held no respect for. “You can’t do this. Magic belongs to everyone.”



The king raised an eyebrow, clearly amused by my protest. “Magic belongs to those who can wield it best. After all, we are fae. The magic is our birthright, as it is yours, Miss Blackthorn.” His sharp eyes lingered on me, and a slow smile crept across his face. “I saw what you did at the waterfall last night. I thought you could only control lightning? A feat like that doesn’t come from surface-level power. It comes from something ancient, something deeply connected. Did you feel it?”

My breath caught. So, he had seen. And though I had no intention of admitting it, he wasn’t wrong. It wasn’t the same as when I’d harnessed lightning. The water had been more malleable, more willing. It wanted to do my bidding.

But it was still new to me, and I didn’t know how to expand my powers. Gods, what I wouldn’t give for a storm right now so I could show him how wrong he was with one well-positioned lightning strike. I’d make him regret offering to take me in.

I’d raze his world to the ground.

Instead, I could do nothing. Without the proper understanding of what special gift I had, I made no difference here, just like every council meeting.

I glanced at Caelum, who stood rigidly beside me, his rageful gaze locked on the fae king. We needed to leave before he said something that got us both killed.

Slowly, I drew the ring from around my neck and extended it toward the fae king. “I think we’ve heard enough,” I hissed. “Will this suffice as my offering?”

Thalion barely looked at the ring before nodding with a satisfied smile. “I do hope you have more things to remind you of your father.”

A servant fae approached and took the ring from me. I thought I’d be sad, yes, but a deeper hollowness settled inside. All that time, it seemed like a weight around my

neck I couldn't bear, but the absence of it was much more devastating.

King Thalion turned his attention to Caelum, his eyes glinting with expectation. "And you, Prince? What will you offer?"

Caelum reached into the shadows of his long cloak and produced a slender, ornate sword with a shimmering blade and intricate designs carved along the hilt.

"An enchanted blade, crafted by your own kin, I believe. One of your friendly females was so gracious to show me around your weapons room when I asked yesterday."

I froze, eyes wide.

The fae king's stare narrowed, his smile turning frosty. "A bold choice, Prince, to offer a stolen item from our very halls."

"I don't recall you clarifying that a stolen item couldn't count. The only stipulation was that it was the most precious thing here with me, and that I'd hesitate to part with it. And I must say, this is the finest sword I've yet to come across. I would truly love to take it home with me, but alas, I will part with it to settle this debt."

It had been risky to steal from the fae, indeed. But he had a point, and I couldn't see a way around the fae king accepting it.

The king stood, but instead of seeming perturbed, he looked delighted. "This is not enough, I'm afraid."

Caelum's smirk faltered, and he took a half-step back. "Not enough? I've brought nothing else with me of greater value. But please, enlighten me if you see a boot or a belt you'd rather confiscate."

The fae king chuckled darkly. “The blade may be valuable, but it’s not what is most precious to you, Prince. No, what we will take in this deal is”—his eyes locked onto me—“her.”

A cold sweat swept over me as I registered his meaning. “Me? ”

“Yes, Miss Blackthorn,” he said, his voice a purr. “You possess a bond with magic that is rare, even among our kind. Your magic flows as purely as any fae’s, and we’re severely lacking it these days. That’s why we started siphoning the magic. We need to rebuild our power here, and we will start with you. You didn’t want to stay by my invitation, so now you will stay by my insistence.”

I stepped back, alarm flaring in my chest. “I am not staying here.”

The fae king tilted his head, his expression softening into something almost affectionate. “Oh, but you are. The bargain was struck.”

Caelum stepped forward, raising the stolen sword. “You won’t be taking her anywhere .” His voice was deep and violent, like thunder across the open sea. “The only place she’s going is on the back of a horse—with me .”

The fae king’s gaze turned cold, and guards emerged from the shadows to surround us in the grove. “Are you challenging the deal, Prince?” he asked, his voice a low, dangerous whisper.

Caelum gripped the hilt of the sword tighter, taking a fighting stance. “Fuck your deal.”

King Thalion laughed. “Oh, I think I’ll enjoy this.” He waved a hand, and his guards took a step closer.

### Chapter Fourteen

The fae guards advanced in a tight, deadly circle around us, their mouths turned down into snarls. My heartbeat thudded in my ears, but before I could fully grasp the situation, Caelum shoved me behind him. The enchanted sword glinted in his hands, and he swung it, its shimmering edge cutting through the air and sending waves of magic rippling outward. The fae recoiled from the blade, faltering under its force.

“How did you know to take that one?” I stammered behind him.

“I didn’t know what it could do ,” he huffed back, holding his ground. “I just thought I’d look cool holding it.”

This was an impossible battle to win, but Caelum fought with a focus I hadn’t expected, each swing causing a new magical wave to engulf the guards, sending them pinwheeling through the air or slamming to the ground. Still, for every guard he drove off, two more slipped in, and I could see the strain in his shoulders as he swung, each movement a little slower, his breath coming in ragged bursts.

“Any ideas, Tempest?” Caelum yelled as a few arrows whizzed by us.

I growled, reaching inward, searching for that spark, that elusive well of magic the fae kept telling me I was made of. My fingers tingled as I strained for it, calling on it with every ounce of will I had. But the magic was distant, slippery, like trying to grasp smoke with bare hands. It was nothing like when I pulled lightning from the sky or even when I’d managed to redirect the waterfall the night before.

It needed to be closer . I could do nothing without the magic source nearby.

“Come on , Eedy,” I muttered to myself, feeling a wave of panic rise as I watched Caelum narrowly dodge a fae’s blade who’d made it past the waves. “You must do something .”

But the magic remained stubbornly out of reach, flickering just beyond my grasp, a river running through my fingers. Frustration and fear twisted inside me as I tried to focus, but my storm of emotions made my thoughts too chaotic.

While I ground my fingers into the dirt in desperation, a tall fae with fiery hair and eyes like burning coals stepped forward, his hand raised. A ball of flames grew in his palm, crackling and twisting as he molded it with precision, his furious gaze fixed on the prince and me.

My eyes widened as the fae took aim, the blazing orb swelling. “Caelum, move!”

The fireball hurled directly toward us, and in a heartbeat, Caelum turned and pulled me into his arms, his body shielding me from the oncoming blast. The world slowed, his eyes brimming with fear, finding mine before the flames struck him square in the back, the searing heat flaring up with an intensity that stole my breath.

He fell forward with a strangled gasp, his weight pressing into me as he crumpled. I caught him as best I could, sinking to my knees as he sagged against me. The acrid scent of burned flesh filled the air, my hands already slipping over blood and charred fabric as I held onto him.

“Caelum?” I screamed, shaking him. His eyes bulged, his mouth twisting in pain.

The fae closed in, cruel laughter echoing all around us. King Thalion pushed through the crowd with a haughty smile, picking up the stolen blade and sheathing it at his

side. “It seems your soft heart has cost you, princeling.”

I gritted my teeth, swallowing back my fear as I clutched Caelum closer. “Fine, you win,” I said, my voice cold. “I’ll stay in Velarune, but only if you heal him. Let him return to Eyre.”

The king scoffed, folding his arms across his wide chest. “That’s not how this works, mage . He challenged the deal, and he lost. I do not have sympathy for losers.”

My heart was like a frightened bird, thrashing itself against my chest. “At least give me a few moments alone with him then.” I glared up at the king. “Please.”

Thalion shrugged indifferently, waving a hand to dismiss his guards.

He did not leave with them. Instead, he knelt next to us, and a stench of cold steel and wet earth overcame me. He grabbed me by the chin roughly, forcing me to stare at his smooth, stony face that no doubt matched his heart. “To ensure your time here begins smoothly and without any disruption on your part, I’ll allow you ten minutes with your reckless prince. When those ten minutes are up, forget you ever met him.” He bent lower to whisper in my ear. “Mortals do not deserve our tears.”

Then he stood and sauntered out of the grove after his guards.

Caelum’s breathing was shallow, each intake strained, and I could feel my own heartbeat in my throat. “Stay with me, Caelum,” I whispered, brushing a hand over his damp golden hair. “Please, just hold on.”

“Someone wise once told me I should never think I could outwit the fae,” he muttered, his voice barely audible. He swallowed hard, and it seemed to take all his strength. “I should have listened.”

His words sent a pang through my chest, and I had to look away, forcing back the tears that threatened to spill over. “You’re going to be fine.” My voice broke around my hollow words. “We’ll get you out of here.”

But it was a lie, and I knew it. There was no way out of this. All I had left were a few minutes to say goodbye.

One of his hands stuttered toward me. I grasped it, blinking back tears.

“It’s okay, Eedy,” he whispered, the lightness in his eyes fading. “At least, in the end, I’m not alone.”

I squeezed his one hand in both of mine, curling in on myself in the mud on the ground, unsure of how I’d survive the pain crawling through me.

A faint shadow stirred to my left then, and I braced myself for an attack only to see the old fae who had cut us, the one who had first called me mage .

Solimir.

He observed us with a calm curiosity.

“Don’t touch him,” I growled, shifting my body in front of Caelum as much as possible.

The old fae nodded, his expression grave. “I am not here to kill him a second time, mage . He will be dead soon enough.”

A tear finally slipped through my resolve at Solimir’s blunt observation. “Then leave us in peace for these last remaining moments,” I said, my voice shuddering under all the emotions coursing through me.

He grunted, circling us like a vulture waiting for its prey to die.

Eventually, he knelt next to me, his milky eyes set on mine. “I am not one to challenge the king openly, but magic has claimed you, and I would not be on the wrong side of it when the magic of this world changes hands. It is all connected.”

I swiped tears from my cheeks. “Does that mean you’re going to help me?” I whispered, afraid to speak any louder and shatter whatever spell this fae seemed to be under when it came to me.

He examined the prince’s wounds with a dispassionate eye. “He won’t last long, mage . These wounds will keep spreading, eating away at him. He has until nightfall, at best, and I cannot heal. You should leave him.”

“Just help me get him out of here then,” I pleaded, ignoring his suggestion. “I don’t care how much time he has. I just...”

My chin trembled. My chest burned.

But maybe I did care. Maybe I cared very much about the time he had left.

The fae’s eyes flicked between us before he nodded, his face solemn. “Very well.”

Solimir took an extra cloak and blanket from the other horse to wrap around Caelum. Then, together, we managed to lift the prince onto my horse, his weight sagging limply as I climbed up behind him, steadying his unconscious form against my chest.

The old fae pressed a hand to Sorsha’s flank, murmuring an incantation that left a faint glow along her hide. “This will carry you faster than any normal horse for a short time. Ride hard, and do not look back.”



I glanced down at Solimir, my heart a twisted mess of gratitude. “Thank you,” I whispered.

“I do not do this for you, mage , but to stay in the favor of magic. It requires balance. If it gives something to you, know that it will eventually need it back.” He paused, his stare boring into me. “This is our tip in the scales for when we claim it all. The debt is paid.”

The old fae gave a slight nod, stepping back. I spurred Sorsha forward, and we bolted, racing away from the darkened grove and back toward the border of Eyre.

Not long after, angry shouts and thundering booms sounded from behind me, but I followed Solimir’s advice, and I did not look back. Caelum’s shallow breaths were warm against my hands as I held tightly to the reins, though his body was unnervingly still as I clung to him, urging my horse faster. I was desperate to outrun the dread that rose inside of me when I realized I might be the sole witness to the prince of Eyre’s very last heartbeat.

### Chapter Fifteen

B risk wind bit at my cheeks as I pushed my horse harder, the rhythm of her hooves thundering beneath us. Caelum slumped in front of me, barely conscious, his skin enveloped in a cold sweat. I dug the acorn from my satchel, clutching at it with shaking hands. Ronan had promised this would bring us straight back to Naohm, and that's what we needed. Even though we'd just crossed back over the border to Eyre, I didn't trust ancient magical agreements anymore. With the fae sucking up all the magic for themselves, it would only be a matter of time until they figured out how to break loose from their cage in Velarune.

I ripped off the top of the acorn and threw it ahead, watching as it burst into a swirl of magic, crackling with energy that twisted into a portal in front of us. With a silent prayer, I drove Sorsha forward, holding Caelum tightly as we plunged through the swirling light.

On the other side of it, the world snapped back into focus quickly?—

My breath caught. I could not sense the sea air, the winds that were always alive in the northernmost point of Eyre. I looked around, my stomach sinking as I got my bearings.

I noted the wide-open land where nothing grew, the hard ground of unforgiving limestone with the thinnest layer of weak grass blanketing it.

The Barren.

We were barely halfway back home. The acorn's magic had failed us, sputtering out before it could bring us the full distance.

I cursed under my breath. There was no going back now. We were stranded, weeks away from home, with Caelum barely hanging onto life.

Gritting my teeth, I nudged Sorsha forward.

We rode for hours, me clutching Caelum's limp form, his head lolling against my shoulder. It took every ounce of strength in me to keep us both on the saddle. I scanned the horizon desperately, hoping for a village, a cottage—anywhere we might find help. But the land stretched out before us, empty and quiet, as if we were the last two mortals alive.

The sun dipped lower as the day waned, casting the flat landscape in shadow. Exhaustion pulled at me, dulling my thoughts. My muscles screamed for rest.

Should I stop and build a fire? Try to wait out the night?

Time was slipping through my fingers, and my frustration boiled over.

I dug my heels into Sorsha's sides once more, spurring her on. "Come on, just a little farther," I muttered. She grunted but obeyed, surging forward in a burst of speed.

Without warning, a pair of foxes darted out from the brush, their sleek forms crossing directly over our path. Sorsha reared back with a panicked whinny. I clung to Caelum and the reins as long as I could, but gravity tore him from my grip, and we both fell, hitting the stony ground hard.

Pain exploded through my head, and the world went spinning. My vision swam. Blood roared in my ears.

“Caelum,” I croaked, crawling through the dirt toward him. My knees scraped against the rough earth, and my palms trembled as I reached his side. He was pale, his eyes closed, his breaths wheezing from him in thin threads.

The dizziness grew stronger, the edges of my vision darkening. My hands slipped as I tried to adjust the tangle of blankets around him, and I fell forward, my forehead resting against his shoulder.

I couldn’t hold on anymore.

The exhaustion, the pain, the fear—it all swallowed me whole as I sank into darkness.

When I woke, the sky was brighter, the dull gray of morning filtering through the clouds. I sat up abruptly, a cold chill coursing through me as my memory of the day before came crashing back.

Caelum.

I turned to find him unmoving beside me. He was facing away, the blanket still twisted around him. My breath hitched, dread unfurling in my chest as I realized I couldn’t hear his breathing. I couldn’t hear anything coming from him.

My heart ached, my head ached, my whole body ached. Fear crawled over every inch of my skin as I hovered closer to him in the dirt.

“Caelum?” My voice was a whisper, breaking as it left my throat.

I held out a shaking hand over his arm, but I faltered.

I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t roll him toward me and find his piercing blue eyes, always so full of mirth and mischief, lifeless. The small, fragile thing that I’d felt when he’d

laid his head in the hollow of my stomach the night before was dying, and I could do nothing to save it.

I could only watch it leave me.

The fae king said I had been his most precious thing. And Caelum had protected me, given his life for me. And for what? Why did all the men in my life want to die for me? Why couldn't they just stay ?

Tears slipped down my cheeks, the pain in my chest growing sharper with each second of silence. Shudders ransacked my body as I sobbed. I scratched at my neck, looking for a cold metal ring to steady my spiraling thoughts, only to remember it had been taken from me as well.

I had failed the council, all of Eyre. Worst of all, I had failed him .

But then, ever so faint, a voice.

“If you must cry this early in the morning, Miss Blackthorn, might you keep it down? Some of us are still trying to rest.”

I froze, barely daring to believe my ears. Caelum shifted, turning his head slightly toward me, a weak smile on his lips, his golden hair a wild tangle around his eyes. Relief flooded through me, a strange and fierce joy I couldn't contain. A laugh bubbled up from deep inside of me as I wiped my tears away.

“Y-you're alive?” I managed, my voice clogged with emotion.

He winced slightly before offering a more committed smirk. “Still here to vex you, it seems.”

I pulled back the blanket to inspect his back where the burns had marred his skin. The edges of the wounds had scabbed over, faint signs of healing that should have taken days, if not weeks, to begin. Not even considering he should have died before his body had the chance. I shook my head, bewildered. “How is this possible? You should be...”

Caelum’s expression softened as he looked away, almost shy. “Turns out, suffering through an entire childhood of being beaten and then healed with magic over and over to cover it up has done something to me. Like a second skin, I suppose. It makes me a bit more resilient than most.”

He still flinched when rolling to lie on his back.

I reached out, my fingers brushing over his chest, his heartbeat strong underneath my hand, grounding me, ensuring me this was real. Then I promptly curled my hand into a fist and punched him squarely in the stomach.

“Ow!” Caelum exclaimed, coughing. “What was that for?”

“For nearly dying on me, you idiot!” I said, my voice thick with anger and relief. “What were you thinking?”

He looked away, guilt shadowing his eyes. “I’m sorry, Eedy. I truly didn’t mean for things to go that far. I thought I had it all figured out.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I was afraid to tell anyone what I suspected about my skin, with that old law regarding royals and magic. I thought my uncle might call for my banishment right then and there.”

My heart twisted at the vulnerability, a glimpse of the man beneath the charm. He’d been abused for so long, to be molded into submission once he ascended the throne, and instead he’d been given a gift. Magic. But he had to hide that too.

“When did you first notice it?” I asked.

Caelum exhaled, his gaze turning distant. “I was fifteen, I think. My uncle was in a particularly violent rage, and he’d gone after my aunt, too, so I provoked him on purpose. By the time he was done, I was barely holding myself together.”

I swallowed hard, my hands curling into fists at my sides.

“When I saw my aunt had gotten away, I mustered up everything left in me and ran. I don’t know how far or for how long, just that I didn’t stop. My body was screaming at me, but the fear was louder.” His lips quirked slightly, though there was no humor in it. “I don’t remember collapsing, just waking up later in a field of etherose outside the estate grounds. My clothes were torn, my skin was covered in dirt, but the pain...it was gone. Completely.”

Etherose.

He flexed his fingers absently, as if recalling the sensation. “Everything felt new. My skin tingled, like it had been rewoven from the inside out. I thought I was dreaming at first, but when I touched my ribs, expecting agony, there was nothing.”

A slow breath escaped me as understanding settled deep in my bones. My voice was barely above a whisper. “You must have fallen on a ley line.”

He blinked at me.

“I don’t think the healers magic from all the times before transferred to you. I think when you fell on the ley line it claimed you. It gave you the magic you needed.”

After a moment, he murmured, “Guess you and I have more in common than we thought.”

I nodded, a small smile forming on my lips as a bit of tension drained from my body.

His gaze grew warmer the longer we laid in silence. He looked up at me, his eyes tracing my face with such focus, it made goosebumps rise on my arms. He grimaced more as he propped himself up on an elbow, his face inches from mine, his breath fanning over me.

“Were all of those tears really for a rake of a prince like me, Tempest?” he breathed, thumbing away a remaining drop on my cheek.

“I was upset for the kingdom,” I lied, my voice stuttering in time with my heart. “To lose their prince so young.”

“Right,” he said softly, his thumb sliding down from my cheek to whisper against my bottom lip. “Of course. What a tragedy for the realm.”

I tasted salt. I smelled pine.

“Thank you,” I whispered, “for not leaving me behind.”

His brow furrowed as his hand dropped from my face. “Leaving you alone in Velarune was never an option for me.”

My breath hitched. “Caelum, you barely know me.”

He offered a small smile. “I know enough to know it was worth the risk.”

My chest squeezed, an ache building within me from his declaration and the confidence with which he’d delivered it.

He continued to study me intently, and I thought I might cry again, seeing the passion



in his piercing blue eyes, fully alive and focused after fearing he was dead. The fragile thing I felt for him was fluttering and flapping again, a phoenix rising from the ashes. For one reckless heartbeat, I thought he might kiss me, and to my shock, I wanted him to.

He tilted his head toward me, his eyelids fluttering, and I mirrored the movements until?—

Sense returned. He was betrothed to another. He would leave after we figured out this magic crisis and return to his fancy balls and enormous castle, and I would just be the witch from Naohm who he'd had a quick romp with after gallantly protecting her from the evil fae. Even if he did feel something more for me, it was never going to be permanent.

And I didn't want to be just a fond memory to him...so, I'd have to be nothing.

I drew back, feeling my cheeks flush. "I should make breakfast," I stammered, pushing myself up and brushing the dirt from my skirts. "You need your strength if we're going to make it back to Naohm to warn the council."

A crease formed between Caelum's brows, his lips pinching together. But then he leaned back, and his features smoothed over, a lazy grin spreading across his face. "That sounds like an excellent idea. You may have to feed me, though. I'm not that healed yet."

I rolled my eyes, but as I turned away, I couldn't help the smile tugging at my lips, the full wave of relief finally easing the knot of fear that had held me captive the last day. Somehow, against all odds, we had both made it out of the fae realm alive.

But now we had to get back to the council as soon as possible with a ticking clock on our backs. The winter solstice was only a few weeks away, and the fae king had

promised that by then the magic flowing through Eyre could be completely gone.

### Chapter Sixteen

The journey back to Naohm blurred into a mix of sunrises and twilight skies, with days spent trekking through forests and rocky paths and nights huddled around campfires. The rhythm of it all was oddly comforting, even as I carried the weight of the fae king's words.

What surprised me most, though, was Caelum's quiet competence in the wilderness. He didn't seem like a prince out of his element. Quite the opposite, in fact. Like a truly seasoned explorer, he found us safe havens to sleep, sought out berries and nuts that were edible, and even caught us dinner occasionally with traps he made from sticks and vines.

I might've helped more if I wasn't so busy being quietly impressed.

One evening, as we sat around a small fire, I watched him carve slices from a rabbit he'd trapped earlier, his movements unhurried and precise. He caught my gaze and raised an eyebrow. "See something interesting?"

"Only a rare sighting of the crown prince of Eyre cooking for himself," I said, unable to hide my smirk.

He chuckled, tossing a few of the meat slices onto a flat stone at the edge of the fire to cook. "Not so bad for a highborn rake. Right, Tempest?"

I smiled, remembering when I'd called him that. The tension present when we'd first met in Naohm had eased, and in its place, an easy camaraderie had developed

between us, one that was far more natural than anything we'd shared back at the council hall. The flames cast a delicate glow over his face, his blue eyes catching the firelight as he turned back to the cooking.

"Not bad at all," I murmured.

Emboldened by the quiet intimacy of the moment, I found one question lingering on my tongue, an unquenchable curiosity clawing at my chest. "Speaking of being a rake...of all the preconceived ideas I had about you, you've proven me wrong except on that point. So, it's true, then? You've been with countless women?"

He stared into the fire a few moments before answering. "I cannot lie to you, Eedy. There have been...quite a few."

Jealousy strangled my heart. Good. This was good for me to hear.

"It became a bad habit of having my cake and eating it too," he continued, his eyes shut and his face void of emotion, like he was watching the scene play out in his head, "I liked women. I definitely liked the sex, and, with someone always in my bed, my uncle would stay away. It was a win-win."

He smiled tightly, his eyes fluttering open as a deep crease formed over his brow.

"So, the healer in Naohm then too?" It felt like pushing on a fresh wound to ask it.

"Ah, yes, her," he said with a half-smile. "Actually, she was there to heal me, not for...well, anything else."

I raised my eyebrows and crossed my arms, waiting for him to elaborate since I'd obviously witnessed his own healing capabilities.

He sighed, noting my stubborn silence. “My skin heals quickly on its own now, but there are still times, especially in the colder temperature, when the pain gets into my bones. Magical healers can soothe the ache, temporarily, at least. I didn’t correct you because”—he paused, a faint grin tugging at his mouth—“well, I was having fun with how furious it made you.”

“I wasn’t furious,” I argued, heat rushing to my cheeks.

He arched a lone eyebrow at me from across the flames.

“And there were no fae in Velarune that you entertained before the revelry? You didn’t have to trade anything to swipe that sword?” I interrogated, ignoring how heated my words sounded.

He plopped a juicy piece of the cooked rabbit on a plate before sauntering over to my side of the fire. Handing it to me, he sat down, his hip and thigh brushing against mine. My mind went hazy at his proximity, his pine and leather scent mixing with the lingering smoke; I wanted to throw my dinner on the ground and devour him instead.

I gripped the plate like my life depended on it as he turned to face me. He was so close; I could see every sparse freckle, every thin line around his eyes from all the smug grinning he did.

“I haven’t been with anyone since my uncle made the arrangements for my engagement,” he murmured, holding my stare with sincerity. “I want to be a loyal person, Eedy, I just”—he ran a hand through his disheveled blond hair—“I only have the books I’ve read to know what that’s like. My father knows everything my uncle has done to me. He doesn’t care. Argued it would make me a stronger king. My mother hates my father so much; she’s usually off at our summer house. I’ve barely seen her.”

I set the plate of meat to the side, never breaking eye contact with him. He was crumbling open and spilling his darkest secrets in front of me, and I didn't want to miss a single moment.

"I never know who I can trust," he continued, "because so many see me as a means to an end, a pawn to use to get what they want. I haven't had anyone be truly loyal to me . Only for what I might provide them.

"But you..." He raised a tentative hand, brushing a stray hair behind my ear. His hand lingered there, his thumb tracing the edge from my ear to my jaw, making me shiver. "You have shown me nothing but honesty, Tempest. And so, I believe every word that comes out of your pretty mouth"—he smirked—"no matter how scathing."

I was breathless with need from his words, from his gentle touch, his openness to my stormy nature. I couldn't move, and I wanted to scream when he lowered his hand away from my face.

"You wanted the truth," he said, sighing. "And there it is. The truth is you were mostly right: I was a rake. Now, I'm somewhat of a reformed rake that is bound to someone I have no interest in. In the end, I have no choice in who my life and body go to."

His words hung between us, a solemnity in his tone I hadn't expected. He turned back to the fire, poking at it with a nearby stick.

"You do not want to be with your betrothed?" I said, squeezing my hands together, trying to hold at bay the growing pressure near my heart. "Does she not suit you? I imagine she's rich and beautiful..."

He scoffed. "She suits me perfectly fine," he replied, but he struggled with the follow-up. "I've only met her once, but she seems like a wonderful person.

Very...warm and kind?—”

“Caelum,” I interrupted, “speak plainly. I won’t be tattling on you to anyone.”

“She...it’s not...I would be bored, Eedy,” he finally confessed. “I’d be trapped in a life with no edge. It would be nothing like this .” He met my gaze, the firelight making his blue eyes appear deeper, darker. “Nothing like talking to you, with your sharp mind and even sharper tongue. You challenge me, keep me on my toes. You’re unpredictable and completely unforgiving of any misstep.”

“Hah,” I huffed, kicking around some dirt with my boot. “Sounds like a match made in the godlands!”

“Honestly, Eedy, I cannot get enough of it.”

The air grew thick with the weight of his declaration. I could feel the steady rhythm of my heart quickening, an ache unfurling in my chest that I didn’t dare acknowledge. Caelum’s gaze was unyielding, his usual levity nowhere to be found.

“Not that you’d ever feel the same way, I imagine,” he added with a wry smile. “Rake or not, I can still be quite a lot for some people.”

I opened my mouth, but the words died on my tongue. Because even though I yearned to tell him I knew exactly how he felt, I knew better. Once we made it back and—somehow—came up with a solution to stop the fae from stealing the magic, he would leave, returning to the life that waited for him, with all its bindings and expectations.

Despite what we might feel for each other, it was against the law for a royal to marry into magic. The magical healing ability that had been given to him would need to be kept hidden. Secret. And beyond that, it was a fairytale to imagine them ever

allowing a witch to sit on the throne as his queen.

No matter what the prince of Eyre felt for me now, one day he would marry another. And when that happened, my heart would bear the price.

So, I stilled my face of any emotion, looking away from his intense gaze. “I wouldn’t say that. Maybe in the beginning you were irritable, but you’ve surprised me a lot these past few weeks. You have a lot of...useful qualities,” I said, keeping my tone light, hoping he wouldn’t hear the tremor beneath it. “Maybe your betrothed will also surprise you.”

The words were bricks leaving my mouth, but it must be said. I couldn’t change his circumstances for him, just like he couldn’t change mine.

“Maybe,” Caelum said softly, returning his attention to the cooking.

I hated how a small voice settled inside of me, insisting, maybe not.



### Chapter Seventeen

After another long day of traveling, we'd found a cave and settled into it as evening shadows thickened around us. Caelum surprised me yet again as he worked carefully on my cloak, sewing the edges of a tear with a steady, practiced hand. I couldn't help but stare at his slender fingers as they deftly mended the material back together. It seemed impossible that those same hands wielded a sword as easily as they did a needle.

I wondered, with a shiver, what else those hands could handle.

I snapped my attention back as a low rumble of thunder echoed above, reminding me of something far more practical to focus on.

"Come on," I said, springing to my feet. I gave his shoulder a tug. "There's something I want to show you."

Caelum handed me my cloak to put on and followed me out of our shelter. He glanced up at the sky as the first raindrops fell, heavy with warning, pinging at our feet.

"You're pulling me out into a storm?" He laughed, but his eyes sparkled.

"Just wait," I said, leading him into the clearing nearby. The rain grew heavier, soaking us both within minutes. Still, he grinned, his wide gaze full of anticipation.

I spread my arms, closing my eyes, and waited. The familiar, humming energy of the

storm pulsed around me, the static charging the air. Lightning cracked in the distance, a stark line against the dark sky. I could feel the pull of it, the way it called to me. I didn't have my iron bars, but it didn't matter. They helped when I wanted to guide the lightning to a small target, but I could pull it right from the sky itself if I wanted to.

The fae had said I was pure magic, but they were wrong. Maybe I could do more than I'd originally thought—like connecting with the water at the revelry—but I hadn't been able to do anything worthwhile when it really mattered, like when I'd thought that Caelum...

I shook my head, refocusing on the task at hand. He had never seen me use my magic, and I wanted to see the wonder on his face for something I knew I could do.

A few moments later, lightning arced across the sky, slashing through the rain right above our heads. I reached out with my magic, grasping at the bolt and tugged, directing it toward a tree at the far end of the clearing and slicing through it. The tree groaned and fell, its branches scattering across the wet ground.

"My gods, Tempest," Caelum said beside me, his hands atop of his head, his eyes filled to the brim with that awe I loved to see.

So, I'd show him more.

Reaching for the next bolt, feeling the electric rush as it surged through me, I flung it out at another tree in the distance, cleaving it in half. On one hand it was exhilarating, the magical energy coursing through my bones while I wrestled the wild power of the lightning. Yet, with each new strike that I bent to my will, something inside felt stripped away, leaving an emptiness to claw at my core. No matter how many trees I brought down, the hollow ache only deepened.

I tried once more, frustration ripping through me. Why could I command lightning in

a storm like this, but not create it on my own? Why could I not figure out a solution to the fae draining the magic if they insisted I was magic itself?

Why couldn't I ever be good enough? Even my father had left to research on his own without me. Did my stubbornness and headstrong ways finally overwhelm him too?

Before I could grab at another bolt, Caelum's hand closed over my wrist, grounding me. His blond hair was plastered to his forehead, falling into his eyes, but I could still see specks of piercing blue. For a few moments, his mouth hung open, as if, for once, he was at a loss for words. Finally, he smiled wide, his dimples appearing as rainwater ran down his face and off his chin. "You are breathtaking, Eedy," he said. "I hope you know that. I could watch you day and night and never grow tired of it."

His words made me buzz like I was still holding onto a streak of lightning. He hadn't said the magic was breathtaking; he'd said I was. If the crown prince of Eyre told me I was enough, could I believe it?

He shivered, squeezing my hand hard as his brow furrowed. "But your mother will have my head if I let you freeze to death in a rainstorm. Let's get back to the cave."

I nodded, feeling the icy wind more acutely now. The numbing cold started in my toes and fingers until it engulfed my whole body. By the time we made it back to our shelter shivering and drenched, my teeth were chattering, even as I hunched by the fire. Caelum tossed a few more logs on the flames and pulled off his soaking shirt, wringing it out as best he could.

An ache formed low in my belly at the sight of his muscled torso, the firelight creeping over every hard surface of him. What did this man have, eighteen abs?

"We need to get warm," he said, jolting me out of my gawking. "There's no way around it—we're going to have to huddle together next to the fire."

I scoffed, shaking my head. “That is not necessary.”

“I’m serious, Eedy. The temperature is dropping. We’ll freeze if we don’t.”

He had to be joking, there was no way. No way.

But the longer I sat in my soaking wet clothes and shook like a tree branch in a typhoon, the more I knew he was right.

Still, I had extra clothing in my saddlebags to change into. He was out of luck given that the rest of his packed garments were left in Velarune, but that didn’t mean I had to lie naked in a forest cave.

He was quick to strip and lay out our supply of blankets near the fire while I stared in every direction but his. When it was my turn, I made him look away before I peeled off my own wet clothes and changed into a simple shift and thick wool socks. I tiptoed over to his huddled form laying on the ground, tugging one of the blankets over my legs while keeping a healthy foot of space between us. He immediately rolled to face me.

“Cheater,” he mumbled, raking his eyes across my dry clothes.

“Because I use the resources I have at hand?”

“Well, if that’s how we’re going to play it...” He sat up slightly, laying his arm out to the side closest to me. I stared at it with a frown.

“Don’t be shy now, Tempest,” he said. “I’m admittedly limited in my resources, so you’re my best chance at getting warm. I need you.”

I swallowed hard at his declaration and crossed my arms.

His playful smile returned even as his shivering continued. “And you are the one that pulled me out into a thunderstorm. Was the plan to let me freeze to death right before we make it back to Naohm?”

I growled, knowing that he was right. “Your bottom half stays covered with your own blanket. At all times,” I commanded as I scooted closer.

His smile grew wider. “Of course.”

This man . This infuriatingly charming man.

With a huff, I laid my head in the crook of his arm and wrapped my limbs around him. He sighed, as if my touch alone gave him relief. He gathered me and the surrounding blankets tighter against him, cocooning us together.

“Your warmth is heavenly, but it’s going to take a bit of time to ease this deep chill in my bones,” he stuttered, reaching for my hand under the blankets. “I need a distraction.”

“Caelum, what are you—” I protested.

“Shh, let us name the old gods. We may need to pray to some of them soon.”

He held my palm open, close to his face. Running his thumb softly against my pinky finger, he muttered, “Stavos. The god who buried himself in a mountain. Known for providing healthy crops and livestock. Not very helpful.”

He touched my ring finger, and I shivered. “Vayros,” I murmured, trying to distract myself from the gentle way he held my hand in his. “Lives inside a waterfall. Known for keeping droughts at bay and rainwater clean.”

And the list went on, Caelum reverently touching each one of my five fingers for the five old gods.

Nycos. Engulfed by a storm cloud. Meant to help with good weather for travel and celebrations.

Elyros. Pulled under in the sea. Helpful in keeping the fish plentiful and the sea calm.

Favios. Consumed by the sun. Worshipped for light against the darkest of days.

“Favios seems like the one to start with,” I said solemnly as we rounded out the last of the old hallows.

“If I were a god,” he said, still examining my hand, “I’d want to be taken in by the moon. To watch over all of Eyre in the night. To make sure no one was alone in the dark.”

My heart shuddered, thinking of where that wish came from, the depths of the pain he’d had to endure to be here right now, with me.

I slipped my hand out of his grasp, but he turned toward me, our faces now inches apart, and I tried to focus on the pop and crack of the fire rather than the intensity in his gaze and the feel of his bare skin under my palms. But his voice broke the silence once more, low and probing.

“If I weren’t a prince...if you weren’t a witch,” he murmured, his voice barely audible over the rain outside, “if we were just two people whose paths happened to cross...”

He trailed off, but I understood his meaning. My heart thundered in my chest as I met his eyes behind wet lashes.

“Yes,” I whispered, my voice so soft I wasn’t sure he’d heard.

But he had. His gaze dipped to my mouth, lingering, and his thumb brushed gently over my lower lip. “So, you’d let this stranger kiss you,” he said, his voice like gravel. His other hand found my hip beneath my blanket, his fingers firm as they brushed against the thin fabric of my shift. “Touch you?”

“He would be no stranger,” I answered, my thoughts hazy with desire.

He drew even closer, his breath warm on my cheek, his eyes earnest. “I’d like to be that man, Eedy. If only for one night.”

His words left me spellbound, my heart pounding, my mind torn between desire and the consequences of giving in to it. Trembling, my hand moved to graze his cheek, and he closed his eyes at my touch.

“Caelum,” I said. “We will be in Naohm tomorrow.”

“Yes.” He turned his head enough to brush a kiss against my wrist. “Tomorrow . Not tonight.”

The fluttering feeling was so familiar, and I knew now for certain he had done it while we’d slept in his fae room the night of the revelry. He was the moth drawn to lightning.

And I understood the feeling all too well. Every part of me was drawn to him. Burning to touch him, taste him, feel him in every way. In all ways. I was standing on the edge of a cliff, and I’d fall so hard and so deep, I’d drown.

“Will you still be getting married in the spring?” My own heart shattered as I said it, knowing I was breaking the spell.

“And if I wasn’t?” His fingers curled possessively into my hip, wet tendrils of his blond hair falling over his eyes.

My resolve wobbled like a drunk on a tightrope. “But you are .”

He didn’t reply, his jaw clenched, his bright blue eyes dimming down into a murky shadow of what they were moments before.

With a shaky breath, I rolled over, turning my back to him, trying to settle my fraying mind.

“Storming away from me again?” he whispered.

I didn’t answer, pressing my lips together painfully, holding in all the things I longed to say. To do . Being a highborn was never something I’d wanted, but what I wouldn’t give to be the daughter of a duke right now.

I was a jealous creature. I wanted to claim him as mine and mine alone. But he couldn’t offer me that, and it was like a dagger in my side.

I curled in on myself, the phantom wound radiating from my core. A single tear snaked down the ridge of my nose, and I put my fist against my mouth, desperate to stay silent. He was a prince with obligations to Eyre, and no amount of my whimpering was going to change that.

But when I tried to quietly suck in a single breath, it was needy and ragged, like I really had been stabbed.

“Gods, I shouldn’t have said all that,” he murmured, shifting closer again. “I’m sorry, Eedy. Truly, I’m an idiot.” His chest brushed against my back, and his hand ran up and down my arm in soothing strokes. “I could take a beating every night for the rest



of my life without issue. But hearing you cry? I can't bear it."

I still didn't trust myself to reply. I was embarrassed. Helpless. Falling for a man I couldn't keep. But he continued rubbing my arm. He gave me time. I took in a few deep breaths, piecing myself back together, focusing on his touch and a solution to this turmoil.

A compromise I thought I could live with rose to the surface of my dreary thoughts.

"I'm a wretch for asking it," I forced out, my throat still tight, "but maybe you could hold me tonight." I steeled my face before turning to look at him over my shoulder. "Can you do just that?"

He held my gaze, his eyes dark pools of blue. "I'll do whatever you ask of me, Tempest."

Ride back with me to Naohm tomorrow and never leave.

But instead of saying that, I turned away from him once more and stared at the fire. My heart flung itself against my chest over and over, either desperate for me to move forward with this plan or warning me not to.

I took one more deep breath. "I want you to hold me, Caelum."

For a few moments, he didn't move, and I tensed in uncertainty. Then a brief chill skittered across my back as he lifted the edge of my blanket. His hand brushed along my side and rested at the natural dip of my waist. Heat sprinted through me, his touch awakening every inch of my skin, every drop of my blood.

His hand continued forward, stroking over my stomach until he reached my other hip that was resting against the hard cave ground. With a quick tug, he pulled me flush

against him.

Scents of cool pine and sweet rainwater drifted over me. The tension in me evaporated. Every rattling nerve and despairing thought dissipated in his embrace. I relaxed, melting into him, his presence overwhelming every one of my senses. With both hands, I clung to the arm he had wrapped around me, not sure that I'd be able to let go after this.

"Is this okay?" His lips brushed against the edge of my ear, sparking a shiver to race down my spine.

I nodded my head, my whole body vibrating in relief at his closeness. He nuzzled into my neck, breathing deeply.

"Good," he said, and I could feel him smiling against the curve of my shoulder, "because even the gods couldn't pry me away from you now."

A small chuckle escaped from me, and he squeezed me tighter.

"That's what I like to hear," he murmured before placing a quick kiss just below my ear. "No more crying now, Tempest. Sleep. I have you."

He had me.

As I drifted off, I wondered if he knew how true that really was.

### Chapter Eighteen

As the first light seeped through the thin layer of mist clinging to the ground, I sat up with only blankets around me, my back aching from my slumber on the hard cave floor. I stole a glance at Caelum, who was already dressed and breaking down camp, his movements purposeful, though he avoided my gaze as much as I avoided his.

I could still feel the warmth of his hand on my hip, the charged silence between us as we lay cocooned in the blanket, his whispered questions echoing in my mind.

I got dressed outside of his view and then we worked in silence, our usual easy banter noticeably absent. With everything packed and secured on Sorsha, we finally set off.

The rhythmic clapping of her hooves filled the quiet between us, a sound I welcomed, hoping it would drown out the turmoil inside me. It did little, however, to quell the spark of tension beneath my skin at the feel of Caelum's chest pressed against my back or his firm hands resting near my waist as he guided Sorsha toward Naohm.

I tried to sit as rigidly as possible, careful not to let myself touch him any more than necessary.

He definitely noticed.

"It's okay if you lean on me, Eedy," he finally said into my ear with a chuckle. "I won't take it as a sign that you've changed your mind."

I resisted out of spite for at least an hour more, but finally, my spine screamed for

relief. Slowly, in the bright afternoon sunlight, I melted against him. There was no denying to myself anymore that I wanted him, but this was different. Leaning into him now as we made our way back home, I felt safe. Secure. I...trusted him.

Without thinking, I put my hands over his as they held the reins loosely near my hips, running my fingers over his coarse skin. He stiffened behind me, a low rumble reverberating through his chest.

After a few breathless moments, he took the reins in one hand while the other snaked around my middle until I was pulled taut against him just like the night before. He lowered his face to nuzzle into my hair on the side of my head, taking a deep needy breath through his nose.

“Gods, Eedy, you’re going to be the death of me,” he murmured.

I tipped my head back against his chest, a frenzy of want pooling in my stomach. I’d had him all to myself these last few weeks. Soon we would be back in Naohm, and it would be different. It must be. He was betrothed, and I was a witch. He couldn’t be seen curled against me like he was right now.

It would never be like this again.

My throat clogged with the realization. Once we got back, would we revert to ships passing in the night, him going one way, and I another? Would we ever touch again? Would I ever see him again?

“Whoa, girl,” Caelum said, pulling on the reins to bring Sorsha to a stop, along with my racing thoughts.

“Why are we stopping?” I said, my pulse thrashing in my ears. If he pulled me off this horse and looked at me the way he did last night, I did not think I could resist him

again.

Instead, his next words left me breathless in a different way.

“I think we’re near one of the ley lines your father had mapped out.”

I blinked, surprised. “You really read all his research? And you remember that?”

He hovered over my shoulder, his fingers a light pressure against my stomach. “Of course, I read it all. I had to know what I was up against.”

I bristled. Up against?

“Why did you have such a problem with him?” I asked, frustration pouring over the simmering desire that had been overriding my senses.

For a moment, he hesitated. “It wasn’t necessarily your father I had a problem with,” he finally admitted as he spurred Sorsha on once more, navigating a thin path through the trees. “It was... you .”

My stomach tightened. “Me?”

He nodded slowly. “Your father used to visit my uncle’s home often, and every time, he’d...well, he’d go on and on about you. He’d beam with pride, telling anyone who would listen how remarkable you were, how fiercely dedicated, talented, unstoppable.”

A lump rose in my throat listening to memories of my father. If only Caelum knew how my father’s opinion had changed of me. How he’d ordered me to stay home, preferring to be alone. I craned my neck to study the prince’s face.

“I’d watch him,” Caelum continued, his eyes far away in the past, “and think how lucky you were to have a father like that. I couldn’t help but envy it. I never got to be around my father much after he became ill, but my uncle...Well, he’s never had a kind word for me, and he certainly doesn’t care about any accomplishments I might have. He only wanted to control me. I wanted what you had—someone to be proud of me.”

My heart twisted at his words. “I had no idea,” I whispered. “All this time, I thought you didn’t understand him.”

“Oh, I understood him. And it killed me.” He nodded, his eyes still on the path ahead. “And I resented you for it, which was not fair of me. I’m truly sorry I behaved that way.”

The cocky, crown prince of Eyre was apologizing to me ? I chuckled.

“All is forgiven, Caelum,” I murmured, leaning back against him. His arm around my middle tugged me closer once more, but it wasn’t fueled with desire. It was more like relief that another thorn between us had been plucked out and healed.

“I see now why he named you Eada,” he murmured.

I froze at the word, my heartbeat stuttering. It had been so long since I’d heard it. “How do you know my full name?”

Caelum’s mouth tugged up on one side, smug as ever. “It’s written as clear as day on your saddlebags. I know you never explicitly asked if I could read, but, alas, I can.” He rested his chin on top of my head. “Also, he never called you Eedy when he spoke of you. It was always?—”

“My Eada.” My throat tightened, and tears rose to the corners of my eyes. I hastily

rubbed them away before continuing. “I asked everyone to stop calling me that when he died. He was always walking around saying my Eada this and my Eada that. And I couldn’t...it was too hard to...”

Eada meant world in the ancient tongue. But when he’d died, my world had collapsed.

I hadn’t realized I’d curled my hands into fists until Caelum’s one palm covered mine, his thumb sweeping over my knuckles, coaxing it to open so he could interlace our fingers. “It’s okay, Eedy. Grief changes us. But no matter if he’s here now to say it or not, you were his whole world, no matter what you call yourself now.”

We rode in silence after that, each of us lost in our own thoughts until I felt a hum pulsing through the air. I welcomed the distraction. “This is it,” I said.

Caelum helped me slip down from Sorsha and followed closely after me as I pushed through the last thicket of trees.

There, nestled in a patch of soft grass, a cluster of delicate blooms swayed gently in the breeze. The flowers’ pale blue petals had edges that glowed a faint silver, as though dusted with a pure magic. I crouched down, breathing in their sweet, floral scent, feeling a soothing calm settle over me.

“Etherose,” I murmured, tracing a finger along one of the petals.

Caelum studied the flowers with a focus I recognized now as his genuine curiosity. “Yes, the same as the ones I woke up to all those years ago,” he murmured. “But this type of flower can only grow well in grassy plains and meadows, not rocky terrain. Perhaps that’s why his findings were inconsistent. Why he had a hard time connecting every ley line.”

Plucking one free from its roots, he brought it up to his nose to smell. He shook his head, laughing after breathing it in.

“I think those fae were onto something, Eedy,” he said softly. “These flowers smell just like you.”

I offered a tight smile in reply, not wanting to think about the fae right now. Or how he knew my scent so well.

I closed my eyes, feeling a surge of energy vibrating beneath the surface. “Maybe I can try to channel it here. The magic feels different from other places. Closer.”

“Then go on,” he encouraged, stepping back with an expectant look.

Taking a steadying breath, I focused, calling the magic up from the ley line. It answered, rising to my palms just like lightning would and spiraling out of my hands in tendrils of glowing energy. I directed it upward, into the sky, where it exploded in a shimmering light. The air hummed with power as I did it again and again, throwing the magic across the clearing, illuminating the trees and making the flowers’ edges glow brighter.

I could feel it moving through me, fierce and unyielding, but I could only channel it. I couldn’t command it into something I wanted, like fire or water or healing elements. My excitement turned to frustration, my hands trembling as I struggled to shape it into something more .

Caelum stepped forward, his hand grasping my shoulder. “Eedy, it’s enough,” he said gently, his voice breaking through my focus. “We know they are here and that your father was right. You’ve proven him right .”

Breathless, I let the magic fade, my hands falling to my sides. I met his gaze, my



frustration bubbling beneath the surface. “I thought proving him right would help us find a solution,” I admitted. “But now I only have more questions.”

He gave me a reassuring look. “Then we’ll answer them together. Come on. We’re not far now.”

We mounted Sorsha and began the final stretch of our journey to Naohm.

Home.

As we approached the outskirts of the village, a young boy passing by spotted us, his eyes widening as he recognized Caelum.

“Prince Caelum!” he exclaimed, his gaze darting curiously to me. “You’ve returned!”

Caelum gave him a quick nod. “Can you please run ahead and gather the council for an emergency meeting? We’ve brought important news from the fae realm.”

### Chapter Nineteen

As we burst into the council chamber, the low murmur of voices instantly stopped. Heads turned, and every councilman's eyes were upon us, taking in our disheveled state. Dirt clung to the hem of my cloak, and Caelum's hair was windswept and tangled, both of us looking far more suited to a battlefield than a council meeting.

Baldric's gaze flickered over us before he forced a polite smile. "Your Highness," he began, raising a brow, "surely you would prefer a chance to clean up and make yourself comfortable. There's no need to rush."

Caelum held up a hand, his jaw set. "There's no time for a bath, Mage Emberford. What we have to discuss cannot wait."

His firm tone caused a ripple of whispers to break out, council members exchanging glances. I had survived a visit to the fae lands and a trek across Eyre, and still the skeptical looks they aimed at me made my confidence waver.

Instead of striding to his usual place at the head of the table, though, Caelum gently nudged me forward. I dragged my feet, confused, but he leaned in close and whispered, "They'll need to hear this from you, Eedy."

My heart ricocheted inside my chest. He was going to make them listen to me .

"Miss Blackthorn will lead this council session," Caelum's voice echoed through the room, a warning rumble that cut through the chatter that had started to sprout up again. "She's the most qualified to discuss the situation with the fae, and I expect

everyone to heed her.”

The council exchanged wary glances, but at Caelum’s curt nod, they finally settled into a begrudging silence. Caelum slid into a seat off to the left of me as I moved to the head of the table, my heart pounding. The weight of responsibility pressed down on me, but I met their gazes head on, just like I knew my father would.

“What we learned in the fae realm changes everything,” I said, commanding my voice to stay steady. “The fae confirmed that my father was right. The magic does pool heavily under us in certain places—in ley lines.”

The room remained silent, their eyes locked on me as I explained what the fae had revealed: their siphoning of magic from Eyre, the gradual weakening of the magic in our land. “They gave us a deadline of the winter solstice, which is now only a day away. By then, the magic that sustains our kingdom could be beyond fixing.”

The discord began, and I let it wash over me, my gaze drifting to Caelum. He nodded, watching me with a ferocity that bolstered my confidence.

“We need to act now to pull the magic back from the fae, to divert the flow back toward Eyre somehow,” I continued, raising my voice over the noise. “But to do that, we need ideas—a way to redirect the magic before it’s lost.”

Silence fell over the council once again, each member exchanging uncertain glances.

Ronan Dunmore shifted in his seat, finally clearing his throat. “The fae’s hold on the magic is ancient and strong. How can we hope to compete if they’re set on taking it all?”

“The fae’s power is waning,” I replied. “King Thalion all but admitted it to me. We cannot let them regain their foothold by stealing the magic from Eyre.”

Another voice murmured, “Still, perhaps it’s beyond our abilities. We could damage these ley lines further by meddling.”

I clenched my fists, resisting the urge to slam them on the table. Their habit to fall right into defeat grated on me, but I forced myself to stay calm. Collected.

“We can’t give up,” I pressed. I dug deep, remembering all of Caelum’s pointed compliments that worked so well for him. “There must be something—anything—that we can do. You all are the High Council of Magi, the greatest mages of the kingdom. Surely if anyone can think of a solution, you can.”

A long quiet settled over the chamber, and my frustration grew as each passing second slipped away without a single idea, without even a shred of hope.

I glanced at Caelum, who looked equally frustrated, his fingers tapping against the table in a restless rhythm. Finally, Baldric Emberford rose from his seat. His usual confidence was absent, and he scratched at his beard, avoiding my gaze.

“There is something I must confess,” he muttered. “A few days back, I received a note from the fae king himself.”

A chill swept over me as the council members gasped, turning to him in shock.

Baldric cleared his throat and continued. “The correspondence verified this same story. So, it is exactly as Miss Blackthorn reports. But it’s hopeless. He said that soon the magic would break completely, and we’d be left stranded without any at all. Though, he offered an alternative.”

My stomach twisted. “What alternative?”

Baldric hesitated, but finally met my eyes. “He promised any mage or witch of

sufficient strength could seek refuge in the fae realm. We would be tested, of course, but he assured me that I—and the rest of this council—would pass.”

“Yes, they almost forced Miss Blackthorn to stay with them for this very reason,” Caelum exclaimed, finally joining in from the sidelines. “They are weak, and yet you are tempted to abandon your duty to Eyre and join them?”

A few council members shifted uncomfortably, clearly unsettled by the revelation. Cormac Verdane coughed and glanced around the room. “Perhaps it’s worth considering,” he said. “If the magic will soon be gone here, we must think of our own survival.”

My patience snapped. “I cannot believe what I am hearing.” I could barely keep my voice steady. “Eyre is your home, and you’d give it up so easily?” Cormac flushed and looked away, but I wasn’t finished. “My father would be ashamed to see this council debating surrender to the very beings who would take everything from us. He’d never have entertained such cowardice!”

A heavy silence fell. I’d said too much, been too brash, but I didn’t care. I had to make them understand. That we must work together to fix this. I sighed, gathering up what little patience I had left.

“If my father taught me anything, it is this.” I leaned over the oak table, sweeping my gaze to each mage in the room. “No matter what the circumstances are, or how hopeless a situation might be, we all have a choice. Always .” My fiery stare ended on Caelum, his face taut and his eyes misty as he witnessed my desperate plea. “And those choices make us who we are,” I said to him, to them, to the whole realm.

To my amazement, some of the councilmen were shaking their heads in approval, in agreement with me . The tide in the room shifted, the fear and the anxiety morphing into determination and resolve.

But when my eyes passed over Baldric, his expression had grown darker, and he stood up once more, his lips pressing into a thin line. “As wonderful as that line of thinking sounds, Miss Blackthorn, your father was not as loyal to this council as you seem to believe. In fact, he was planning to resign from the council entirely before he passed. That’s why we’ve hardly taken your place here seriously. He’d already lost faith in us—in Eyre’s High Council of Magi—long before you stepped in. So, in truth, maybe he would have been the first to join the fae.”

His words struck me like a blow to the stomach, my breath catching as my mind reeled.

“You’re lying,” I whispered. Baldric’s expression slackened with pity.

I turned back to the rest of the councilmen, the ones who had just been looking at me with true heart in their eyes only to find them all staring down at the fascinating oak table before them.

I stumbled backward. All this time, I’d been fighting to uphold my father’s legacy, to keep his work alive. And yet, he’d planned to leave it all behind? To quit the fight and abandon it?

“I’m sorry, Miss Blackthorn. But it’s the truth.” He shook his head. “Perhaps, we should have told you from the start. If you’d known, you wouldn’t have burdened yourself with a fight that was never yours to begin with.”

The council resumed its quiet chatter, as if my father’s legacy and my own rousing efforts moments before had meant nothing to them. The walls were closing in, their judgment crushing, and I couldn’t bear it another moment.

Without another word, I turned, my steps hurried as I made for the door. The betrayal, the confusion—it was too much.

As I rounded the corner of the large oak table, a hand reached out, warm and steady, catching my own and halting me in my tracks.

Caelum's gaze held mine, his eyes a raging sea of blue, reflecting a pain that echoed my own. For a moment, I let him see everything—the hurt, the grief, the disappointment. His fingers tightened around mine, a wordless understanding between us.

But it was not enough.

My heart was collapsing inside of my chest, and I needed to get out. I pulled my hand away, not trusting myself to speak, not trusting anything that fell within these walls anymore. Without another glance, I walked out, leaving behind the council and every hollowed out hope I'd carried in with me only moments before.

### Chapter Twenty

I didn't realize I had stomped to the edge of the path that led to the hollow tree until a particularly large gust of wind pushed against me, and I blinked, looking up at the familiar cliff side. I stood there for some time, contemplating if the climb was even worth it. Was there peace up there still or only more disappointment?

While I bit the inside of my cheek, considering my choices, a rustling crept up behind me.

Breathless, Caelum rounded a bend and jogged up to my side. "I had to send a few crows for messages after you stormed out, but then I couldn't find you. Your mother recommended I look here."

I didn't reply, not having much left to say. I needed to act .

"Eedy, where are you going?" Caelum called as I started up the cliff side path.

"To think," I replied, not turning to watch the prince of Eyre chase after me.

"May I come?" he huffed, catching up.

"It's dangerous."

"Well, then I'm definitely coming." There was a lightness in his voice, like something had been lifted off his chest and he could breathe easier. Anger rippled through me, knowing the state of my mind. The crushing hopelessness. The defeat.



It would be better if he didn't come. It would be easier if he stayed away from me.

Caelum stayed quiet as we trekked up the mild part of the path, closer to the base of the cliff.

When the real climb began, though, he found plenty to say.

"Dangerous was a good word for this trail, Tempest. You could have also added treacherous, hazardous, potentially deadly."

I snorted at his complaining. "That's all basically the same thing, Caelum."

"True," he huffed. "But I believe using various words would have emphasized more the amount of peril I'd be in by following you up here."

"Then turn back," I hissed.

"I mean, you could consider a hand railing here and there," he rambled on. "Maybe add some stone pavers into the pathway."

His constant barrage of suggestions made me lose my concentration, and I slipped on some loose rocks.

Panic raced through me but, almost as quickly, steady hands held me at the waist, stabilizing me once more.

"You come up here alone often?" His lips brushed against my ear. "You should most definitely stop that. Someone wise told me that this is a very dangerous path."

I pushed him off me, but a small smile grew on my lips.

Hallows be, who was I kidding? I wanted him here with me.

When we reached the top, Caelum could not help himself. He froze, staring wide-eyed at the tree, his mouth hanging open.

“It’s amazing, Eedy,” he said, circling it.

I didn’t say anything. It was amazing. Or it had been. I ducked into the carved-out center of it and sat curled into the inner wall, wondering if anything that my father had told me in this hollow space had been real. That he was sure he’d be able to convince the council when he had enough proof. That they were the key to making a difference in Eyre.

Caelum soon followed, staring at me intently. “You’re angry with him. Your father.”

“He was going to leave the council,” I exclaimed in a burst. “He was giving up. I was fighting for him, because he left .”

Caelum crouched down to my level, his brows furrowed. “He didn’t leave you,” he said softly. “He fell, right? I heard it was an accident.”

I stood then, pacing the small space inside the tree. Energy hummed around me as I tried to not fall too far into the nightmare that was that day. “He slipped, yes. But he was still holding on to the ledge at my feet. I tried to help him. I had him. If he’d only given me more time to think. If he’d just waited .”

My throat tightened, the memory hitting me like a hurricane. His fingers clamped around mine, the raw panic in his eyes, the impossible weight of his body pulling against my grip...

Caelum stood slowly, hands on hips as he turned to face me. “How long have you

been this angry with him, Eedy?”

“What?” I shoved him in the chest for his stupid words. “Only now. When they told me about him wanting to abandon the council.”

He shook his head, his eyes somber. “I see your anger. It may be hidden behind your grief, but it’s still there. It’s been there for a while. I should know the look.”

I turned my back on him, the hollow walls of the tree closing in on me. “You’re ridiculous. And you know nothing of it. Or him. Or what happened.”

I felt his presence behind me, hovering, waiting.

“Eedy, was he pulling you down with him?” he asked at last.

I was shuddering, flashes running through my mind of me grasping at my father’s arm, the shuffle of the pebbles as I strained to keep my balance where I lay. “I was fine! He could have been fine. He needed to wait!”

The memories scraped against my raw heart. I had begged him, my voice ragged with desperation. I thought I could hold on...if I just held tighter, if I just didn’t blink or breathe or move, he’d be okay. But instead, he’d looked at me with a soft, resolute expression, like he already knew what he had to do.

Caelum’s hand fell on my shoulder, and I turned to face him again, eyes burning, heart burning, everything burning.

“Sometimes,” he said softly, pushing a stray hair out of my face, “we have to leave the ones we love to keep them safe. To protect them. He knew you’d never let go, so he made the choice to do it. It was his to make, but I know it was out of love.”

It didn't compute. Love was holding on. Fighting. Love wasn't leaving . But the look in Caelum's eyes, a man who didn't have anyone who truly loved him, still understood what that love looked like. And the choices that love would make. If only I could wrap my head around it too.

He stepped closer, placing a firm, slender hand around my arm, anchoring me in place.

“And even if he planned to leave the council, Eedy, I highly doubt he'd given up the fight. He just gave up on a group that was meant to serve the people when he realized they weren't doing that anymore. You saw them just now. They're useless and ready to join the fae.”

His words made sense, but my heart still felt numb from all the emotions I'd just dumped on it.

“So, the council will abandon us for the fae,” I murmured, “and Eyre will soon be left with no magic.”

“There are still the two of us willing to fight,” he said, his confidence shining through even now. “It's not over until it's over.”

“I think it's already over, Caelum,” I whispered, tears blurring my vision, my hope lost.

He gave my body a rough shake, rousing the blood in my veins and reawakening all my senses. I blinked up at him, surprised.

“No, Eedy, it's not. We can still figure this out. I have been far and wide throughout this kingdom and have yet to find someone who matches your tenacity, your intelligence, your...”

He trailed off, never revealing the last thing I possessed, but his gaze had turned soft and his hand on my arm tugged at me with the slightest pressure.

I threw a hand up to his chest, determined to push him away, but once it was there, once I felt his heart hammering underneath his soft linen shirt, my resistance to him fell away.

In fact, he was the only thing I really wanted right now.

“Caelum,” I breathed, a tear falling down my cheek.

“Yes, Tempest?”

“Don’t call me that,” I grumbled, turning away from him.

But he held tight, rooting me in place.

“Why not?” He tilted my chin back up toward his commanding face. “You are a tempest, a storm to be reckoned with. I feel your thunder when you’re furious. Your winds when you snap out a witty reply. Torrential rain pounding down on me when you’re sad. And when we touch”—he squeezed my arm, and snaked his other hand around my waist, pulling me in closer—“your lightning.”

“No one wants to be near a storm,” I finally whispered. All my life I was too much for everyone around me. Too moody. Too stubborn. Too everything.

He inclined his head even closer, his eyes alight, tendrils of his golden hair falling into his face. “The storm is what excites me most, Eedy. You are raw. Chaotic. Untamable.”

I bristled. “So, you wish to tame me, then?”

“No, never.” He huffed, his grip on my hip and arm tightening in his frustration. “I just want you to know it doesn’t scare me. I can handle it. I can handle all of you.”

He was kiss-close now, his piney scent settling over me, making me breathless. His lips parted, and his eyes fell from mine to gaze lower.

“Eedy,” he murmured, “I must tell you?—”

I covered his mouth with my fingers. “Tell me later.” I was done with his words. Now, I wanted everything else.

His eyes widened as I gripped at his shirt and pulled him the last few inches toward me. And when the prince of Eyre laid his delicious mouth over mine, something in my heart unlocked.

Thank the gods he wanted me raw and wild, because I could no longer tame myself.

### Chapter Twenty-One

In the hollowed quiet of the ancient tree, Caelum's mouth was insistent on mine, hot and hungry. Every touch, every graze of his fingers at the nape of my neck pulled me in deeper.

He coaxed me against the rough internal wall of the hollow tree, capturing both of my hands above my head as he nipped at my jawline, my earlobe. I was losing myself in the feel of him—the warmth of his hands, the weight of his body pressed against mine, grounding me as much as he was setting my whole world spinning.

An insatiable frenzy rippled through me. I was lightning trapped in a bottle, and I needed release.

“Let me go,” I whispered between ragged breaths, straining against his hold on my wrists.

He listened. With my hands free, I clutched at his arms and spun him, so his back was against the wall now. I shoved him against it, hard. I thought maybe too hard, but when I looked up at him, his eyes were wide with delight.

I dug my nails down his chest, and he groaned, pulling me taut against him once more. He yanked my head back by my hair, forcing my neck to be exposed. His mouth left rough kisses along my collarbone and up the column of my neck, leaving flames in their wake. I ran my hands through his hair, grinding my body against him but finding no relief.

I wanted him closer, so much closer.

I drew his mouth back to mine, my tongue slipping in, desperate to taste more of him. A low, eager sound rumbled from his throat, sending another bolt of need through me.

“Eedy,” he whispered against my lips, his voice rough, his hands in knots of my hair. “Gods, I want to stay here with you for the rest of my life.”

The words should have thrilled me, wrapped me in the possibility of an endless promise. But instead, they cut through the haze, sharp and unforgiving.

For the rest of my life?

A harsh reminder of my reality, that I might’ve claimed him here, now, but he wasn’t mine to keep.

I pulled back, meeting his startled gaze, my heart pounding with something between fury and heartbreak. I forced the words out, trembling. “I shouldn’t have done that. We shouldn’t...we can’t...”

He reached for me, nodding his head, his eyes still wild pools of desire. “Yes, Eedy. We can .”

I pushed his hands away, my anger flaring. “I don’t think your betrothed would agree. She should have a say in who her future husband kisses, Caelum!”

“She doesn’t have anything to do with this,” he proclaimed, frustration in his eyes as he reached for me again. “Please, Eedy, I can?—”

But I’d already backed away against the other edge of the hollow tree, swallowing the



shame that clawed its way up my throat. I'd given in to him, to the deep need inside of me, and now I'd lose my heart. He'd rip it out when he left.

I needed to restore my walls; I needed my defenses back to protect me.

"Just go back to your lavish tent, and your proper fiancée, and your heaps of money, Caelum," I hissed. "Leave me alone."

He looked stunned for a moment, his mouth working to form words that wouldn't come. And then his face hardened, and he straightened his spine to his full height, towering over me. "Are you implying heaps of money solves everything, Eedy?" His voice was taunting. "Would heaps of money be able to bring back your father?"

Anger flashed hot under my skin, and I stomped forward, slapping him across the face. "Don't you dare bring him into this!"

A red welt appeared on his cheek, but still, he didn't give up his assault.

"Well, would it?" His voice was a quiet fury, turning back to face me.

A heavy silence coated the hollow space, and I hated myself for not having a proper retort, for feeling so exposed in front of him.

"In case you haven't been paying attention," he went on, his voice cold and raw, "there are loads of problems that even heaps of money cannot—will never—be able to fix. It cannot bring your father back to you. It cannot stop my uncle from whipping me on a whim. It cannot even buy us an answer to this magical crisis. So, go ahead and lie to yourself. Tell yourself that the rich rake of a prince could never understand you. That feeling of being trapped. Stuck. Unable to climb the mountain that you so desperately want to."

He took a shaky breath, his voice full of restrained anger. “If it helps you sleep at night, Tempest, then do it. Recite it to yourself like a prayer. But know this: no matter what you do, you know— and I know —it isn’t true.”

He turned to leave, but he paused after a few steps. Glancing back, his eyes shimmered as his voice dipped lower. “I thought we’d moved past you equating me to the dirt under your boots. Even though I’ve never had anyone in my life to tell me, I know I am worth much more than that.”

His words echoed unforgivingly in the cavernous space. The pain in his eyes mirrored something in my own chest, something I’d tried to ignore. I saw past his title, past his charm and arrogance, to the bruised, yearning soul that I’d been so desperate to avoid.

Because it reminded me of myself.

Without another word, Caelum stormed out of the hollow tree, leaving me standing alone in the shadows, my heart still pounding, and my eyes still burning, and my lips still tingling with regret.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

H ours later, I sat in the quiet of our small cottage, emotions swirling inside like a storm I couldn't calm. Even a long soak in the bath had done nothing to settle the ache twisting through me. The fight with Caelum replayed in my mind, every harsh word a bruise I couldn't stop pressing on.

I stared into the flickering fire in the hearth, my thoughts scattered, while my mother busied herself over a pot of stew. Mannix lay on the floor next to my chair, pressing against my leg, trying to comfort me. I gave his head a quick pat, thankful for his attempt.

My mother glanced over, her perceptive gaze catching every crack in my facade. "That scowl of yours could scare away a whole village," she said gently, coming to sit beside me.

I sighed, fingers tracing patterns on the rough wood of the table. "Or one infuriating crown prince," I murmured, barely able to voice it. "And that's the least of our concerns. The council is useless, more concerned about themselves and the fae's promises than in saving the magic of Eyre. Tomorrow is the winter solstice, and I don't know how to fix it."

Worry shadowed her face.

"I don't even know if I'm doing the right thing," I continued. "I've fought so hard, but all I do is push people away—especially Caelum."

She got up to stir the stew she was making. “Have my old ears deceived me, or am I sensing your distaste for that highborn has softened?”

“He wasn’t what I expected.” My heart squeezed at the memory of his angry face at the hollow tree. “He’s more my equal than anyone I’ve ever known.”

She gave a soft chuckle. “Well, that’s a shame, then, since he’s returning to the capital city tomorrow. I would’ve loved to visit more with someone who could match you .”

“Tomorrow?” I managed, fighting to keep my voice steady.

She nodded, her lips turned downward. “With the risk of witches and mages leaving to join the fae, he’ll want to discuss strategy at the capital, among other duties I’m sure he needs to get back to.”

Like getting married. The thought was a vicious thorn snagged deep in my side.

The weight of regret tightened my chest as I stared into the fire again. My thoughts strayed to my father, to the countless trips I took with him across Eyre before everything fell apart. I never understood why he stopped taking me toward the end, no matter how much I pleaded.

“Why did he stop?” I murmured.

She looked at me, confused. “Who?”

“Father. Why did he stop taking me with him on his research trips,” I said, the words tumbling out. “Before he...before everything happened. I always thought it was because he didn’t trust me, or that I was holding him back. But now...” I searched her face, hoping for some clarity. “Was it something else?”

Her stirring slowed, the wooden spoon resting against the rim of the pot. “You were never holding him back, Eedy,” she said softly. “If anything, he wanted to protect you.”

“From what?” I asked, my brows knitting together.

She hesitated, her eyes flicking to the fire before settling back on me. “He saw something in Velarune,” she said, “in the Pool of Desire.”

“What did he see?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, her expression clouding with old memories. “He never told me all the details. But whatever it was, it scared him. He said it was tied to the ley line—and to you. Something that foreshadowed you being taken away because of a problem with the magic. He wanted to keep you safe until he could understand it more.”

I swallowed hard, the crackling of the fire eating up the silence.

I shook my head, bitterness coursing through me. “He should’ve told me. He should’ve given me the choice.”

“Yes, he should’ve,” she said with a sigh, coming to sit next to me at the table. “Men don’t always make the best choices when it comes to that. It’s hard-wired in them to protect, defend. They always think they know best.”

I nodded, though my heart felt heavy. The truth didn’t bring the comfort I’d expected, but it gave me something else: resolve. Whatever my father had seen, whatever he’d feared, I couldn’t let it stop me from fighting still for a solution.

My mother reached out, her hand warm and steady as it rested on mine. “Maybe this

is the first time you're realizing it, Eedy, but he wasn't a perfect man. No one is without flaws. But he loved you. Very much. And he was proud of you every day of his life."

He was proud of me.

My throat tightened, and I leaned my head against her shoulder, holding back more tears. Despite all my turmoil about what happened and agonizing over why he did what he did, I think I always knew he was proud. Whereas...

Caelum.

My thoughts circled back to him, to the hurt I'd caused. I couldn't let him leave with so much left unsaid. I owed him an apology at the very least—a chance to make things right. And if he didn't want to help me find a solution to the magic problem anymore, I could at least give him a proper goodbye.

Before leaving, I grabbed one of my everflame lanterns, recalling the last time I'd entered his tent, his candles burned down low. Maybe he could take this one thing back with him to his home in Tridus, to remember me.

My heart shivered at the thought, but still, I gathered up my things and ventured out into the cold.

I took a steadying breath as I approached his tent. The air was frigid, finding every nook and cranny of me left exposed to the elements. I peered inside the tent, still gathering my courage, and I could see his silhouette moving as he packed his belongings, no servants or help. Doing it all on his own. Alone. I braced myself, dread and anticipation twisting together.

"Caelum," I called softly from the entrance, and he turned. His face was guarded, his

eyes unreadable.

“I didn’t expect to see you tonight, Miss Blackthorn,” he said, his voice carrying a chill that made me wince.

I was Miss Blackthorn again. We were formal, unattached once more. My chest tightened, but still I forced myself to walk inside.

He looked every bit the prince again—his hair perfectly combed, his clothes and face without a trace of dirt or disorder on them. The wild, adventurous man from before was gone, replaced by this polished, distant version of himself, the one he’d been coerced into becoming his whole life.

Would the awe and wonder he had for the world fade when they pushed a crown into his hands? Would he go back to Tridus and become someone I wouldn’t recognize?

My heart shuddered at the thought.

“I...I wanted to give you something.” I held out the lantern. “For your journey back to the capital.”

He took it, examining the everflame glowing inside. “Is this one of yours? Made from lightning?”

I nodded while studying the floor, finding it hard to speak, to look him in the eye.

“How long will this flame last?” he whispered.

Forever, I thought, my heart clenching. “A ring. Maybe longer,” I said instead.

I heard the scrape of the lantern as he placed it on his desk.

“Thank you, Eedy,” he replied.

My name returning to his lips made my heart do backflips, and I had to look up.

Caelum was looking at me now too, but it was accompanied by a frown and a rigid posture. My heart plummeted, afraid that this was how it ended. That this was the last memory I would get of him, a cold and lifeless stare.

Don’t be a coward, Eedy. He is worth so much more than your pride.

I took a steadying breath. “Caelum, I didn’t just come to give you the lantern.” My voice wavered, but I pressed on. “I came to apologize.”

He tilted his head and crossed his arms, as if warring with himself over whether he wanted to hear it, but he finally raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“For the things I said, the way I’ve treated you.” I took a tentative step closer. “When we met, I judged you unfairly. I told myself that your title and wealth made your life easy, that you couldn’t possibly understand what it’s like to struggle, to lose . But these past weeks you’ve shown me how wrong I was.”

He remained silent. Still, I owed him this, so I pushed forward before I lost my nerve.

“I s ee you now, Caelum. I see someone who is resourceful, who can adapt and endure in ways I couldn’t have imagined. Someone who fights not because it’s expected of him, but because it’s the right thing to do. You’re resilient, strong. And I...”

I swallowed hard, the words catching in my throat. “I realize now that it wasn’t you I was angry at. It was me. I clung to those old, cruel ideas because it was easier than admitting the truth—that maybe I’m not worthy of you .”



His brows furrowed, and for a moment, the hard edges of his expression softening. But I wasn't finished.

"I'm so sorry for what I said to you," I continued, emotion welling up in my throat. "Those words were lies, and I said them because I was scared. Scared of what I felt for you. Scared of what it would mean if I let myself want you, knowing I couldn't have you. I thought pushing you away would hurt less than losing you, but I see now that it only made everything worse."

I let out a shaky breath. "You deserved better from me, Caelum. You still do. And in case we never see each other again after tonight, I just...I needed you to know that."

Silence stretched, heavy and uncertain, as I waited for him to speak. His gaze flicked over my face, and I fought the urge to look away. Then, slowly, his arms fell to his sides as he took a step closer.

"Do you really mean that?" His eyes shimmered like a blue wave in the sunlight. "All of it?"

"Yes," I whispered. "Every word."

His shoulders relaxed, the tension in his frame melting away as he reached for me. "Come here, Tempest."

I didn't hesitate. I closed the gap between us in a few quick strides, stepping into his arms. He wrapped me in his warmth, the familiar scent of pine grounding me even as it made my heart ache. I pressed my face against his chest, letting the steady rhythm of his heartbeat calm the storm inside me.

"We all make mistakes, Eedy," he murmured against my hair, "but don't think for one moment that you aren't worthy of me. You're the most amazing woman I've ever

met. Come to think of it, maybe I misspoke earlier. Maybe I yearn to be the dirt under your boots, if only for the chance to be near you.”

I laughed as tears slipped down my cheeks. I tried to pull back, embarrassed, but he held me tighter, his hand rubbing soothing circles on my back.

“I’m grateful for the time I had with you, Caelum,” I murmured against him. “I won’t soon forget it.”

He sighed. “That sounds like a goodbye.”

I didn’t confirm or deny it. I’d already bled myself out, the pain in my chest growing sharper. He was not mine to claim, and he never would be.

He let me pull back enough so he could see my face and wiped the tears from my cheek with his thumb, his touch so tender it made my whole chest ache. “I must apologize to you as well,” he said, his brow furrowed. “I should’ve explained myself more before all that happened in the tree. I should’ve told you?—”

“Please, don’t, Caelum,” I interrupted, shaking my head. I had already cracked open the contents of my heart and spilled them before him. If he declared his feelings were even remotely close to mine, I would not recover when he left.

“You are betrothed to another,” I whispered, jealousy rising untethered from deep within my core. “You said you wanted to be a loyal person, and?—”

“I am loyal,” he said, gripping me tighter. “Just not to her .”

That wasn’t good enough. It would never be good enough.

No matter how much I wanted him now, I knew what I needed. “I cannot be the

woman on the side, Caelum. You cannot have a tempest and a queen.”

“I’ll admit it, Eedy. I do want both. But I want them to be one and the same.”

I shook my head, confused.

“That’s why I sent a crow as soon as I stepped out of the council meeting,” he continued, “informing the duke of the end of my engagement to his daughter. When you looked straight at me in that chamber and said we all have a choice, I knew what mine needed to be. I wanted to tell you, but you were so upset about the meeting and all that talk about your father, and when you kissed me, I lost all other thoughts in my head, and...”

My heart stopped as he trailed off. I touched my own lips, remembering. “Are you saying that when I kissed you ...”

He nodded, his fingers curling into my waist more. “I was only yours then.”

All the breath I had in me left my lungs. “But your uncle, he?”

“I’m no longer afraid of him and his consequences.” He ran one palm down the side of my face. “I’m not alone anymore.”

I gripped at his shirt, unsure of what I’d just heard. Did the crown prince of Eyre say he broke off his engagement to the daughter of a duke...for me ?

“Now,” Caelum continued, tilting my chin so that I had no choice but to be pierced through with his blue eyes. “Eedy Blackthorn. Will you have this freshly bachelored prince or not?”

YES, I wanted to scream. Dear gods, yes . Still, my mind scrambled to find the right

hook that would hit me later. For a reason this wouldn't work.

"B-but the law, Caelum," I said, stuttering. "Maybe we can be together for tonight. Not forever."

"Ye of little faith," he scoffed, skimming his hands up and down my back until they anchored on my hips and tugged me closer, eliminating all remaining space between us. "Do you not know by now how charming I can be? That I always find a way to get what I want? Do not doubt me." He leaned in until his hot mouth was murmuring into the shell of my ear. "I can make you a queen, Tempest."

My breath hitched. Words would not form as this surreal fantasy unfolded before me. But he was staring at me, expectantly, burning like a thousand flames only for me.

And there was nothing I liked more than telling him when he was wrong right to his smug face.

"If you're going to be spouting off reckless promises to me, I need to correct some of your assumptions," I said, nudging his nose with mine. "I never wished to be a queen, Caelum," I stroked both of my hands along the sides of his face, my lips brushing against his as I spoke. He groaned, squeezing me tighter. "The only thing I ever wanted to be was yours."

And then I was kissing him. Not a prince. Not a stranger. Just Caelum. He was delicious. He was deviant. He was daring. And soon, all of Eyre would also know he was mine.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

As our mouths met for a second time, every barrier between us snapped. Every unspoken word, every look that had lingered too long was resurrected from the past and brought forth to feast upon. The fragile thing I'd felt inside for him was no longer breakable. It was full grown and fierce. Hard as stone, yet soft in all the right places.

There was no denying it any longer: I was irrevocably and hopelessly in love with Caelum Ashford.

One of his hands cupped my face, his thumb brushing away a remaining tear as I clung to fistfuls of his shirt. He walked me backward, his lips never leaving mine.

Each step brought me closer to the tent's outer edge until my back hit one of the poles, trapping me between it and the solid wall of him. With the rough wood digging into my spine and Caelum's warm body flush against mine, something deep and wild stirred within me until I was a well, overflowing with desire for more.

Still kissing me, he slid his hand from my cheek, over my breast, past my waist—his touch leaving a trail of embers in its wake. His wandering palm stalled when it reached the back of my thigh, where he grabbed it and tugged it up against his hip. A gasp slipped through my lips.

A deep guttural noise poured from Caelum as he pushed himself closer into me, the evidence of his own longing a rock against my stomach. With his other hand, he grabbed mine and forced it between us so I could feel his hardness.

“Do you see what you do to me? What you’ve been doing to me?” he said in between frantic kisses as my palm traced the contours of him through his trousers. “Ever since the day you stormed into my tent and called me a highborn rake, I’ve wanted to devour you and that wicked mouth.”

A moan escaped me, but he captured it with his eager mouth. “I think we can arrange that,” I breathed against his lips, surprised my mind could even form the words.

Hallows be, I need him closer still.

My hands moved of their own accord, tracing the lines of his shoulders, down his solid chest, until I found the edges of his shirt. Desperate to do my own devouring, I tugged it over his head and immediately explored every inch of his exposed torso with my fingers, a thrill running through me when goosebumps rose on his warm skin from my touch.

“Do you like what you see, Tempest?” he murmured, wrapping his arms around me.

I nodded, biting my lip as his deft fingers unlaced my corset, his eyes holding mine as he did it, his lips red and swollen. He grinned when it slipped off and fell to the floor. His hands moved quickly to deliver my chemise to the same fate, pulling it up and over my head to leave me shivering in anticipation.

I fought the urge to cover my chest when he stepped back, his cheeks flushing slightly as he took in my half-naked form. “You know,” he said, his voice deep and gravelly, “I was wrong about you. You’re not a tempest.” He dropped to his knees in front of me, his palms finding their way under my dress to run up my thighs and rest on my backside.

I couldn’t stop the gasp that escaped when he squeezed and tugged my hips forward, his warm lips kissing me just above my navel.

“You’re more of a goddess.” He stared up at me then, reverent and eager.

It took every ounce of my willpower to not pounce on him.

“Can I not be both?” I whispered back, teasing.

With that cocky smirk I loved, he pulled my skirts down around my feet. “Tempest, queen, goddess.” His mouth found the inside of my thigh, and he nibbled lightly between words. “You can be everything. You are everything to me.”

My body quaked. Here he was, on his knees in front of me, his midnight-blue eyes brimming with desire. I was being worshipped—by the crown prince of Eyre.

A sly smile unfolded across my face as I dug my fingers into his blond hair. “You are no god, though, Prince.” I tugged his head back, forcing him to look up at me.

The want in his gaze almost sent me to my knees next to him.

“No, I’m not,” he said. “I am but a humble servant, hoping you’ll have me.”

“And how will you convince me?” I played along.

Another infuriating grin. With those long, nimble fingers of his, Caelum slid my underwear down to pool on the floor, leaving me completely bare.

“I’d love to give an offering to My Goddess if she’ll let me,” he answered, his eyes sparkling.

Hearing him speak in that fevered and husky tone made my mouth drop open. Warmth blossomed in my belly.

I shivered, my cheeks warming as I nodded in agreement. Keeping his eyes on me, he kissed down the flat plane of my stomach, venturing lower until his mouth hovered over the very center of me, which ached with his proximity.

My throat tightened, my pulse spiking. He wanted to do that ?

“Hmm,” he murmured, his forehead against my navel. “No. No, this won’t do. A goddess made to stand? I won’t have it.”

I yelped as he stood and scooped me into his arms, his stare never dropping from mine. I flung my arms around his neck and buried my fingers in the tendrils of hair that curled near his neckline. Grinning widely, Caelum laid me down on the soft silks of his bed. My heart fluttered in response as the gold and maroon colors of Eyre swallowed me up.

It was as divine as I imagined.

I shut my eyes and stretched out, reveling in the fabric’s caress against every inch of my skin, breathing in the heady pine and leather scent that was purely him .

I glanced up to find Caelum staring down at me, his face stilled. My stomach twisted.

I sat up on my elbows, heat flushing through my exposed skin. “What?”

“It’s just...” He ran a hand through his already-disheveled locks. “Seeing you stretched out on my bed before me might be my new favorite view in all of Eyre.”

Desire spiked through my blood once more at his words.

“You said you wanted to devour me.” I stared up at him through my lashes. “Are you still hungry?” I’d never said such teasing words to a man before, and it left me feeling



raw and exposed.

That mischievous look covered his face again as he grabbed my hips and dragged me closer to the edge of the bed.

“Starved,” he replied, breathing needily through his nose as he bent down to place achingly slow kisses along my inner thighs again.

My entire body trembled, goosebumps rising on every limb. But despite the well of anticipation bubbling up inside of me, apprehension wormed its way in too, and I froze.

He had so much more experience than me. I’d never had a man stationed between my legs like this. What if he didn’t like how I tasted? What if I didn’t measure up to all the other women he’d had?

My knees drew closer to his head as my thoughts spiraled, and Caelum pulled back, his brow furrowing.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No. I mean, yes. Maybe,” I fumbled. “You don’t need to do this if it’s not something you really want to do. I?”

“Eedy,” he said with a playful sternness, his blue eyes glittering in the everflame. “I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you. And I want all of you. Everywhere, every way, any place I can.”

My heart thundered in my chest. He hadn’t paused. He hadn’t stuttered. He didn’t reconsider. He was the same pompous prince as the first day I had met him: confident in what he wanted.

And that was me. Like this. Or any way I desired.

“Okay,” I said, the taut coil inside of me slowly unraveling.

I couldn’t help but dig my fingers into the sheets as he pushed my thighs apart again with a gentle firmness.

“Lay back and relax, My Goddess. Let me take care of you.”

I held my breath, anticipation now running alongside the heady desire still heavy in my veins.

He took one tentative lick at the apex of my thighs and all logical thought left my mind. I whimpered, positive my nails would tear a hole in these silk sheets from my clawing of them. He continued, sucking gently at the bud of nerves at my very center, and I could not stop the feral moans that escaped. My thighs loosened more, and my hips moved of their own accord against his devious mouth until a wave built deep in my core.

Gods, why did I even try to stop this?

He really was devouring me, and I would die from the pleasure of it.

“Caelum,” I moaned, pushing against his shoulders. The things this man could do with his tongue. “Caelum,” I breathed his name again more urgently.

“Hmm?” he murmured against me, and it almost sent me over the edge.

I paused, my chest heaving. But I knew what I wanted. “I want you inside me.”

He lifted his head, his eyes darkening. The look made my breath hitch. I gripped at

the sheets again as he stood, his movements growing increasingly slower as he drank in the full view of me once more.

“As the goddess wishes,” he finally said, unbuckling his belt and dropping his trousers.

My eyes grew wide, and my cheeks burned at the sight—the size—of him. Hallows be...

Caelum chuckled softly, moving to crawl on top of me, but I shimmied over to the side before he could.

“I want to be on top,” I said, my heart fluttering like a frantic bird.

He raised an eyebrow but lay down on the sheets, a new layer of awe falling over his features. “Before this happens,” he said, “just know that if my heart bursts from the amount of pleasure it gives me to see you atop of me, tell them all I died the happiest man in the kingdom.”

I rolled my eyes playfully as I straddled him, and his hands immediately found my breasts, pinching my nipples with his thumbs methodically. I arched my back, and the length of him brushed against my wet center.

A bolt of ecstasy rolled through me.

I reached to take him in my hand, to lower myself onto him, but he swiped me away and swirled his fingers over my swollen bud instead.

I groaned as I toppled forward, gripping the silk on both sides of his head.

“Hmm, I think you like this,” he murmured as I ground against his hand.

“Caelum, please,” I moaned breathily.

“Please, what?” He took hold of himself and rubbed his tip against my entrance, teasing me. His other hand found the back of my neck, tugging me down so his mouth could graze my jawline.

All focus was lost, my body vibrating with so much pleasure.

“Please,” I panted, “I need you.”

“Where?” he whispered into my ear. “Where do you need me?”

My skin was electrified by his whispers.

“Inside me,” I groaned, trying to align myself over him, but he pulled himself away and guided my mouth to his again.

My dark hair curtained around us as he kissed me. I tasted myself on his lips, and a fresh shock of pleasure sprinted through me. His hand fisted in my hair, holding me in place as his tongue pushed at the seam of my lips. I let my mouth part for him, his tongue exploring, but I had little patience left. I pulled away, a frenzy roaring through me.

“Caelum , ” I growled against his lips. “Give me what I want before I strangle you with these silk sheets.”

He chuckled, running his nose against my jaw. “I quite like hearing you threaten me.” Breathing deeply against my throat, he finally conceded. “Alas, I’m yours to command.”

He pushed the tip of himself into me, and I lowered myself slowly, whimpering as he

stretched every inch of space inside of me to fit.

“Hallows be,” he breathed, squeezing me closer, pushing himself in farther.

I gasped, marveling at the feel of him and the way my heart expanded as our eyes locked onto each other. It was like a tether had snapped into place between us, something eternal.

He was staring right into the heart of me, just like he had since the first day we’d met. Only this time it wasn’t as a challenge; it was to know me like no one else had before.

His hands roamed my body as I rolled my hips against him, our breaths coming in short, hurried bursts. It didn’t take long before a glorious pressure rose inside of me. I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling as if I might shatter at any moment.

“Eyes on me, Goddess,” Caelum pleaded, bracketing my face with his hands. “Don’t storm away from me. Not yet.”

My eyes flung open, my gaze locking onto his once more. A sheen of sweat covered his skin, and his pupils were blown out so widely that only the smallest hoop of my favorite blue still showed. He was inside me, all around me, his every touch lighting up a different part of me.

His mouth hung open, and he panted as I rocked my hips against him, harder, faster, sucking in deep breaths of fresh pine and worn leather. The storm swirled inside again, the waves building higher and higher. I arched my back, chasing after it.

“You feel so damn good.” He groaned, moving his hands to anchor onto my hips, his body tensing. “Don’t stop, Goddess. Please, don’t stop.”

In the midst of his praise and his flushed face, I found it. It was like lightning,

shattering me, blinding me, making me cry out as I'd never done before. Caelum pulled me against him as I shuddered, holding me tightly as our bodies twitched and pulsed in the aftershock.

He didn't let go, even after the waves of pleasure ceased. His long, slender fingers drew circles across my back, coaxing me back down to the ground after flying as high as a crackling storm cloud.

And, my gods, I could not wait to claim my own lightning again with him.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Caelum's arm encircled me, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. It should've been soothing. But I lay there, wide awake, staring at the shadows flickering along the tent walls, my mind spinning with the weight of the coming solstice. Tomorrow, everything could change. The magic might break forever, and we'd lose all our power to the fae.

I shifted, trying to burrow deeper into Caelum's warmth, but the ache in my chest wouldn't ease. I tilted my head to look up at him, his face smooth. Relaxed. I didn't want to wake him, but my whisper slipped out anyway. "Caelum?"

He stirred, mumbling something unintelligible before his eyes opened, hazy with sleep. "Mmm?"

"Tell me something boring," I murmured, nudging closer. "Like...nature facts you've picked up from all the books you've read. I need something to put me to sleep."

He let out a sleepy laugh, tightening his hold on me. "Nothing I read is boring," he murmured. "For example, did you know pinecones only release their seed after a fire? It's how they keep their species alive."

"You would start with a fact about something releasing its seed," I whispered, a smile tugging at my lips.

"All right, all right." He yawned, thinking. "I bet you aren't aware that certain types of moss always grow on the north side of trees. So, if you're ever lost in the

woods?—”

“I already knew that one.”

“It sounds like you should lead the class then, Tempest.” He chuckled, his eyes closing again as his fingers traced up and down my arm. “How about...rivers always flow downward from the highest ground.”

My thoughts snapped to attention, his words triggering an idea—a faint spark, but one that grew stronger, brighter, with each second.

Rivers flow downward...

Magic flows like a river...

And the hollow tree, always looming at the highest point of Eyre, had felt alive in a way that no other place did. Could it be the connection point where magic could be pulled through Eyre and away from the fae realm?

My pulse quickened, the idea growing clearer, more solid with each passing moment. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of it sooner. If we could try to redirect the flow of magic and regulate it like I did with lightning...Maybe I could fix this.

I glanced at Caelum, his breathing deep and steady, sleeping once more. I didn’t want to wake him again. This idea, this plan, would be dangerous. The storm outside was already rumbling, the wind picking up, carrying the scent of rain. The path to the cliffs would be treacherous in this weather. But I couldn’t wait. Not with the solstice mere hours away.

I knew he’d insist on coming with me, and I couldn’t lose another man I loved to the cliffs.



I slipped out of his embrace, holding my breath as he shifted, murmuring something in his sleep. I looked back once more at him, and my heart ached. I wanted to stay, but...

I would return, I vowed. I would not leave him alone again.

When I pushed open the door to my home, my mother was still awake, sitting on her rocker facing the entrance, as if she'd known I was coming. She took one look at me, the storm raging behind me, and her face contorted in fear.

I didn't even have to say where I was going. She knew .

I walked over to the corner where I kept the spare iron rods I used to bring down lightning. Picking them up with a steadying breath, I shoved them in a long leather sack that I could wear on my back. My mother watched me, her expression calm but her eyes glistening with a quiet sadness.

"I don't have time to explain," I said, hoping she wouldn't put up too much of a fuss, "but I have to try something."

"Eedy, what are you trying to gain from thrusting yourself out into a storm at this hour?" she said, standing as she wrung her hands together. "I hope that you're not trying to push your gift beyond its limits. Risking yourself to gain more power will not give you what you need, dear. Because you are enough. You have always been enough ."

I froze at her words, turning to face her. To face the truth that had festered in me my whole life.

"I know, Mother. And you're right...I did want more power once. I thought it would make it easier to set wrong things right in this world."

“And now?” she asked, her eyes pinched tight.

“Now I know that there is power in the doing . Taking action, even if no one else will. Just like Father did. He wanted to leave the council because no one was doing anything productive, and nothing has changed. But I can make a difference, because I’m determined enough to do so.”

She nodded but worry still clouded her face. “You can be as determined as a hurricane to bring down a ship, dear, but that doesn’t mean you have to do it alone.”

I flinched at her words, looking down at the bag of rods in my hand. Even as my throat tightened, I shook my head. “I have to, Mother. I won’t risk losing someone else.”

Her jaw clenched, the glimmer of sadness in her eyes hardening into something sharper. “You’re just like him, you know. Stubborn as a mule.”

I winced at her words, but it didn’t change my mind.

“It’s my choice,” I said, lifting my chin.

“Is it now?” she said, her anger ebbing into sorrow. “And you think I could live with losing you too?”

A lump formed in my throat, but I forced myself to stand tall, to keep my voice steady. “You won’t lose me,” I whispered. “I promise. But I’m set on doing this by myself.”

For a long moment, she just stared at me, her expression a storm of emotions I couldn’t quite untangle. Finally, she sighed, her shoulders sagging as she stepped back. “Fine,” she said, her voice heavy, “but don’t you dare think for one second that

I don't see the strength in you. There is more power in you than all those worthless councilmen put together."

Her words cracked something inside me, and I stepped forward, pulling her into a fierce hug. I soaked in the embrace, absorbing the warmth, the strength, the twenty-five rings of wisdom she'd given me. And in that moment, the weight of her trust, her belief in me, filled in every crack of doubt.

"I love you," I whispered.

"I love you, too, Eedy."

"Eada . Call me Eada, Mother."

"Eada," she said, voice trembling, tears sliding down her cheeks. "Now, go. Do what you were meant to do."

With one last look at her, I turned and stepped out into the storm, the wind biting at my skin as I headed toward the cliffs.

### Chapter Twenty-Five

The rain lashed against me the moment I set foot on the path leading up the cliff, the wind howling in fury as it tore at my cloak, twisting it around my legs. I unfastened my cloak, letting the wind carry it away; it would've only held me back.

Each step forward was a fight, my boots slipping on the mud-slicked rocks, and the force of the storm slamming into me, like a wall I couldn't breach. But I gritted my teeth, clutching the straps of the iron rods harnessed to my back as I climbed higher.

The first gust nearly threw me back. I planted my feet, steeling myself against the edge, feeling the stone beneath my fingertips, the way it bit into my skin as if reminding me to stay present, to hold on. I pushed forward, rain slicing down so hard it stung my skin, and the path narrowed, twisting upward with the weight of the wind bearing down on me.

The higher I climbed, the more treacherous the ground became. Rock and debris cascaded down from above, a deadly shower that had me flattening myself against the cliff face more than once, hoping the next stone wouldn't knock me loose. My fingers were freezing, my muscles shaking from the cold and strain, but I forced myself onward.

A flash of lightning illuminated the cliff, the jagged stones casting long shadows, and I took a tentative step up to the next ledge.

The moment my boot touched it, the ground beneath me gave way. I cried out, clinging to the cliff face as dirt and stone crumbled down, tumbling toward the ocean

below. My legs dangled, the emptiness stretching below me like a hungry maw waiting to swallow me whole. My grip slipped, rain making my hands slick. I tried to find footing against the rock but couldn't.

Panic clawed at me. I will fall, just like my father.

I squeezed my eyes shut, the weight of the storm pressing on me, my heart racing with fear as I struggled to hold on. My strength was fading, my fingers loosening. A few seconds longer, and I knew I'd be gone.

Then a strong hand gripped my arm.

I looked up, rain blurring my vision, and saw Caelum's furious gaze locking with mine. He hauled me up with one swift, powerful pull, steadying me on the narrow ledge.

"One moment I'm happily snuggled against you," he barked, his voice barely audible over the storm, "and the next thing I know you're gone. Your mother came barging into my tent to insist I go after you. Are you insane?"

I guess my mother was free to make her own choices too.

"It can't wait," I growled back, catching my breath.

"Why didn't you wake me then?" he yelled over a rumble of thunder.

"Because look at this! I couldn't risk your life. I couldn't have you fall like my father. I love you, Caelum!"

He stared at me, bewildered. "I almost just lost you . If I hadn't been here to..." He threw his hands up to pull at his soaking hair, shaking his head. "I once said we were

rivals, and, hallows be, I love how you challenge me. But can't you see how we're so much stronger together? You don't need to do this alone. Not ever again."

I nodded my head as he pulled me into a slick hug.

"You have a plan?" he said into my ear, even as he clutched me tighter.

"Yes," I admitted. "I don't know if it will work, but I have to try."

He didn't hesitate, gripping my arms in a vice as another gust of wind almost threw us both back. "We," he said firmly.

"You're not going to try to force me back?" I asked, my voice choking.

"I wouldn't dream of trying to tame a storm."

My throat tightened and tears threatened to blur my vision even more than the rain already was.

"Together?" I asked, taking his hand in mine.

He nodded. "Always."

We started the rest of the ascent as one, step by step, supporting each other when one of us slipped or stumbled. But the elements would not be deterred. After another close call from a landslide of rocks falling just inches from us, I thought we might have to give up.

"It's too strong," I cried out into the chaos, pounding my fist against the rough, rocky wall in front of me.

“Eedy,” Caelum said sharply, his voice cutting through the storm as he gripped my arm tighter, steadying me against another gust of wind. “You’ve controlled lightning. You redirected the waterfall back at the revelry. It’s all just a different type of energy. You can control this storm.”

I blinked at him, startled. “The storm isn’t just lightning or water. It’s everything all at once—it’s too wild.”

“So, tame it,” he countered, his blue eyes fierce as he gained confidence in his idea. “You don’t need to create the storm, it’s already here. Use it. Every gust of wind, every drop of rain. Your gift isn’t controlling lightning, it’s controlling a source of energy. Harness it.”

For a moment, his words clashed with the panic racing at me, the focus I always put on what I couldn’t do. But then I felt the surge of power thrumming in the storm, the energy pouring down all around us.

Hallows be, he’s right. It was just another force waiting to be directed, like the lightning I had caught countless times in my hands. Like the waterfall in Velarune or the pure magic I’d tugged from the ley line itself.

I closed my eyes, blocking out the rain stinging my face and the roar of the wind. I reached for the storm, stretching my magic outward like fingers, threading through the frenzy. At first, it resisted, wild and ferocious, but as I focused, the energy bent to my will. It wasn’t about fighting it.

It was about guiding it.

The rain directly around us slowed, the torrent softening to a gentle mist. The howling wind calmed to a soft whisper. Even the thunder quieted, rolling in the distance as the storm parted around us, clearing a path up the cliffside.

I opened my eyes to see Caelum staring at me, tendrils of his damp hair dripping down his face. “Well done, Tempest.” His voice was laced with awe.

“Thank you,” I said breathlessly, a small smile tugging at my lips.

With the storm under my command, the climb became manageable. Step by step, we ascended, the path illuminated by the occasional flicker of lightning far away. The rain slid harmlessly around us, and the wind no longer threatened to throw us back.

At last, we reached the tree, lightning cracking across the sky in wild bursts, illuminating the branches twisting overhead. My magic faltered then, giving out like a well run dry. The storm encased us once more, pounding down harder than ever as if it were furious that we’d made it to the top.

I moved swiftly, ignoring the fatigue in my limbs, and started placing the iron rods around the inside of the tree. Each one hummed when it touched the earth, crackling with a power that was ancient and angry. Caelum watched, his face a mixture of awe and trepidation as I fixed the fourth rod into place.

I stretched my hands forward, drawing on the magic and coaxing it up from the ground. The currents surged beneath the surface—two distinct streams, one overflowing with untamed energy toward the fae realm, the other sluggishly trickling toward Eyre. At the heart of it all stood the tree, the fork where the magic divided, the key to restoring balance.

Channeling the magic through the iron rods, I willed the chaotic flow to stabilize, to return what rightfully belonged to Eyre. The magic obeyed, shifting and pouring through the conduits with newfound purpose. As the current gathered strength, the iron hummed with life, pulling the magic along on its own.

The air around us pulsed with raw energy, vibrating in waves that rattled the ground



beneath our feet. The rods began to glow, their light interweaving with the storm's flickering lightning. I stole a glance at Caelum, and for a fleeting moment, triumph sparked between us. He grinned, caught up in the raw, exhilarating thrill of the moment.

It was working. The magic roared beneath us, rushing down the cliffside in a steady, unbroken stream toward Eyre, its purity and strength unmatched. For the first time in many rings, our kingdom's ley lines were fully restored.

But the triumph was short-lived.

The rods began to tremble violently, their glow intensifying as cracks webbed through the earth around them. A sharp, ominous groan split the air. Before I could react, the rods wrenched free, flung outward with an explosive force. They clattered to the ground as the magic surged out of control, too vast and feral for iron to contain.

With the balance shattered, the flow wrenched away from Eyre, tumbling back toward Velarune, wild and unyielding once more.

"It needs something stronger than iron to regulate it," Caelum said, his hands clutched to his head as he stared at the rods, helpless. "I don't know, maybe steel could work...or?—"

"No, Caelum," I interrupted, feeling the realization settle over me like a rolling thunder. "Not something."

His eyes widened, searching mine in confusion. "Eedy?"

I took a deep breath, steadying my resolve. "Some one."

The truth rose in me with the force of a crashing wave. The fae had been right. I was

made of the storm clouds, the wind, and the rain, thunder and lightning. I was everything wild, everything untamed. The magic would not overwhelm me because it was me.

I was mage. I was magic.

It was just another type of energy that needed to be guided.

Ignoring Caelum's protests, I tossed the rods from the tree, letting them clatter to the ground outside. I stepped into the hollow space, placing my hands on the rough, living wood, feeling the pulse of the magic surging beneath my palms. Like the old gods before, this tree would consume me in exchange for the desire in my heart. It had given me life when I was too weak to survive on my own; now I needed to return the favor. Solimir had warned me. It needed me to bring the magic back into balance.

Yes, I could do this.

"Eedy, no!" Caelum yelled, lunging toward me. "No! Was this the plan all along?"

"The plan was always to do what needed to be done to restore the magic," I said, my lip quivering.

"No. No. I'd rather live in a world without magic. Hate me all you want for asking it. Stare daggers into me for days. Just don't go, Eedy. Stay with me."

"No, Caelum," I shouted, my resolve hardening. "The fae will strip this land of magic and leave it barren. Do you think once they hold all the magic they will stop there? They will find a way over our borders, and then they will come for the land, for our people. Their greed will never be contained if we let them have this."

His expression shattered. "Eada, please." His use of my full name was like a

mountain dropped onto my heart, and I thought I'd collapse with the weight of it. "Just when I've found you, you're going to leave me alone again?"

Standing in this hollow tree, my father's face flashed in my mind, and I finally understood. He'd loved me too much to risk my life one moment longer when he'd slipped. Letting go had been his greatest act of love.

I looked back at Caelum, my heart breaking, my voice faltering. "A wise man once told me that sometimes we must leave the ones we love to save them. I'll still be with you. I swear it."

"How? You can't possibly know that." He reached for me again, but I backed away into the tree. Despair shuddered across his face. "Please don't do this."

"Do you not know me by now?" I asked, my voice steady, even as fear threatened to consume me. "That nothing will stop me from doing what I know is right."

He swallowed, his face hollow with grief, and I saw the fight leave him, his eyes misty with a terrible understanding. He knew this was the only way, but it didn't make it hurt any less.

And it didn't make him any less desperate.

"The price is too high, Eada," he whispered, hands bracketing the entrance to the tree, chest heaving from the frantic breaths he was consuming. "Can you not see it? Isn't it as plain as day that I love you too?"

The anguish in his voice spurred me to action. I stepped forward and pulled him to me, one last time, feeling his lips slide across mine in a mix of rain and tears. His hands knotted in my hair, securing me in place, as if he relied on me to breathe. I let my mouth part for him, deepening the kiss, and a groan escaped him. I wished with

all my heart it was a sound made from the fevered anticipation of more, but it was not. It was from a scorching pain inside of him that would not be silenced.

Pulling away, I whispered, “And I wouldn’t be the witch you love if I didn’t do this. I don’t know if I can come back, but if I can, I will.”

He thumbed my lower lip, his eyes pinched tight against the onslaught of rain. “I’ll wait for you. Forever. Longer . Tell me to and I will.”

My breath hitched. “Caelum, I have no idea what will happen when?—”

His thumb moved higher, pressing against my rambling mouth. “Tell me to, Tempest.” He leaned his forehead against mine, as if he was suddenly very tired. “Your prince commands it.”

I couldn’t ask this of him. It was selfish. Unreasonable. Still, my heart couldn’t help itself.

“You highborn fool ,” I choked out, running my palms along his wet cheeks as scorching tears spilled down mine. “Wait for me.”

He nodded, loosening his vise-like grip on me, his lips in a tight line, his words all dried up.

“Come back here during the summer solstice,” I said, desperation edging my voice as the magic called me away. “The magic will be at its peak. If I can find a way back, it will be on that day.”

As I ducked deeper into the hollow, the narrow opening began to close, sealing me within the embrace of the tree. The storm raged, soaking Caelum to the bone. It seemed to have little effect on him, his hand pressed against the outer bark walls of

the tree, helplessly watching as it pulled me in.

The last thing I saw before the darkness closed around me was Caelum kneeling in the mud, one hand clawing at his chest, his chin dripping with rainwater as it trembled .

In that moment, I didn't know the strength of my own heart. Not until I had to rip it out myself and leave it behind with him.

### Chapter Twenty-Six

The roots coiled tighter, pressing against me, rough bark scraping my skin, locking me in place. I gasped, lungs straining, mind spiraling. The tree was devouring me, pulling me down into itself, ancient power flooding through every cell, scorching, consuming. I didn't feel like me anymore; I was something else—something boundless.

I could feel the heartbeat of Eyre throbbing through me, with me, as if it was my own. I saw the magic surging through invisible veins beneath the land, stretching to its limits, taut and frayed, each thread ready to snap. I felt the fae in the west, their darkness gnashing, pulling it toward them, straining it, tearing it. With everything I had, I pulled it back.

No. This land would not break.

I reached for the magic, clutching it in my hands like a hilt, forcing it to balance, to flow as it should. I could feel it pouring back into Eyre, filling every hidden crevice, winding through roots and rocks, sealing every fracture. I became the wild pulse of it all—the roar of the rivers, the rush of the sea, the trembling of the trees. Every inch of this land was inside me, every life, every breath. I was Eyre.

I was magic. Magic.

Time slipped away, dissolved, became something formless and meaningless. Seconds, hours, days, rings—they blurred and melted, stretching into a vast, endless now. I existed in every heartbeat, every whisper of the wind, everywhere, always.

Always.

The word awoke something in me.

There was something—no, some one —still pulling at me. A heartbeat, not my own, but still it was stable, familiar. A warmth, like a flame, bright and alive. I focused on it, on him , on the hum of magic that wrapped around him like a shield, protecting, preserving. I could feel his every movement through Eyre. Steady, strong, unyielding.

I could not place names here in this dark, eternal place, but I knew he had once matched my mortal soul like no other.

And he was mine .

My magic reached for him, brushing against his, feeling the heat of his presence, his life pulsing like a beacon. His heartbeat was a drum, constant and comforting, grounding me in the vastness. He became my anchor, the reminder of what I'd left behind.

I reached out, pouring promises into the space between us, silent, invisible. I would return. One day, I would step from this tree again, find him, hold him. He was where I had left my heart, and I knew—gods, I knew —I would come back for it.

### FIVE AND A HALF RINGS LATER

King Caelum rode into Naohm as the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm glow over the village nestled against the cliffs. Tomorrow was the summer solstice, and the air was thick with magic, vibrant and alive. Fields were blooming, rivers running high with clear water, and a quiet peace radiated from the land itself.

Along his journey from the capital city of Tridus, Caelum noted more shrines appearing in sacred corners of villages, at the roots of ancient oaks, and beside riverbanks. Simple offerings—ethereal flowers, carved lightning bolt talismans, little lanterns flickering against the night—had been left for her.

Eada had become a hallow. Worshipped. Revered. A goddess who rivaled all five of the old gods, if you asked Caelum. And it warmed him, the way her presence had spread through the land she'd saved, her spirit lingering in every corner, woven into the lives of those who lived in Eyre.

But Caelum did not want a talisman today; he wanted her .

Blood and bone. Skin on skin. Everywhere, in every way, in every place, like he'd once promised her.

His nerves thrummed like a bowstring drawn taut at the thought of that dream never coming true. He had come back to Naohm every summer solstice, ring after ring, waiting. Hoping. Desperate.

And every time, the day had passed without a glimpse of Eedy.



Doubt gnawed at the edges of his resolve, a voice whispering that perhaps he was the highborn fool she'd called him the last time he'd seen her. That maybe this would be another solstice spent alone beneath the stars, pleading for a woman who would never return to him.

His father's passing two rings ago had not helped lighten Caelum's mood. The crown had been pressed into his hands with little ceremony, a weight he had been born to carry but had never wanted. And yet, through every impossible decision that determined the fate of Eyre, he had never truly felt alone.

Whenever uncertainty clawed at him, whenever the burden of duty threatened to break him, he traced his steps back to the ley line he'd once fallen upon, where he'd obtained his own magical healing abilities. He would stand there, in the quiet hum of power, and feel her presence thrumming through it, steady as his own heartbeat.

She had not spoken. She had not appeared. But she had been with him like she'd promised.

Always .

So, even though each summer solstice only brought pain and disappointment, he would keep returning to Naohm like he'd promised. As long as there was still breath in his lungs, he would come.

In the dark hour before dawn, he made his way up the cliffside, toward the tree that marked her resting place. Mannix climbed beside him, determined not to be left behind, his tail wagging in anticipation.

Caelum chuckled as they ascended the final stretch. "You know, she will murder me if you hurt yourself up here, Mannix," he muttered to the dog, who snuffed in response and bounded ahead. Finally reaching the top, Caelum's heart hammered in his chest as he stood before the tree.

He waited, breath held, as the first rays of sunlight pierced the sky, bathing the tree in golden light. But nothing stirred. The tree remained closed, silent, unmoving.

His hope faltered, a sharp ache blooming in his chest as the realization sliced through him like a blade. Again, he had waited, prayed, dreamed that it could be this day...for nothing.

He should be grateful for the time he'd had with her, no matter how fleeting. But he wasn't. He was selfish. He wanted more .

The gnarled bark looked unchanged, the wood rough and cold under his fingers as he placed his palms against it, feeling the steady hum of ancient magic beneath the surface. He pressed his forehead against the hard trunk of the tree.

“Come back to me, Eedy,” he whispered, his voice breaking. “I needed more time with you. So much more time.”

His chest felt hollow as he closed his eyes, breathing in the salt and moss coating the bark. A single tear slipped down his cheek but he wiped it away in frustration. It was pointless to cry. He'd provided hundreds of tears as an offering these past five and a half rings, and he'd only been given silence back.

Mannix whimpered, and Caelum opened his eyes to study the dog. “I miss her too, boy.”

Then he felt it: A tremor vibrating against his palm.

His fingers tingled against the bark, and a violent sea breeze raked through his hair. He stepped away as the ground began to tremble, a shudder that rippled through the earth. With his heart in his throat, he watched as the tree shifted, creaking and groaning as the outer walls slowly parted. A mist seeped out, golden and ethereal, swirling to mix with the soft light of dawn.

From the heart of the mist, a figure emerged, graceful and otherworldly, wrapped in a glow that made her seem part of the morning itself.

It was her .

Eedy's face was familiar, her sharp brown eyes holding the same fierce light, yet there was something more—something timeless. An embodiment of pure magic.

It made him pause, his throat tightening in despair. Worry nagged at the back of his mind at what the magic might have done to her, if it had stripped away everything he loved about her and left her as a hollow shell, like the tree she'd entered. Had his tempest finally emerged only to be just a goddess?

Of course, he still wished to worship her as one, but that wasn't who he'd fallen in love with first. It was her storm that left him breathless and begging, from the first roll of thunder down to the last sweet drop of rain.

"Eada?" he whispered. He took a step toward her, his legs feeling like he'd been waiting these past rings at sea instead of on dry land. "Do you...remember me?"

A few moments passed where she only stared at Caelum, her brow bent in concentration while the rest of her face remained impassive. The mist had settled, and the surrounding glow she'd arrived with had faded, but still her eyes didn't light up like they should've at the sight of him.

"Caelum," she said slowly, her mouth forming the word like she was pronouncing it for the first time.

Caelum only nodded, fear strangling the words right out of his throat.

Then Mannix ran toward her and barked, and her eyes grew wide.

Something inside of her snapped, her posture going rigid. Her neutral expression evaporated, and in its place, a scowl so familiar it made Caelum's heart melt with relief.

"Caelum!" she yelled his name now like thunder across a clearing. "Which part of that supposedly sharp mind of yours thought it was a good idea to let Mannix climb up here with you?"

Caelum took a few tentative steps toward her, his smile growing wider the longer she frowned at him. "What did you expect?" he said smugly. "He's a Blackthorn. No is not a part of his vocabulary."

The closer he got to her, the tighter she squinted her eyes at him, her arms crossed stiffly over her chest. "This would not have gone well for you if my dog had died," she muttered when he was only a foot away.

"So, since he is alive and well," he said, bringing a hand up to graze her jawline, "can I expect this next part to go very well for me?"

Her eyelids fluttered, and she inclined her head in the slightest toward his touch. But when her eyes met his, there was a distance in them, and it made Caelum pause, holding back his need to wrap her in his arms and never let go.

"How long have I been gone?" she asked, her brow furrowing.

"Five and a half rings," he said, feeling the weight of every one of them fluttering away in the breeze now that he was near her once more.

A hand flew to her mouth. "That long? It can't be. You look exactly as I remember you."

Caelum chuckled, smoothing out his tunic. "I do have a youthful face. Not very

helpful when you're trying to be stern and intimidating as the King of Eyre."

Her eyes widened. "The king?"

Caelum nodded, his hands reaching out to ghost along her waist. He could not hold himself back much longer, losing against the magnetic pull he'd always felt around her.

But Eedy threw up a hand against his chest, just like she had in the hollow tree when they'd first kissed, holding him at bay. Her eyes were glassy. "I know what is expected of kings."

Caelum felt a smirk tug at his lips. He knew exactly what she was referring to. "Do you mean if I had to take a queen in your absence?"

She raised her chin. "I would not blame you for it."

But despite her words, Caelum swore he heard the grumble of thunder in the distance.

He dared to edge closer to her taut form, his voice dropping to a teasing murmur as he leaned forward. "It is expected of me."

Eedy's perfect mouth smoothed into a fine line as her fingers curled into his shirt possessively, and Caelum could literally weep knowing that even in this divine state, he could still vex her so.

"But," he continued, desperate to put them both out of their misery, "how could I settle for just a queen when I've already had a goddess?"

A tear glistened at the corner of Eedy's eye, and her smile grew wide, brimming with a fierceness he had missed so achingly.

At her nod, he closed the distance, pulling her into his arms. When their lips met, it was like coming home. It set his heart ablaze and his lungs breathless. Mannix barked again, circling them as Caelum attempted desperately to relearn the shape of her mouth once more.

Eedy eventually pulled back, her breath ragged. “Caelum,” she said, gripping onto his arms encircling her, “you understand, though, don’t you? Even though I’ve found my way back, I can still only come out on this day, once a ring, when the magic is at its peak.”

He nodded without hesitation, his hands cradling her cheeks, pulling her in to kiss her once more. He nuzzled her face, shuddering at the hardship this would be on his heart. But he also needed her to know...

“To be clear,” he murmured against her lips, “what I wanted was every second, of every minute, of every hour, of every day with you for as long as I breathed. And then, beyond that, if the gods would’ve allowed it.”

She sniffled, a short chuckle escaping as she ran her hands through his golden hair.

“I wanted to wake up each morning to your scowling face,” he continued, “and go to bed each night with you moaning so loud you forgot what you woke up mad about.”

A faint blush rose to her cheeks. Still, he went on. “But if this is all I’m granted, Eada, one day every ring, I will drink every last drop like the parched man I am and be happy with it.”

She kissed him , then, and he swore he’d been engulfed in a raging storm. It was electric, unwavering, unstoppable. He wanted to feel this all over his body, not just his lips.

But when he pushed against her, trying to coax her into the hollow tree with him, she

pulled away once more, her lips puffy and deliciously red.

“There’s one more thing,” she said, a sly smile forming.

“Yes, yes, I’ll bring you down to the village to see your mother,” Caelum said hurriedly, gripping at her hips tighter. He felt drunk in her presence, his heart about to burst with need. He tried to compose himself, though, for her. “I’ll allow her fifteen minutes with you,” he said, voice husky, “and then she must leave. Because I will need the rest of the time to do unspeakable things to her daughter.”

Eedy’s laugh rang out, pure and bright, filling the dawn air. To Caelum, it was the most beautiful sound in all of Eyre.

“I’m sure she will be grateful for that generous offer,” she said, “but that’s not it.” Her gaze flickered to the distant horizon, where the first light of day kissed the sea. “While I’ve been inside the tree, I’ve been working on something. A new realm. My own world.”

Caelum’s brow furrowed as he studied her face, confused. “I don’t understand. You’ve been building a whole new... world ?”

“I’ve been weaving it together inside the endless space I go to when I’m within the tree. It’s not finished yet, but when it is, it will be a haven for witches, mages, all magical people—a place where they can feel safe, comforted. A place just like this tree was for me and my father.”

She glanced behind her, taking in the massive tree carved into the highest plateau in Eyre.

“I’m going to call it Misthaven,” she continued, turning back to him. “And I believe I can create a way for you to enter it.”

Caelum's heart galloped, but he steeled himself, afraid of misinterpreting. "Don't jest with me, Tempest," he whispered.

Only moments before, he'd tempered his heart for a life without Eada, albeit one measly day a ring. It wasn't enough, but he would have made it enough, would've squeezed out every last drop of time he'd been granted and lived the rest of the ring in a perpetual state of longing, as long as he always found her again at the end of it.

Eedy cupped his face, her fingers fanning over his cheekbones. "Any hollow tree in Eyre could become a gateway. You could visit me, Caelum. Whenever you want. We may not have much time in this world together"—she ran a delicate thumb along his bottom lip, making him shiver—"but we can have more in another one."

Caelum stared at her, the weight of her words crashing over him like a tidal wave. His hands squeezed her hips, steadying himself against the whirlwind of emotions. Taking in her bright eyes and wide smile, her excitement infected his blood until he felt his own pulse hammering with a boundless joy.

"It won't be ready for a while," she went on, her brows pulling together in worry. "There's a lot still to do, and I'm still trying to figure it all out, so?"

"I'm sure it will be perfect," he interrupted. Touching his forehead to hers, he felt a well of happiness inside of him running over. He pulled her close, still in awe of how perfectly she fit inside of his arms. "You have to know, you must know by now, Eada, that you are my world. Wherever you are is where I'm meant to be."

And, in all his life, nothing had ever been truer.

THE END