



The Knight (The Heir #1.5)

Author: *Kayla Eshbaugh*

Category: YA&Teen

Description: Sixteen years ago, I took a vow that changed everything.

I was not created to follow my own path. I was bred, born, raised, and trained to be a guardian knight. This is a great honor and a privilege. On the one night when I let myself forget my purpose, it resulted in death, the death of my heirs. Guardian knights have one solemn purpose—to protect the Royal Heirs of Terra. One moment of selfish freedom was all it took to kill my best friend, his wife, and scar Emma forever. I know that if I had been there—if I had been in that back seat with Emma, I could have saved them all. I vowed from that moment on that I would never let the ways of this strange realm corrupt my soul again.

I am Rykerian Dallard, and I hail from the famed Dallard line of Torren knights. I will stop at nothing until I find those who murdered Emmas family.

I will keep her safe.

I cannot and I will not fail—

not again.

Total Pages (Source): 23

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:11 am

The Heir Series

The Heir Series is clean, portal fantasy romance series, that directly connects to Kayla Eshbaugh's best-selling fairytale retelling series, The Cursed Kingdom Chronicles.

See the Ancients, whom you have come to know and love, and meet the progeny of the fairytale royals, hundreds of years in the future. The Heir, a six-book series, begins on Earth, within our world, and it uncovers Terran magic as well as magical beings among us, and it might just take you on a trip to modern-day Terra.

This series was previously published. This is the five year anniversary edition, which has been polished and expanded upon.

Series reading order:

1. The Heir— a novel from Emma's point of view
2. The Knight— Ryker's novella
3. Shattered Heir— a novel from Emma's point of view
4. The Soulless— Cade's novella
5. Heir Restored— a novel from Emma's point of view
6. The Keeper—Emma's mother's story

This series was previously published and has been re-edited and expanded upon for this 2024 special edition.

Chapter 1

It was dark in that hospital room, where I lay close to her. It was so dark and so painfully silent—other than the whirl of the machines, echoing to the beating of her heart—her sad, broken, unmendable heart.

“Em,” I whispered into her hair as I placed my lips upon her head, not kissing her, exactly. Still, the pull I felt toward her was stronger than ever. I watched the machines’ lights for a time as they flickered and blinked on and off as she slept. The strength of the bond between us always surprised me; it became even stronger after her parents’ deaths because, in their absence, her soul’s melody had been set free.

As I continued to stare at the machines, which tracked Emma’s precious life, their constant beeping and flashing lights reminded me of an ambulance’s emergency siren, and I had to turn away. She had cried for hours. How could anyone blame her? I couldn’t help but cry, too, as I held her in my arms. How did this happen? How did I let this happen? I wanted to curse the Ancients—or my bloodline of guardian knights—anything and everything. My royal heir was murdered while I still lived!? Let’s just say, that wasn’t something I ever expected to experience in my life, and I never wanted to experience losing him—Lamont. His loss would haunt me until the day I died.

It was understood by all guardian knights—what excruciating pain we would feel if our heir ever died. We were taught what happened when our royal descendants moved from this life to the next. The echo of the guardian warning wailed inside of me: “We feel it in our bones, in our souls, and we will know the loss of them until our own hearts stop beating.” I had been taught that warning since I was a child. Still,

the realization of what life would be like without him and of the pain that Emma would endure because of the loss of him? I couldn't think about it for too long. It was so very painful.

Where was he? Was he with the Ancients? I called forth my belief in them, my faith. I paused as I let part of my melody free, and I listened as it reached out to her. I watched as she moved closer, her melody reacting to mine. Could she sense me? I tried to ignore it, to focus on the silence of the room, instead of the constant beep of the machines, but her melody was too strong to ignore.

Most knights never experience such feelings of failure, nor of the sorrow that accompanies their heir's death—because they sacrifice themselves, their very lives. Most guardian knights of Terra die in the service of the heir line. I would have gladly given my life for Lamont. I just didn't get the chance. Why had I been at that football game? I wanted to punch something, to yell and wail from the pain within my soul. I wished to no longer exist, but then I remembered Emma, there in my arms, broken and weak, and I knew that above all else, she needed me.

I patted my face where the tears had poured silently down. I knew that Emma didn't need to see me weak, not when she was so broken. I knew exactly what she needed; she needed a home, a place she belonged, and I wouldn't move an inch away from her until I wasn't needed anymore. I would be anything and everything that she would need or could ever want. It was my purpose; she was my reason for living. Yet—I felt more than just the guardian knight's commitment to her. I wished that I could kiss her, feel the curves of her lips on my own.

An ache built up within my chest. Dark brown hair rustled—silver eyes looked back at me in my mind.

That was an impossibility, I reminded myself. Emma was my second chance. I cleared my throat and looked away from her. The pull, the ever-constant need, I had

to kiss Emma never left me unless I remembered her .

I looked to Emma as my distraction, the anchor to the present. I reached out to touch her lips with my fingertips. It was as if they specifically called out to me, drawing me to her, begging me to truly be hers. Still, she didn't know what a kiss meant—she didn't know what a kiss from me meant . No one except Mary knew what my kiss really meant. And while I wanted her kiss, and I knew a kiss from Emma would finally replace my pain with peace, I pulled away yet again. She buried her face in my chest, wrapping her arms tighter around me. Her melody ached, and a river of feelings poured from her directly into me. It appeared that she believed that if she let go of me, she would never get me back.

“I’ll always be here for you, Em.” The words were automatic—my own feelings, mingled with my guardian knight duties. She was my heir. She was my heir to protect, and I swore it again, right then in that hospital bed with her cradled in my arms: I would protect her. I would be anything and everything she needed. It was my duty, and I would fulfill it. I felt the oath of the guardian knights pass through my lips in a soft whisper as I lay close to Emma:

“May my melody never corrupt,

may no vow I make break,

may my soul never sing false,

and may no heir die before my last breath.”

The knowledge that I had failed hit me again. The sting of living without Lamont hurt more than I could ever express. If I moved forward with Emma would I lose her too? Lose her like Ana, Lamont, and Ara? So many deaths, deaths I should have prevented.

“May no heir die before my last breath,” I whispered again, disgusted with myself. I wasn't sure that I would ever be able to use the ancient gifts again, because I had failed in the worst way possible, but I would do all that I could to keep the vow I had made to Lamont to keep Emma safe. The inhabitants of this realm, while human like Terrans, were very different from my world. Humans in this realm were very bold. They also had no shame. I had learned a lot over the years about how these non magical humans readily went after their dreams, often breaking the rules; they did all they could do to force their wills to win their way in the world—to follow their heart's desires. Whenever they did that, when they broke the rules and forced their own wills upon others, they did not seem to suffer much from doing such things; it was odd. I didn't think I could ever live with myself if I were to break a vow. I could barely live with myself as it was, knowing that I hadn't been there to prevent Lamont from dying. Those observations, which I had made over the years—that so many humans did not take their vows, promises, and duties seriously—alarmed me.

Earth was a strange place.

I knew that I would do anything and everything within my power to protect Emma from all danger and from the corruptor. If an heir ever became corrupted, the vows and the ancient powers bestowed upon them wouldn't hold and wouldn't work any longer. Similarly, if I became corrupted, it would strip me of my birthright. Being anything other than a guardian knight was unfathomable to me. I loved being a guardian knight of Terra.

The constant need I had to protect, help, and comfort her was so intense that it was hard to breathe as I held her, especially with her soul's melody fully exposed. The one thing I feared most was that Emma might be the one person in all the worlds who could cause me to break all of my vows and all of my promises—if doing so would make her happy. I knew I would do just about anything for her. I was desperate for even an ounce of the happiness I once had enjoyed with Ara by my side. Emma, she was the answer. I knew it. If I was honest with myself, however, if I was totally and

completely honest, the truth about the power that Emma had over me to make me do what she wanted, because of how I felt about her, terrified me. She had become my everything.

There was only a thin boundary between a guardian knight and his heir, and the boundary between Emma and I was thinning out more and more each day.

Emma gasped in my arms, and I wondered if she was having another nightmare about the crash. She whimpered for a few moments and then was silent once again. I brushed a few strands of hair from her face. She had tied her hair up in a loose bun, the way she always did before bed. How could someone so beautiful be in so much pain? I wondered. It didn't seem right; it seemed against nature. But if I knew anything of this world, it was that beauty was pain—most of the time.

Brown hair—silver eyes— no, I stopped myself . I shoved those memories away again.

I regained my focus, and I thought about Emma. I thought about how I hadn't seen many emotions come from Emma throughout the years. Being a shielded soul, as she was, that was to be expected. Then my mind pondered upon how Lamont and Ara wanted me to really get to know Emma, even to bond with her in the way that no knight had bonded with any heir ever before. So they unshielded her soul to me, from time to time. Usually, as she was normally without a soul's melody, she went along with the flow of things, which was normal for someone with a shielded soul. But whenever her soul's melody was partially unguarded, Emma's feelings and emotions became very heightened.

I remembered a particular incident when Emma was twelve:

She and I enjoyed playing in the forest behind Mary's flower shop. I recalled watching as She climbed upon a fallen branch, trying to keep her balance as she

walked, and then sped up into a jog, her blond waves flowing in the wind as she ran, and her smile warmed her face like a sunrise.

A sunrise, similar to the one that transformed my world when I had met—

No, stop. Ana is gone. The pain from losing her was even more painful then, while within the aura of that sunrise.

I forced my focus back upon Emma: golden hair, green eyes.

Emma had always looked at me in a unique way. Lamont had unshielded her soul just enough that year so that I could hear her melody, but no other Terran could. Her soul's melody was getting stronger. Being around Emma always made my soul feel lighter. It made all of the heartache from my past more bearable. When unshielded, her melody would swarm warmly around me, and her thoughts and feelings were as clear as the sky was blue on that cloudless afternoon so long ago.

She liked me. On that day, I heard her melody sing it. It was the first time she had thought of it—the first time I had ever heard her melody ponder and reflect upon me in that way.

I spoke back to her with my melody, but I knew she would not understand. She had not been trained, and without training, it was difficult to understand another's feelings, to reach into their soul, even when their melody was blasting very loud.

"Ry, are you coming?" she asked me, tucking a bit of hair behind her ear.

"Yeah, I'm just enjoying the warm weather. I think summer is coming."

"I hate summer; it's too hot," she groaned as she bent down and picked up a wildflower. I watched as she brought the bloom to her nose.

"It's beautiful today, though," I answered.

She smiled and motioned for me to take her hand. I did, gladly, and like always, her warmth covered me. She smiled again, and her melody wondered what it would be like to kiss me.

I almost dropped her hand, but I didn't—I knew I couldn't do anything that would cause her to think that I knew what she was feeling. If I kissed her, I knew Lamont would not have minded, because he trusted me above anyone else. But the real worry of mine was: could I do it?

"Hey, I'm nervous for next year, Ry. You'll be in high school."

"You can't ever get rid of me, Em." I squeezed her hand.

"Ry, you're my best friend. I was wondering if maybe—" She paused as if she wasn't sure she wanted to say anything after all.

I didn't want to hear her soul's melody before her words came out.

"You can ask me anything, Emma." I smiled at her, holding her attention.

"Kiss me," she whispered, and I opened my eyes wide as I watched her blush.

"Kiss you?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid if you don't kiss me now, I'll never get the chance, you know?" She smiled, and I could tell that she was trying to act like it wasn't a huge deal to her.

"Never get the chance to kiss me? Or someone else?" I asked, rubbing my thumb up and down her knuckles.

"I want you to be my first kiss, Ry. You've always been there for me, and our friendship is so strong that a little kiss couldn't mess it up."

"I see you've thought a lot about this."

"I have, and if you don't like me that way, it's fine. I still want my first kiss with you."

"So let me get this straight. You just want to use my lips? Like a test? Like practice?"

"Oh, um, I mean—" She turned away from me.

"I'll do it," I blurted. I had heard her soul, and she was worried that I was mad at her for the suggestion. She liked me more than a friend, and she wanted to see what kisses were all about.

"You will?" she asked, her green eyes sparkling.

"Yes, what are best friends for?" I shrugged, acting like it wasn't as big of a deal as it actually was. Inside, my heart was attacking me with joy.

"Okay, then." She cleared her throat and leaned in.

I moved away and smiled. "Not right this instant, Emma." I touched her cheek, and she looked embarrassed. "But soon." In reality, I wanted to kiss her senseless right then. I thought about how kissing her would seal my old life up and create a new one. I was sure if we kissed, my broken heart would finally mend. I said, "not yet," because we were far too young, and we had plenty of time. Also, when she asked me, my heart began to beat too wildly within my chest as I found myself imagining kissing my lost Ana.

I wasn't ready.

The memory faded as I pulled a weeping Emma even closer into my arms. Seeing that side of her was still new for me. I had never experienced her sorrowful cries before. That experience was not something I enjoyed; seeing Emma in pain was horrible.

Mary and I tried to shield her melody as best we could, but it was obvious that we could only prevent other melodies from sensing her from great distances. It wasn't easy to shield her from everyone she came into contact with, but we tried. I had to focus on shielding Emma more completely, and to figure out how to keep her safe. In that moment, her melody was contained, but how long would that last? Only a parent could completely suppress a melody. I was not her parent, not in the slightest. Usually, her melody was so loud and strong; additionally, at that moment, she was also in torment. It ached everywhere inside of me. Her melody could have crumbled me to dust if she had wished for it. As she felt such pure pain and torment, I felt it, too. Her pain, after all, might as well have been my doing.

Chapter 2

I stood inside my house and tried to focus my thoughts. I kept thinking about the hospital, being there with Emma, and I needed to stop. It was making me miserable. My house was cold, even though there was no chill in the air. It was dark, even with all the curtains wide open in the middle of the afternoon, and the few pictures which hung on the walls meant nothing to me. It was better than the hospital room, better than the blinking lights. I was grateful that, at least, that difficult time in the hospital was over and done with. I needed to focus on the next phase, the next task at hand. I placed my head in my hands and felt the cool surface of the counter seep into me, only making me colder as I inched my face closer and closer to the stone. The quiet around me only aided in attracting her melody from next door; it pierced through my consciousness. Maybe, that is the reason why people of this realm do things to numb their bodies—are they numbing themselves from this kind of pain? I leaned back on the kitchen chair, abruptly, running fingers through my messy curls in annoyance. I couldn't just sit there in that quiet, sterile place that I was supposed to call home .

I had a home once—but that place was not it. I stood and walked to the living room, sank onto the black leather couch, and turned on the TV. I turned up the volume so loud that I wondered if my neighbors could hear. Neighbors?—Emma.

"Gah! Curses!" I swore. No matter what I did, I couldn't escape experiencing the horror Emma felt because of her parents' deaths; it emanated so loudly from her home, next door, and settled directly into my soul. I had things I needed to get done. I had things to figure out so that I could keep her safe. I had become so distracted. I closed my eyes and remembered that Mary had said that processing it could help my swirling mind, so I breathed in deeply and thought back.

I wasn't sure if Emma remembered the night I took her home after she was released from the hospital. I was happy that Mary let me drive her home. I inhaled and let those memories rush through me.

This better work, I thought.

I drove her in, what I told her was, my fathers car. But I had no father there. The roads were deserted; still, I was too paranoid to have even a moment's peace during that twenty-minute drive home. Emma was asleep. When she wasn't crying—she was sleeping. As I pulled up to her house, their house, I turned off the ignition and looked at Emma's face.

Lamont and Ara knew that shielding her soul would change her from who she was meant to be, but the risk in her being discovered was too great. I helped to convince them to do it. I didn't want Prince Shad to find her, either. I felt a small ounce of guilt at that but pushed it aside. Just the thought of him believing for even just a moment that she belonged with him made me angrier than most things in all the kingdoms could. I was protective of Emma, and how could I not be? With a melody like hers, Terrans would come across the country to find her—across realms. There had only been one other time, other than just after her parents' deaths, when her melody had been released in its pure unshielded or unguarded form: the moment she was born.

I pulled up the driveway and sat there, unable to move. I looked at Emma's sleeping form, and like always, I was transfixed by her, just like I was at the moment I first met her.

I took in a sharp breath, opening my eyes, looking around the living room where I sat. I looked at the screen in front of me and thought about Emma and the day she was born.

Yes, I had been there.

The day when Emma was born, was a much happier moment than the present, and I let myself reflect. I would never forget that day; my second chance.

Something nagged at me as I reflected on that memory, a small, little tug inside my mind. It had happened before, and it was common from time to time for me. Like always, I pushed the nagging feeling away. It was as if my mind was filled with boxes, most of them all connected with strings, one thought triggering a memory, or another thought or even a feeling. There was one box, however, that I didn't dwell on. All of the horrible and bad things that had happened to me were locked up inside it. That box was unlike all of the others inside my mind. It was old and dusty with chains and locks around it, a clear sign to stay away. When I felt the nagging, the tug, all it meant was that something must have happened that made Emma's birth difficult for me, but I didn't want to remember. I had put whatever it was in that heavily locked box for goodness sake. That was the entire reason for the box—so that I could live my life and not think about all of the misery I had experienced.

If only the memories of Ana would not leak out into my consciousness.

Living such a long life, as Terrans did, that wasn't uncommon to compartmentalize. Our melodies were a combination of our minds and hearts, and our souls were trained from birth. We were trained to use our minds to keep us safe. I kept myself safe from pain by having that box with the darkest moments and memories of my life locked away inside. I knew that, eventually, I would probably have to put the loss of Lamont and Ara in there, too—but some of the feelings, the pains, I still needed fresh in my mind. I needed to feel that pain in order to move me forward. That pain, it served my purpose; the other pains inside that blasted box no longer served me. I couldn't fix them, and I definitely couldn't change them—so I didn't dare open it, even when it begged to be unlocked. Of course, I didn't remember exactly what I had put in that dusty, locked box, which was the entire reason that box in my head existed at all, and it was clearly doing its job for the most part. It still didn't stop the reality that every once in a while, if I let myself ponder too long on things, like right then, it would

shake and rattle, begging to be allowed into my conscious thoughts, to be on center stage in my brain. I pushed the box away one final time and focused on Emma.

I smiled as I remembered Lamont being a wreck. I had never seen him so unkempt and rumpled: his shirt untucked, his hair sticking up—yep, he was a worried mess. He quickly returned to the delivery room.

Ara was a quiet, sweet person. She wasn't shy or necessarily fearful, but I assumed that she preferred to watch and observe rather than to be involved in a discussion. However, when she did give her opinion, you bet she had everyone's attention.

When Emma was born, Ara screamed, and I remember looking at Mary who had been in the hallway on an errand from Lamont. I was obviously shocked that such a sound had come from Ara.

"I told you, Rykerian. She is not always soft-spoken and quiet." Mary walked over and sat beside me, nudging my shoulder, as I ran fingers through my hair.

"I guess you were right," I said. We were quiet as we listened to Emma's baby cries and a melody more strong, more perfect, than any other melody I'd ever heard. Mary's melody reached out to mine. She shared feelings of awe and wonder, and I sent the same astonished feelings right back to her. We smiled at each other, as two happy aunts or uncles would, and then dread filled me. She read my feelings and my worries for this little girl's strong melody, through my melody.

"We must tell Ara and Lamont what you know," she whispered, reading my soul's melody's fears of a prophecy foretold, long ago, of a dark prince, finding a child with the brightest melody ever heard of. Could Emma be the one?

When I saw Emma, I thought that she was adorable, wrapped in that pink hospital blanket. She was my best friends' child, and I instantly adored the little girl.

Lamont's soul's melody also sang very loud that day; he was so proud of his little baby girl.

I had known of countless births but very few deaths. In Earth's realm, humans lived one very short life span, and then, once their bodies withered away, they died. On Terra, people lived multiple of the Earth life spans. Once we reached the age of maturity, we aged very slowly. It was a common thing for couples to meet and fall in love with drastic age differences between them. My father met my mother the day after her birth, for example. Finding one's match, the person to share life with at such a young age, was very rare without a searcher. But I was sure that these "searchers," as myth described them, were just that: myths. A searcher had not been heard of in hundreds of years. Sure, Terran storybooks told about them, and spoke of people who could find their song, but those were the fairy tales of our world, along with other tales—some of which had shocking similarities to this realm's fairytales. Cinderella, on Earth, goes to a ball and the prince finds her by trying on the glass slipper on each maiden in his kingdom. On Terra, Cinderella was a princess who had her kingdom stolen away, and through secret identities and the help of the Ancients, the prince from the enemy kingdom fell in love with the lost princess, and they married, combining their two, war-torn kingdoms into one of peace: Solalune . But that was so long ago.

Thinking about those midnight flower fields made me miss Terra in a way I did not need at that moment. Lamont wanted me to look after Emma. Being a guardian and friend to her made sense. I would blend in with Earth ways and be with Emma as she grew. She was my mission from the Ancients, and when I took the vow to be at her side, to be anything and everything that she needed only days after her birth, I was happy to fulfill my role, my place in the worlds. I had never known exactly what loving Lamont and Ara would make me do—never knew exactly what being everything Emma ever needed truly meant. I would never have guessed that only a few days later what Lamont and Ara would offer me—what the next vow was that I would take, and what it would bring back to me;

Hope, a second chance.

I shook my head moving on from that train of thought. I couldn't get stuck there, hearing the box rattling again, I opened my eyes.

I moved my hands over my face as I breathed in and out slowly, feeling the rise and fall of my chest in order to help me calm down from my memories and feelings. It is hard to explain how the Ancient magic works. For the guardian knights, we are gifted magic for our the royal heirs whom we protect; however, we do not have the ability to use the magic—it is acted upon us. Being transformed back into my childhood body had to have been the most insane magic I had ever experienced. I was always myself, but the magic made me appear her age. I attended school with her, watched over her, and I grew to love her.

Yes, I loved her. She was light in darkness.

Magic was usual for us guardian knights. It pulsed through us, and if we needed to feel peace, love, or fear, because feeling it would help the royal line we served, then we felt it. Even though I was supposed to be there for Emma, to protect her and do whatever she needed me to do, I did know one thing: my devotion to her, for Emma, was real.

Lamont and Ara were the best of people, and Emma would never really know them. That had always been a real possibility, and Lamont and Ara had made their wishes known if they were both to die. And although I told myself it would never happen. I would never allow their deaths. It was my entire purpose to keep them safe.

And you failed.

Pain pulsed through me at the loss, of my failings. Ancient magic let me know.

I looked at my hands in my lap and squeezed them into fists. Lamont had expressed that if they could not continue to shield her soul, she would need to be told about who she was, and most likely taken back to Terra—if such a thing could be done. I had searched for the cave where the portal to our realm was, and had never found it. There was a chance Prince Shad might know where it was, but I could not chance seeing him, and having him read in my soul that I had kept Emma from him.

He had been searching for her, his entire life.

It would only be a matter of time now, Shad was coming. I knew it was only a matter of time. When Emma's parents died, every Terran on Earth could hear her. Including Prince Shad.

Chapter 3

On the night I drove her home from the hospital, she lay passed out in the passenger seat. She had no idea who she really was, just how special she was. If I could just find her a strong seeker's crystal, then she could be safe—well, depending on the strength of the crystal. The problem was that the crystals in Earth's realm, the ones that could actually work, were almost impossible to find anymore. Roseville used to be full of seekers' crystals, decades before. That is what drew us there in the first place. Still, once we arrived, we soon discovered that the real useful ones—if there ever were any—were all gone. All that was left were the useless, non-soul-shielding crystals in the creek behind Mary's flower shop, and over the years, I had searched that creek along with the area around it in vain, holding to the hope of finding just one strong enough to help.

I suspected, however, that I knew who might have one: Prince Shad. He, no doubt in preparation to find Emma, would have gone to great lengths to find one, and knowing him as I did, he probably had sweet-talked his way into having someone give it to him. I had known Prince Shad on Terra. We weren't exactly friends, for he reached his maturity long after I had reached mine. We were even distantly related. He was a prince of Embra, and his mother was a princess of Torren. His grandparents were the King and Queen of Torren. So, he was of my lineage, though distantly. I was a descendant of King Ronin, the first Guardian knight. But I was far removed from the royals. I had a prestigious family of Knights; we were legendary in our realm. We were trained in Torren, and many royals came to us in search of a guardian knight when they came of age. So, even though I was related to Prince Shad of Embra, I was no prince.

Still, throughout my life, his name often came up in the royal councils I attended. I never had a serious problem with Shad. Sure, the people of Torren as a whole, usually kept to themselves. But Shad's father could not be trusted. The King of Torren was a vile man. His melody became corrupted early on in his life. There were often rumors and whispers spread regarding what really went on in the kingdom of Torren. What saved the Crown Prince was that he had a brilliant soul's melody. His soul was always loud and strong. His melody actually made him stand out among the nobles of the heirs. It was even stronger than Lamont's. Many of the kingdoms wanted to gain access to his melody's strength through marriage. So even with the rumors of his father, and the secret nature of Torren at the time, he had his pick of princesses. They were all waiting for him to mature, marry, and align with a kingdom. He was the prize everyone wanted to win. Maybe that is what started my dislike of him. He was so widely talked about and so often praised—it irritated me.

So, I needed a crystal. If Shad had one, I knew Emma could use it and maybe even live out her entire life as an average human in this realm with it protecting her from any Terran threat here or elsewhere. But I knew what the prince really wanted. He was looking for her—he wanted her soul's melody. Of course, his strong melody was not enough for him; he craved more. He couldn't have settled for the dozens of other princesses who would gladly have given their melodies and their right arms to him. No, he had to have my charge; he had to want Emma. He would take her away, he would claim her, and I was determined not to allow him into her life if I could help it, not if he was going to take Emma away from Mary and me.

I watched the television for a moment bringing me back to the present as a commercial of a car driving along a winding road came on. As I watched, the images and the words started to blur on the screen, and my memory flashed back again. It continued to plague me, and would keep doing it until it was complete. So, I did not fight it, and let it play back again in my mind one final time.

I opened my side of the car and stepped out, placing the cold metal keys into my

pocket. As I walked over to her side of the car, I saw a tall and large figure in the driveway. If I hadn't seen the figure so many times before and known that it belonged to Prince Glasson, I would have been on my guard. But Glasson, though strong and intimidating, was harmless to me—at least at that moment.

"I heard—" His voice paused, and he walked closer to me. "What happened?"

"Glasson—" I crossed my arms. I was not in the mood to talk with anyone, let alone Glasson. He was the well-known rebel, guardian knight and the Crown Prince of Torren. Shielding my melody so often made it harder for me to get a clear reading even on my own emotions, not to mention Emma's, so I definitely didn't know his, and he didn't know mine. The pause in his speech caused me to think that he was on edge. Okay, so sometimes, I could read him.

"I just thought that you should know that word has gotten out about her. " He moved his head in the direction of where Emma was slumped over in the front seat, still asleep.

I started to worry that the drugs the doctors gave her to help her sleep were too strong; she shouldn't sleep her life away. "Thank you for the information. I assumed as much," I replied.

"Well, I will leave you alone then," Glasson started backing up. He could probably tell from my mood that I wasn't interested in talking much, and if that were so, our abilities to read each other without our melodies was improving. I wondered what that meant about our relationship. Were we friends? I wanted to laugh; no, we were, indeed, not friends. Our relationship was more master and servant, with him being the master and me being the ungrateful, non-compliant servant.

"Meet me at my place, tomorrow. We need to go over some things. I have news that I can't discuss at this moment," I demanded.

"I don't know why you assume I'm under your command," he snapped.

Princes, they are all alike, I thought. However, Shad did have a little more patience than Glasson. Still, Shad was in an annoying, irritating league of his own. And then, of course, there was Prince Lamont. He was—well, he was the exception to everything. Maybe he was why I didn't care for anyone else in the royal lines. I was loyal to Lamont to a fault, it seemed.

"Who found Ashlyn?" I asked, raising my brow in a question, deciding to remind him of how much he owed me.

"Lucky guess, Rykerian—you're lucky you are from the Dallard family line."

"What does that mean, Glasson?"

"Don't forget your place."

"Forgive me, it has been a trying time," I said, bowing my head, remembering how I needed to act around Glasson, at least sometimes. He was, after all, my original prince. I was born and raised in the kingdom of Torren, and because of that, Glasson did deserve my respect.

Glasson nodded, "I do understand, but remember who you are, and remember our oaths."

"May my melody never corrupt, may I break no vows, my soul never sing false, and may no heir die before my last breath." I tried to remain calm as I said the last phrase. I knew I had not kept my Guardian knight oath in the most essential way.

"You honor your family."

“I don’t care about my family honor, Glasson. I care about Emma, about Lamont and Ara; they were—are my family,” I snapped, so much for being more respectful or not letting on that they were both dead. I didn't have the energy then to have that conversation, a lecture from Glasson about my failure. I just wanted to get Emma inside.

“You are too close. I told you to keep your distance. Were you not trained in such things?”

“Of course, but I love them.” It wasn't against the guardian knight code or oaths to fall in love with our royals, but it was always supposed to be a brotherly or sisterly love, never romantic. Romantic love would usually get in the way of duty.

“You love her . This isn’t how it is supposed to be. I will come by tomorrow, and we will speak then.” He turned and left, seemingly fed up with my company, and I couldn’t blame him. Anyone nearby right then would not have liked being around me. To be fair, I didn't want to be around him either, but that was typical for me.

I watched him walk away, dreading moving Emma from the front seat. I carried her right to her room and tucked her into bed. I wanted to destroy the person who had hurt her, who was responsible for killing her parents and almost killing her. I slumped over the edge of the bed and held back a sob. The previous few nights when I had held her as she laid in her hospital bed, she often woke up screaming—as if someone were torturing her. I couldn't reach her when she was like that, when she couldn't hear me. One of the nurses explained to me that having night terrors was common after such serious trauma, and the best thing I could do for her was to simply be near her and to let her sleep, so I had never left her side. How could I have? I felt the tears fall from my face then as I reflected on the days that had passed, and it stung as if acid were trailing down my flesh, rotting me from the outside in. I knew that she needed me. I knew it because I was her guardian knight, and I would always know what she needed most. She needed me, but more than that, I knew she needed safety. I was

sure that whoever had caused the crash had done it on purpose. Who knew when that evil Terran would be back? I had no doubt that Prince Tarick would always attempt to kill off Lamont's line. I growled and tried to stop the sobs from coming out stronger. I didn't want to wake her.

"Ryker?" Mary's voice whispered through Emma's cracked door, and I saw her bloodshot eyes. How long had I been there? I had not even heard Mary come home. I stood and closed Emma's door, following Mary to the living room.

"Do you know who it was?" she asked as she sat on the couch. We hadn't talked about it yet, but I had known that the conversation would come.

"No, but my best guess is that it was one of Tarick's men. I wouldn't put it past him to be hell-bent on destroying Lamont's line, even after he has found freedom and peace."

"I can't believe—how could they discover that Lamont escaped the Dungeons of the Mist?" She cut herself off as she let out a sob.

"I'll figure out who did this, Mary. I swear it." She nodded and continued to cry. I reached for her, her head tucked under my chin. She cried, and I let a few tears fall, too.

"I am so worried about her. Now that she has her melody back, she will be feeling so many different feelings, feelings that she has never felt before."

"Right now, all she feels is horror and pain," I said.

"I know, and her nightmares—How will we all ever heal from this?" Mary looked up at me then; her blue eyes were so full of pain. The blue was almost a shade that could not be found on Earth. If I looked at them long enough, I could imagine that they were the crystal sea off the coast of Torren. But right then, in her eyes, the sea was

raging, and waves spilled over their boundaries and dripped down her cheeks. I wanted to gather all of them up and return them to her sea, where they belonged. Mary and I had developed a strong friendship over the years. I cared for her and for her happiness.

"We will, Mary. Emma needs us now more than ever. If Tarick has discovered where we are, he'll stop at nothing to destroy her. We must fight." I held her shoulders as she pulled away, not irritated with me but with the situation. She wiped at the tears staining her cheeks. I moved away from her and walked to the fireplace. I watched for a time as the clock's hands moved. I counted each second that passed, each moment of time, of life moving forward.

"You're going to leave, aren't you?" Mary looked up at me as I paced in front of the fireplace.

"I can't just sit here and let them find her. I have received some intel that reported having heard talk of her."

"She needs you, now more than ever." Mary sank into the chair closest to the fireplace. She pulled her knees under her chin. She always did that when she was sad or afraid. It was as if not taking up as much space made it easier for her to handle her pain.

"She has you; I'm no use here. I already screwed up enough." The regret, I knew, was thick in my voice. And, I knew—I knew that it was well-founded.

"This wasn't your fault, Rykerian." I knew she would say that. She was always too good, too kind, just like Ara and Lamont.

"Lamont asked me to go with them that night," I said, combing a hand through my hair.

"I know. I told him you had the game. He knew it was important to you, so don't blame yourself."

"You did that? Mary, why did you? If I was there, I could have saved them."

"No, Ryker. You could have prevented the car accident?" I could feel it in her melody—she knew it was an actual possibility. If needed, a guardian knight could do anything, nothing was impossible if the Ancients blessed it. So, I ignored the question.

"I'll leave after school ends. I'll tell Emma that I am going on a family vacation."

"If you think that she is in danger—"

"I do, and because we can't shield her soul as completely as Lamont could, we have to keep everyone who could harm her far away from her. Also, I want to find a seeker's crystal."

Mary nodded. I could see in her eyes that she was beginning to understand.

"I will talk to Prince Glasson tomorrow. He can keep an eye on her while I am gone."

"Prince Glasson?" Mary's eyes grew wide.

"He owes me a favor," I shrugged.

"Okay." It was silent for a few moments, and I tried to steady my breathing as I heard Emma moan from her room.

"I want to kill the person who did this to her."

"It's late. I'll go to her. You can rest on the couch if you want."

"There is too much to do," I said as I walked past her. "I have to get into contact with some people."

"Okay, the funeral is in three days," Mary whispered.

"I won't leave until after that. Are we doing it all the way they do things here, then?"

"It's all Emma knows, Ryker."

"Burying them here seems so wrong."

"No!!" We both heard a scream, and Mary ran to Emma's room. I walked outside into the black night.

I slumped down on the couch, shoving my head between two pillows, forcing the memories to fade away. I was unable to control the swirling of emotions inside of me. Mary had been wrong; going back and thinking things over—it didn't help a single thing.

"Why did I listen to her?" I groaned and turned on the TV, raising the volume to numb the pain, even though I knew it wouldn't work.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:11 am

Chapter 4

My phone rang, and like an idiot, I answered it without even looking at who was calling. I will never do that again, I told myself after I heard the voice on the other line.

"Ryker," his voice was sharp, and I should have known that he would call me again, and soon.

"Prince Shad," I answered in mock joy. "How nice of you to call."

"I heard her a few days ago. I am sure of it."

I swore inwardly and tried to remain calm. Why did I answer his phone call? I had successfully avoided him during the previous few days "You did?" I feigned intrigue as I walked into my kitchen and got a cup of water.

"Yes, and she is near you. I have a feeling this is not a surprise for you."

I rubbed my eyes. Of course, it wasn't a surprise for me. She was the one. She was the one that prophecy foretold. Emma Warren could save Terra.

However, I was not happy that Prince Shad still wanted to claim her. He did not deserve her. He didn't even know her. Sure, I knew that the prince had been searching for Emma for a long time, and, yes, I knew about her for the past sixteen years, but she had the right of choice, and she didn't have to save Terra—or be with him.

"I think I heard something—" I feigned wonder.

"Don't you understand how important this is?" Shad asked.

"Prince, I do, and I also understand that maybe she doesn't want to save some unknown realm."

"So you know her? Is she from this realm? She does not know? Who is she? Where is she?"

"She is safe—and away from you, which is all I can ask for right now."

"You are a sad excuse for a knight. How can you do this, go against the Ancients and not fight for Terra?" Shad scolded me.

Pain flickered inside of me, but I swallowed it down.

"I am not telling you anything."

"I will be in contact again with you very soon, knight." He growled, and then the line went dead. I tossed the phone onto the counter and smiled. Man, it felt good to make that pompous prince squirm. Or well, I assumed he was squirming. I would be leaving for my fake family vacation soon. School had just a month left. Just one month, and I could make it right. I had wanted to leave sooner, but Mary asked me to stay, and I knew Emma still needed me. I could sense it down to the marrow in my bones; the ancient magic pull was insanely strong. Surprisingly, Emma had become more of a shell than when she didn't have a melody, and that was saying something. I knew that what I was doing was semi-running away, and normally, I would be against that; however, I couldn't help but worry that she would be found out. I needed to find a seeker's crystal—and I needed to find the person who attacked my royals, even if that meant leaving her for a time.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:11 am

Chapter 5

The months moved by in a blur. Seeing Emma at school with her bloodshot eyes and vacant expression made my heart ache. I needed to fix it; I had to talk to Glasson. I needed his help more than I wanted to admit. I was haphazardly finishing up my homework, hating every moment of doing the meaningless work of school work that made me appear to be the seventeen year old boy that I needed to try to be, when the door to my house opened up.

"Ryker," I turned to see Glasson, standing in my doorway. He walked inside and sat down on the couch.

"Oh, well, make yourself at home," I offered, closing my English notebook; the essay could wait.

"Your door was open. Do you want me to leave?"

"Most people knock," I shrugged. I'd asked him to come. It wasn't actually a conversation that I was looking forward to having. I stood up tall and cleared my throat. "I must report that Prince Lamont and his wife Ara are dead. I am not sure if you've heard."

His head shot up. "Dead?" he asked, folding his arms, his brow furrowed. "No, I had not heard that."

"Yes."

"This isn't good, guard," he growled. I clenched my jaw; "guard" was a term used to demean an unworthy Torren Knight. He must have been truly upset. I didn't blame him; I deserved to be called that—even worse.

"Yes, Highness. I am aware."

He frowned but continued to watch me as I walked over to the door to close it. "So who did it? Who found them? Was it Prince Tarick's men?"

"I wasn't there, but I am sure that it was Tarick's men. Knowing him, he would stop at nothing to kill off his brother's line and any other challenge to his right to the throne." I folded my arms across my chest, not ready for the chastisement I was about to receive from the rebel-Prince knight.

"You weren't there?" he scowled at me as he stood up. I knew that I had gone against everything a guardian knight vowed. I knew I had messed up. He shook his head and moved on, but I knew that he would come back to it at some other time. I was surprised that he did not mention my failings right then. It was his duty, after all, to make sure that all of his people took their oaths and vows seriously. He placed a hand on the back of the couch as if that realization had shocked him so badly that he needed help to stand. "So what do we do? This realm isn't safe for her anymore if they know about her. I wish I had a crystal for her."

"We are doing the best we can at shielding her now."

"Emma's melody is so strong."

"I'm looking into finding a crystal," I added.

"She is so loud. Anyone could come here and find her, so easily. We have a target on our backs." Glasson paced, seemingly not paying attention to me.

“Lamont and Ara were always able to suppress her melody. I didn’t account—“

“Account for their deaths ?” he frowned, moving away from the couch to pace, for a few strides, across the floor. His feet left imprints in the plush, grey carpet, marking each step.

I gulped, unable to think for too long about the fact that I never had accounted for the possibility of their deaths that night. I nodded.

“We need a crystal.”

“I agree,” I said, leaning against the back of the brown couch in the living room, watching Glasson’s uncomfortable movements.

“How will you find one? There are no more left here in Roseville. The best crystals from Roseville's small mine were excavated long ago,” he added, pausing in his pacing in order to look at me.

“There are the Terran colonies up North. I want to check them out.”

"Okay, yes; that might work." He rubbed his jaw and then his face with his hands.

I tried not to look at him. I was sure that the feelings which I had for Emma would be clearly visible in my eyes. I didn’t need any more disappointed looks from him if I could prevent it.

"Next thing—" I started.

“I can’t be of much help. My charge is very—“ He pulled his phone out of his pocket and signed. “She’s a handful.”

“ You have trouble with your charge? So it is possible that you are not an actual Ancient, in the flesh.”

“I’m the Crown Prince of Torren, head of the guardian knights as you are well aware, guard. Do not question me.” I watched as he rubbed his eyes. He looked tired and worried.

"I’m going to figure out what happened. I’ll talk to the police; we have a sketch—" I voiced my plan.

"You think they will know anything about things from our realm?"

"The first person on the scene was a cop sent from the 911 call for an ambulance. He may have some info. They do have eyes."

Glasson rolled his eyes. I knew he didn't trust humans with his life, especially agents of government.

"Ashlyn is being moved. I can try and relocate her here to Roseville." Ashlyn had been his charge for the longest time, which was rare for a royal heir to follow the guardian knight’s life. But Glasson was a guardian knight to this Ashlyn person. I had never met her, although I did help him locate her once, a long time ago when she ran away.

"You will make sure Emma is safe," I commanded, which, I understood, was rather bold to speak so to my prince, well, the prince of my people. Lamont would always be my prince, the prince I served.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"I don't know, but you can hear her melody, can’t you?"

He shrugged.

"Just keep an eye out; that is all I am asking. You know if it was Tarick's men who did this, you and I will need to stick together."

"I will watch her—and be discreet. How long?"

"Two months."

"Two months? I have to keep watch of Ashlyn, too. If Tarick's men are on the loose and doing his bidding, then I need her close by."

"I leave in a week. Is that enough time to figure out Ashlyn's situation?"

He furrowed his brow, and I watched him as he thought about my question. I was desperate.

"I'll get it done. I'll have her enrolled at your school for next year," he finally answered.

"Okay—" I didn't know why he was giving me that information.

"You need to help me keep her safe after your return."

"I'll do my best."

He nodded and turned to walk out the door. "I have to say, I am surprised at you, for leaving your charge. Perhaps, the corruption of this realm has already begun to muddle your soul."

"I'm not leaving her, and she won't see you, will she?" I chose to ignore the

corruption remark. There were a lot of things that I was, but corrupt was not one of them.

"Of course not," he answered.

"Good."

"But it's still odd," he replied.

"Everything is odd right now. Desperate times—"

"I get it, I do—but, you should really unshield your soul. You aren't of any use if you become corrupt."

"I am fine," I assured him.

"I wouldn't bet on that."

"I let out my melody often enough, Glasson."

"Well, I don't think I could do that to Ashlyn, just leave her—no matter how irritating she is." He turned and walked out the door.

And just like that, I had a plan, and I would figure out who had murdered my prince and protect Emma no matter the sacrifice or the cost, even if that meant leaving her for a time.

Chapter 6

Saying goodbye to Emma was the hardest thing I ever had to do. School let out, and summer break began, yet she still was as depressed as ever. Mary tried to help as best she could, but the corruption was already starting to work its way inside of Emma, inside of her beautiful soul. I needed to leave, and hopefully, I could figure things out fast, and then return soon, and somehow, tell her about who she was and help train her to keep her soul from becoming corrupt. It would be a lot for her to take in, but I needed to do it.

“Did you get everything squared away?” I asked as I loaded up the truck bed. Glasson stood on the grass to my left, and I looked at him, expecting a remark about how stupid I was.

“Everything is ready. Are you sure leaving her at such a fragile time is a good idea?” There it was, his criticism.

“I have to find who did this. He’ll be coming for her; I know it.”

“Mary can’t shield her fully. She will become even more exposed,” he added as he walked near the edge of the lawn.

“Glasson, what do you want me to do? If this person, whoever he is, gets Emma, I have no doubt they will be after your precious Ashlyn next.”

I watched as he frowned. “I understand the importance, which is why I am helping. However, I do have concerns.”

“I have to find who did this, and I have to find a crystal. It is as simple as that.”

“Ashlyn is safe in her new home. Emma needs to be safe, too. I am concerned that perhaps this isn't the best way to go about doing things. Even though I am able to be in the area and keep an eye on things, she really needs her knight.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it.” I nodded, intentionally not addressing his concerns. I had them, too. Emma also had Mary. She needed more, and I knew that Glasson could help her; heck, even prince Shad would protect her. But, if Prince Shad ever found Emma, he would never let her go. She—if she really was what he thought she was, if she really was what he had been searching for—I knew that she would mean everything to him. I hated Shad even more as that thought came to my mind.

Then unwanted memories with Shad came to my mind.

“You look upset,” he spoke, and I glanced at him with irritation.

He was always the picture of calm . Not one hair was ever out of place. You would never have suspected that he and I had just spoken with some insane woman who had opened a portal to another world with her fingertips. Sure, we were free of the cursed Dungeons of the Mist, but did he have to act like he was merely sitting down to eat lunch? I was in shock at what had just transpired. Shad sat down on a rock in front of the cave as if all was well in the realms.

“Upset? Yes, why of course, Your Highness , I am upset.” I brushed my fingers through my hair as I took in his calm demeanor. “Mind telling me, what has you feeling so calm, Prince?” I asked, standing in front of him.

“I am calm because I have received the answers that I feared I would never obtain throughout the entire span of my existence.”

I wanted to laugh His “entire existence?” Really? He was just born, from my Terran perspective. How could he have something already causing him to worry with such intensity? Being a royal heir wasn't hard. What could someone like him be lacking?

“That old crow just gave you answers? She gave me a million and one questions—like for one, where in the realms are we?” I touched my sword in nervousness. I knew that I should not be speaking to a royal in that way, but it was difficult to hold it together. For five years, I had searched for Lamont. In vain, I searched for him, day and night. When I discovered that he had been right there, within those cursed mountains, inside the Dungeons of the Mist, the entire time, in I was filled with hatred for myself. The only peace I found, even though I could not be with him to protect him, was in the fact that I could feel the pull—the bond that we shared, inside of me. I knew that he was alive because I was tethered to him.

“I have a song,” the prince said as he placed something into his shirt pocket.

I shook my head, not sure I had heard him correctly. From what I gathered, that old lady had just sent us into another realm without any ancient magic, a realm where Lamont was living. That part was good; however, how would I find him? Would we be safe? Right away, I could feel the pull, even stronger, toward Lamont. I knew he was close, and that knowledge gave me back the hope I had lost all those moon cycles earlier.

“You have a song , Prince?” I asked, trying not to laugh. Songs of the soul were lost to us. I was not sure they even existed at all. I tried not to treat him like he had just matured, but it was hard to avoid it with him spouting about having a song—like we were living in Ancient, blessed times. Fairytales, and nonsense.

“I understand, Rykerian. You do not believe in them.”

I held up my hands, but my face held the truth that I thought it was humorous. “I will

not tell you what to believe in, Your Highness.”

He looked up at me then, for the first time. I saw the look of pure hope in his eyes. His melody soared into mine, and I knew how he felt about songs, and I knew he did not joke about them. I understood that he didn't want to hear my critiques.

“I apologize, Prince Shad. Of course, I should not joke at a time like this.”

“I know that you find me naive. I understand, I have only just matured in the last moon cycle; however, I know what I know.” He looked around at the forest where we stood as if he were taking inventory. The trees were the typical brown-barked and green-leaved kind. The sky was the normal blue.

Where are we? I wondered.

“And you believe in songs?” I asked, sitting down on a boulder. It seemed that we were not leaving anytime soon, although having that conversation with prince Shad, when Lamont was yet to be found, was the last thing that I wanted to do. But, there we were.

“Of course,” he said, pulling a leaf off of a small plant beside him. I watched as he lifted the leaf to his lips, and then to his nose to smell it. “I believe we are inside a realm called Earth. There is no magic in the land,” he said, standing up.

“Uh, how do you—know that? No one has come here before—”

“That you are aware of. Please know, Rykerian, that the realm we have just left had many secrets, secrets that even the Dallard family line doesn't know about. I believe that the real connection that Terra has to Earth is one of these secrets.” His thoughts lingered, and I listened to his melody as he tried to memorize the way the cave looked, the cracks in the rocks, the trees, and the plant life nearby. What was he,

some kind of scientist? I was surprised that he didn't take specimens to study with all the attention he was giving to our surroundings.

"I agree, but unfortunately, Haleston has become corrupt," I added to his assessment.

"Yes, that was confirmed for me when I was locked in the Dungeons of the Mist," Shad said with a smirk. "It is as if the traitor King Falcon exists in the air there."

"His soul—it tortures whoever enters," I said with a shiver. The traitor King Falcon of Haleson had long ago tried to remove magic from Terra. He was of course unsuccessful, and he was locked inside one of Haleston's deepest mountains. Over time the mountain somehow opened, and the Traitor King, although long gone, his evil lingered there in that mountain for hundreds of years. The Haleston royals and other royals sent the worst of the criminals within its depths. There, one often gets mad within a few hours.

I hated how he seemed to know something I did not.

Pompous prince.

How was it that he could cause me to feel like I was the one who had just matured? I felt like a child, but he was the one who was spouting off fairytales and being his annoyingly calm self.

"I would suggest not sharing too many of those feelings, Rykerian." He raised his eyebrows as he gazed at the cave one last time and turned around. Oops, I had forgotten to shield those thoughts.

Seriously, he made me feel like a schoolboy being caught doing something I wasn't supposed to do. I switched my thought patterns to other things so that I would not insult his Royal Highness. I watched as he walked a few paces; then he froze.

“Everything alright, Prince?” I asked, standing up and preparing myself for a battle. The look of intensity was in his gaze. I looked behind me, but all I saw was the cave.

“Everything will be alright, knight.” I watched as he closed his eyes and looked one last time at the cave’s entrance; then he turned around. “We are exactly where the creator needs us to be.”

“Will you tell her aunt?” Glasson asked me.

I shook my head of the memory, trying to forget about the annoying threat that Prince Shad had brought to Emma. Out of all of the threats I knew about, he was the least of my worries, because he would never hurt her. Take her from me? Yes. Make her believe his fairy tales? Yes. But she would live. I hated him.

“I told her already. I don’t keep secrets from Mary.”

I watched him as he nodded.

“Good. So where are you going, and when will you be back?”

“Just a month or two. I need to get information from the police and then go back to the scene of the crash and figure out how to track down the person who did this.”

“Do you have a tracker?”

“No, but I have some skills in it.”

Glasson nodded, and I knew it wasn’t the way things would happen on Terra. I knew that going on a mission and leaving my royal heir unprotected was a horrible thing to do, but I needed to do it. I had to do it—to keep her safe.

“I will do my best, Ryker.” He placed a hand on his heart, then moved it to his eye. I met him in the middle, and we saluted. He nodded and walked back down the sidewalk. I leaned against the car. I had already said my goodbyes to Emma, so I was free to go. But as I looked back at the house next door to mine, I thought about Emma, and about how sad I was to leave her, and—about what it might feel like to kiss her goodbye.

Chapter 7

“Y ou are coming back? Does this mean that you found him?” Mary asked me.

“I have some information,” I spoke into the phone as I stared at the hotel room ceiling. The past month had been a nightmare: being away, coming up nearly empty-handed, until I came into contact with the Terran group that I had been searching for.

It was quite strange how after the first few days in the hospital, I had to basically force the cops to allow Emma to describe the man who was with her that night, so that a sketch artist could draw his image. Good thing I did, as it was all I had to go off of in my search.

The Terran group had been much larger than I thought it would be. Glasson had been contacting them for years. Glasson, of course, had many contacts with many Terran colonies. There was an entire system, which he had set up, for Terrans to communicate with each other and to find those Terrans that others were looking for. Prince Shad was a part of the whole system, but I avoided close connections to him.

It was a small town, as the population sign indicated. It was made up of a couple thousand, but when that number was entirely made of Terrans? It was a very powerful town, and in some ways, very dangerous. I drove to the heart of the town, down an old worn road. I worried that if I went into another pothole, I would pop a tire on the old truck I drove. Luckily, the main town area was better maintained. I couldn't help but wonder if the rough road was kept in such a condition to ward off people. Subtle, but effective for some travelers, I was sure. I drove down the quiet streets of the town. The buildings looked like they had been there for quite a while, as

if frozen in time: back to the 1950's, but everything was well-maintained. Nothing seemed Terran at all, but one thing stood out above everything else, I realized, as I parked near the post office: the melodies. They were so calming, as they swarmed around me, that I closed my eyes at their sounds. It had been so long, too long, since I had heard so many of my people together. It was more than beautiful; it was breathtaking, and I found myself lost in it for a moment.

“Can I help you, sir?” someone asked, and I opened my eyes. I saw a man before me, with dark brown eyes and white hair. He looked old, about seventy or so in this realm's years, but for a Terran, he could be anywhere from seventy to over two-hundred years, or cycles, old for all I knew.

“Yes, I'm looking for the leader of your colony.”

He stood up taller, and I took a moment to unshield my soul, just enough to show him who I was. I watched as he bowed his head in the customary way that a commoner would to honor a guardian knight of my rank.

“We are honored to have you here, Rykerian Dallard.” Like usual my name was incredibly useful.

“I need help. It seems that someone is trying to injure the person I am protecting. Have you heard anything about any of Prince Tarick's men from Haleston living here?”

“I wouldn't know, knight; however, I can find the boss for you.”

“The boss?”

“We found it easier when people come by to use the terms from this realm as much as possible. The boss is a knight, also.” I nodded and followed him as he showed me to a

large business building. I waited for a few moments in a lobby of sorts before someone came into the room. His melody wasn't pure. I took note of the black, corrupt parts of it before he shielded them from me. I will have to keep my guard up with him, I thought.

“A Dallard?” he asked, as I stood. I nodded, and he and I bowed in the pattern of proper respect of our people, and for my family. I couldn't read him, couldn't sense his melody, so I did not know from where he hailed.

“It's great to meet you—I'm in search of information.”

“Yes, this is what Will said.” He cleared his throat and walked with me into a room, no doubt some kind of office for an important person at one point. He motioned for me to sit, and I did, in a leather back chair in front of a massive wooden desk. He quickly moved around the desk to sit behind it. The room had papers and folders spread across the floor, as if they were laid out in haste.

“Yes, sorry for the mess,” he cleared his throat. “I am Rian. We are glad to help you. What do you seek?”

“I'm looking for someone. Have you noticed any soulless in the general area—or have you heard of any?” It was my gut feeling that the man from the sketch was soulless. The sketch, in my opinion, though in black and white, showed proof of it; he had soulless, black eyes. I imagined that the idea of the culprit being a soulless would bring me some peace—but why, I thought, was a soulless doing such things? And why was he still alive? Everyone knew that you could not live long without a soul.

“There is one man who comes through here to recruit people to work for his mining company. He has been through here three times now, and each time, he can't tell us what happened to his old recruits—he says it's confidential.” He held his hands in front of him on his desk, and I noticed the injuries to his knuckles, small bruises, and

scabs. “He always promises us that all who go with him will have their identities protected. Some of our people really want that—after being banished here to this realm.” He took a drink from a glass cup on his desk. It was then when I noticed that the walls of the room were stocked high and low with books—books not only on every single shelf, but also covering large spaces on the floor. Rian looked up at me, his brown eyes heavy with worry, it seemed. His scruffy beard barely covered his jaw and chin, his thick brown hair fell over his forehead, and he moved it aside.

“I spoke with him directly the last time he was here. I always thought he was human, but he said something to me that made me think that he might be soulless, but it astounds me how he could be one when he has survived for so long?”

“Who is he?”

“I don't have a name. I only know that he isn't welcome here anymore.” I watched as he cracked his knuckles. I looked again at his bruised hands.

I dug through my bag and looked for the sketch. Other than that one cop, Emma was the only other person to have seen him. I found the picture and held it up.

“This him?” I asked, staring into his eyes and listening to his melody, trying to pick up on any lies that he might try to shield.

“That's him alright,” he nodded and looked down at his glass cup.

I nodded back, and I silently congratulated myself and put the paper back into my bag, getting ready to ask my next question. “Do you happen to have a seeker's crystal?”

The conversation wasn't fruitless, but they didn't have a crystal. I said my goodbyes and thank-yous and drove back to the hotel room. I wished I had been able to get

more information, but what I got was solid intel.

As soon as I walked into my hotel room, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I shut the hotel door and sat on the bed; then I answered the call. Mary got right to her point as soon as I said, “hello.”

“Prince Shad is here. As far as I have seen, he has stayed away from Emma, but his melody is strong, Ryker.” I heard Mary’s concerned voice, and it pulled me away from my deep thoughts about the Terran colony I had just visited.

I cursed. “Mary, how long has he been there?”

“He moved in, literally across the street, three weeks ago.”

“And you are just now telling me this?” I growled as I shoved my clothing and other useless items into my carry-on bag. I needed to leave, and I needed to leave right away.

“It is hard to get in touch with you in order to tell you anything, Ryker. Calm down. His melody, Ryker—it’s so powerful; it reminds me of Emma’s.”

I felt sick, “What do I care about his melody?”

“He just—he doesn’t seem like the horrible prince that you’ve made him out to be, and how could he be that bad when his melody is so strong? I don’t think he shields any part of it. There’s no corruption at all in his melody.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course, his melody would be perfect. “He’s horrible. Do you know how many people rave and talk about him on Terra? He’s like the most well-known heir, and it was only because of his soul,” I answered, thinking to myself that he was horrible because he wanted Emma for himself, because he wanted to create

some fairytale life with her. He was horrible. Shad irritated me by simply breathing.

“Well, that’s what happens on Terra. I don’t know why that would surprise me. That is why people could come for Emma’s soul if it is left unshielded. You need to unshield your soul, Ryker. Emma is very drawn to him, and I see why. It’s not just his melody being strong. She is much happier since he has been around, and her melody—the corruption, it’s—it’s gone.” She paused for a moment. “When was the last time you unshielded your soul entirely? Let it really be free?”

“Mary, I cannot. You know why. Please, just stop. I am not able to break my vows. I will unshield it when the time is right, just as Lamont required of me.” I threw a shirt at my bag and walked away from the foot of the bed to lean against the wall. “I have to keep her safe, Mary, safe from any and all threats. I can’t have a target on us both. I have to focus only on her. If I let my melody out, I would be signaling who-knows-who to come for us. There are many Terrans who hate my family. Not all Terrans who are here were banished here for illegitimate reasons.” The phone felt heavy in my hands as I spoke. I gripped it so hard that my hand shook slightly.

“I know, Ryker.”

I moved my face from against the wall and looked at the room around me. I wanted to unshield my soul. It was a lot of work to keep one's soul shielded. Mine was no exception. I thought of what would happen if I did, and quickly decided that it wasn't a good thing to focus on. It would tempt me too much. I thought about Shad’s melody and then Emma’s. If the prophecy was true, then Emma would be more like her real self than ever before, simply because Shad was just across the street. I hated that thought—so very, very much.

“Shad cannot know,” I said.

“Cannot know what?”

“He cannot know who Emma is.”

“She has a melody, Ryker. What else would he assume? Do you think he will believe that she is something other than Terran?”

“Please, Mary. He just can’t know about Lamont, about her being the princess. Let him suspect all he wants, but I want it to remain a secret that Emma is an heir. He believes in songs, for ancient’s sakes— actual songs, Mary, so he may even believe that she could be from this realm. I wouldn’t put it past him to believe in the impossible. He already does.”

“I don’t know why you don’t believe in songs. All our people were built around them. We are from them.”

“Yes, and then the ancients took them away.”

“Rykerian, we don’t know that, and if that was the case, maybe they are coming back.”

She sounded so hopeful, and I didn’t have it in me to crush her. I knew it was a fairytale, a dream, not real, but I didn’t need to convince her of that. She had to already know. I must have been silent for too long because she spoke again, changing the subject,

“I haven’t spoken to him, and I don’t plan on it.”

“Good, I just need time.”

“Come home, Ryker. Emma is doing better, but she still needs you. You are her best friend.”

“I will. I just packed my bags. I will book my flight tonight.”

"Good."

My flight landed in Sacramento late that night. I texted Mary that I was back and threw my carry on bag in the back seat of my truck. It would be nice to no longer have a rental. I opened the door and sat down inside. Frustration flooded through me. I was back, and although I wasn't completely empty-handed, I didn't feel that much closer to figuring things out. I started the engine as my phone chimed a new message from Mary, confirming that she had received mine.

I missed everything—how easy things used to be. I missed Terra.

I missed—no, do not go there. I shut the lid on that box quickly. But not before—

Ana whispered through me.

I shook my head. I missed Lamont and Ara. I even missed the simple way things were before Emma's melody was unleashed. She had become so much more difficult to keep safe because Mary and I had to work so hard to shield her soul, something we were barely able to do. I missed the snow covered mountains of Haleston. Missed the life I once had.

But, I missed Torren, too, I missed the cool water of the beaches, the sand, the bright sky, the treasures found on the seashore. I banged my head against my headrest as feelings and emotions ran through me. Memories blasted into my brain at laser speed, and I tried to reign them in. Those memories were always in that box, tucked away in my mind, the box with cobwebs and dust on the outside. I never touched that box—not anymore—not for over sixteen years.

Ana

Grey eyes haunted me as I sat there. I closed my eyes and tried to pull the memories back inside the box where they belonged so that they could not haunt me anymore. They slipped back out anyway, and I saw in my mind, that still body and that dark, black-brown hair. They were the first things I had noticed, on that bright day I had been patrolling around Torren as part of my knight training. I was worried because she had no melody—that was a sign of death. But when I came closer, my feet moving slowly on the clear pebbled sand, I watched as her eyes opened, revealing clear, silver-grey eyes, not the eyes of a soulless. Life flashed before me; I stood frozen, looking at her. How could she not have a melody?

I tugged at my hair, begging myself to stop reflecting, begging myself to end the pain. The drive home was torture as I fought the inward battle, raging a war inside of me. The memories I had locked up sixteen years earlier tried to float onto center stage in my mind, over and over, but I pulled them back—shoved them in the once-beloved box and locked it tight. I needed to focus. I knew my task; I knew my vows and promises, and I would not break them. I did not want to break them, no matter what was inside the blasted box.

Chapter 8

I floated just above the surface of the water. I had been able to sense her while unpacking my bags and knew she was about to head to the pool, so I grabbed my swim trunks and ran to her yard. I needed to see her, and although I needed rest and a shower, I needed her more. I had slipped into the pool just as she opened the sliding glass door. She was wearing her white and green bathing suit. I tried to keep my mind from wandering, from focusing on the curves of her figure and her cascading hair. It wasn't honorable to be so focused on her looks.

She was safe, she was alive, and she was breathing, and I had done my job. It felt wonderful for a moment to know that she lived and breathed. I still could succeed in my duty, to her, at least.

Emma was indeed stunningly beautiful, but she was also so much more than that. She seemed so much more put together than I had ever seen her before. I waited for her to walk down the pool steps and ease her way in, but she just stood there, looking into the pool as if she were looking into her own soul. I moved around the pool's edge and grabbed her foot, pulling her into the depths of the water. As she popped her head out of the water, she looked terrified, and I was afraid that I had made a mistake. Maybe she wasn't well at all, I thought.

"Ryker, you almost killed me!" she spat, splashing water into my eyes.

We joked for a moment. "We just got home, like an hour ago," I lied, there was no we, only me. But I said it with a smile. "You seem better, Emma." That was the truth. One lie, one truth; that was a good balance.

“I feel a little better. Every day, it’s a little more bearable,” she shrugged.

“I hate that I was away for so long. My dad really wanted some quality time as a whole family,” I lied as I pulled her into a hug, resting my chin on top of her head. My melody hummed inside of me, and for a moment, I let it float around us, and she leaned in closer to me, no doubt to feel the pull of warmth from our connection.

“Where did you guys go again?” she asked, her body leaning in closer and closer to mine. It was hard for me to breathe. The pull I had for Emma was so strong.

“Camping,” I said with a laugh, trying to pull my feelings and my melody back, to avoid releasing them fully and ruining everything.

“What! That’s funny; you and camping,” she giggled, looking at me with a bright smile, and I knew that if I wasn’t careful, I would bend down and touch my lips to hers, and that was not a good idea, not yet. So I moved my arms from around her, releasing her.

“Hey, I can camp. Seriously, I have skills,” I retorted as I splashed Emma with water.

“I vaguely remember a boy who looked like you, trying to build a fire back here in the fire pit, and—” I swam closer to her and placed my hand over her mouth. I shoved my melody back, shielding it again.

“Okay, okay, so I am not good at making fires; I get it.” I looked into her beautiful, green eyes. They seemed to glow as I gazed into them, entranced. I couldn’t look away. I wanted to tell her everything, to confess all to her, but I knew that she needed time, and I had to do what was right for her. Her melody sent her thoughts about me, right to me. She loved my blue eyes—they looked like an ocean after a storm. I was so surprised by her feelings about me. Grey eyes came into my mind, and I quickly shielded my soul again. I felt Emma's emotions change. She moved away from me,

and my hand dropped from her mouth.

“I came out here for a swim, so if you don’t mind,” she said, taking one last look at me and then diving under the water, and then her feelings were that of escape; she wanted to escape me. I wanted to die, knowing that because that's not what she needed from me, so I had failed her. I had failed her once again.

Chapter 9

Emma and I spent the rest of the short summer together. We watched movies because it was so hot that we didn't dare go outside for more than some quick dips in the pool. I didn't unshield my soul again around her. I was frustrated. I had let my guard down, and I wouldn't do it again.

School was about to start, and Glasson had filled me in on Ashlyn. Ashlyn was going to seek us out so that I could help guard her, too. I sighed, just thinking about it. It was enough that I had my hands full with Emma and this possible Terran wanting to kill her, and that Shad was here, who I had yet to speak with, for obvious reasons: I was avoiding him—but Ashlyn, too? Not to mention, the box in my brain, which kept threatening to unlock at any given moment if I were to even think of the blue oceans of Torren or of grey eyes—these were things I tried not to think about—trigger images. I laid on my pillow a bit longer than usual after my alarm went off. I stared at my alarm before finally getting up and getting ready for school.

After I showered, I picked out a pair of pants and a shirt, slung my backpack on my back, and that's when I heard it— Prince Shad's melody—for the first time in a long time, and it was close. I looked out my window, and there he was, crossing the street and heading right for Emma's house. What was he doing? I darted down the stairs and out my front door. The pull to keep my vows and to protect Emma was pushing me toward the Prince.

"Prince Shad," I called. He looked up, and our eyes met. He looked pissed, more than pissed, actually—enraged. He walked up to me, and I groaned as I realized that he had a few inches on me. But he was slim, and I was strong from years spent training,

and more recently, playing football. If I needed to, I could take him down. He was also younger than me, I reminded myself.

“Shielded soul, huh?” Shad said as he placed his hands in his pockets, scowling down at me. I tried not to laugh as I noticed that he wore a suit, an actual suit.

“You going to a wedding or something there, Prince?” I asked with a laugh. His brow furrowed, and I would never tell anyone this, but I felt like taking a step back; he was actually pretty intimidating. I told myself that it was just because his melody was so strong, not because of the look on his face.

“I am attending school.”

“Well, you might want to check in with the times. Teenagers here don’t wear that,” I said, motioning to his clothing.

“Knight, if I cared what you thought, I would have asked you, but alas, I do not. I am a prince of Embra, and I will dress as such.”

“Whatever you say, Prince.”

“If you could, please call me Shad. That would help me blend in better.”

“And what makes you think I want, or would, help you ?”

“I assume you do not want to tell Emma about melodies, or you would have already?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, I plan on telling her—because I do not plan on ever keeping secrets from her,

but I will be courteous and let you know when I do.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I want to get to know her, and that takes time. You must give me time.”

“What are you doing here?” I tried to keep my voice down, but I was angry. Give him time ?

“What do you mean?”

“So you think you finally found her?” I whispered.

“Yes, you know exactly why I am here. Don’t play games with me, Ryker. How long have you known?” The anger on his face was palpable. His golden eyes seemed to glow. I bit back the intimidation I felt.

“ Shad ,” I said his name with a scowl. I enjoyed the twitch he made at my use of his name. “You’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

“Nothing? Are you serious? This is not nothing. How you could even say that to me, baffles me. How could you not remember what The Ancient told us?”

“Of course, I remember. I know it’s a big deal, okay. I get it,” I said, running a hand through my hair.

“You have changed; back home, they would not even know you. Do you not understand how important this is—for her, for us, and for our people?” Shad asked. The last part he whispered.

“You can’t just come here and expect me to do whatever you say, Shad.

Seriously—this isn't Embr—”

“Ryker, I can come here and do what I wish, and you know that I have just as much of a right as you. I have been all over this realm, and you knew about it the entire time. I asked about this place, and you told me—”

“Just stay away,” I quietly retorted. I wanted it to come out more demanding, but I sounded like I was begging, and to be honest, I was. “She doesn't know anything.”

“You think after all these years, I'll just walk away? You have no right to that wish—or warning—especially after what you have done. It was tasked to us both. Sixteen years, Ryker. For sixteen years, you have had your time.”

“Shad, you don't understand. I couldn't—things have happened. She is in danger.”

“I thought you were a Torren Knight? What have you been doing? Do you even remember who you are?”

“Do not patronize me Shad .” I said his name mockingly. “You know I'm not a seeker, and I'm not an Ancient; I'm not invincible. I need help finding someone. I don't have any more connections, and someone, someone from Terra is after her. I believe one of Tarick's men.”

“I will help. Keil and I have resources of this realm's magic, or technology rather, at our disposal, and you have had your chance. You have failed miserably, so now it is my turn.”

He was right, I knew he was. I had failed, my oath broken. If I was to return to my kingdom of Torren, I would most likely pay for it being broken. But at the moment, I still had to protect Emma. Perhaps, I should get as much help as I can—even from this pompous prince. I sighed, brushing my fingers through my hair.

“Well—okay, fine.” I backed down. I could not let my pride hurt Emma. “I would appreciate any intel Keil could give me on this guy. He has been almost impossible to track.”

“I will update you,” Shad agreed.

“I guess we have to work together again,” I said, irritated at the idea.

“Seems so, but you need to give me time with her. I do not want you interrupting my relationship with her.”

“What relationship?” I asked in anger.

“Unlike what you may believe Ryker I would never force her into anything. I just wish to get to know her and help her as best I can.”

We were silent for a time. I felt his melody reach out to speak with mine, but I didn’t dare unshield my soul so close to Emma. I would never do it around him. I had too many secrets to keep.

“Why do you shield your melody, Ryker?” Shad asked, and I tried to remind myself he was perceptive—that he had not just heard my melody and knew I was keeping secrets.

“Emma and I are close. She and I—”

“Are you fond of each other?” he asked.

“Yes, we are.”

“I understand, and although I am more enraged than I can possibly explain, I am

grateful that she is safe. Even if I didn't know about her being here with you, her safety is what matters most."

"Agreed," I said, hating that I respected him for that comment.

"I need to go. I do not wish to be late to my first day of this realms academy."

"Little hint, Your Royalness. Don't call it 'this realms academy,' Call it high school."

He nodded and walked across the street, back to his house, and I couldn't have been happier about that.

Chapter 10

“ A shlyn says that she is going to Emma’s house,” Glasson said.

“Yes, you don’t have to worry. I will be there,” I said as I closed my computer and rubbed my face.

The first day of school went well. I was worried for Emma, but she seemed to handle it fine. I disliked the way she looked at Shad, but I figured anyone would be drawn to someone dressed in a suit at a high school. What I didn't understand was how everyone was swooning over him. It seemed like it didn't matter if he tried or not, the Prince would have no trouble fitting in and being beloved wherever he went. I, on the other hand, had worked for years to become well-liked at that school. Again, I hated him so very much.

I decided before the day was over that I needed to quit the football team. I didn't have the time for it, and it wasn't really important. It never had been. The idea that I wouldn’t play again did something to me, though. But how could I keep playing a game that was useless? I mean, it was useless; in all the realms, football didn’t matter, really. It had mattered to me, though, and that was the problem; I wasn't fully focused. A Torren Knight served selflessly. I had become selfish.

When I told Mary about it, she tried to tell me that I didn’t need to do it. I didn’t need to quit the team out of guilt. But, that wasn’t it; I couldn’t look at a football, or at a jersey, or at the field without feeling that emptiness of being without Lamont’s melody in the world. The gushings and feelings of horror that endlessly flowed from Emma were what really mattered. Well—I paused, as I listened to her melody right

across the street. The notes from her melody played loud, and I did my best to help tone them down. As a knight, I could manipulate Emma's melody some, but not enough to do much but drown it out or to confuse Terrans who would normally be able to hear her melody from miles away.

Her soul was happy. She was excited to see Shad. I knew what she felt for him. It made me sick. I pushed her melody away for a moment to listen to Glasson. He had been talking to me on the phone, and I was sure he would catch on that I wasn't listening if I continued to ponder. I didn't need a lecture.

"Sure, and how is that supposed to help me not to worry? She isn't safe with the people here."

He meant people without melodies. To be fair to him in our realm, if you did not have a melody, you were a soulless, and evil. So I could understand the negative reaction the people of Earth received from my kind. Was it true, though? No, people here were good even without a melody.

Ana—she was good without a melody—

No.

Go back in the box.

"What is different about a party than school on a daily basis?" I asked, trying to get my thoughts back on track.

He sighed, and it felt different than the hard prince he had always been. I wondered—not for the first time—more about him, more about what he was doing here in the first place, and why he was a knight for Ashlyn. I knew she was Terran. I could hear her melody, but I never communicated with her through it before. I rarely

let my melody out any more. I wasn't supposed to. I couldn't let Lamont down again. He wanted me to shield my melody, and I would. I wouldn't fail him—at least, in that way.

“Please, Ryker. Please make sure she is safe.”

I felt, for the first time, the desperation in his voice. He seemed tired and worried.

“Are you well, Highness?” I asked, turning to face my bedroom. I looked out the window to the tree outside and watched as the wind made each green leaf move back and forth. The phone I held to my face felt hot in my hand, as if the battery was overheating from overuse. I quickly looked at the screen to see my battery slowly depleting. In Earth's realm, the magic, or technology, was brilliant, but had some flaws.

“As well as one can be while away from home, Ryker.”

“I see,” I said, nodding to myself. I understood the longing in his voice. I felt that, too. I missed Terra. I didn't say it out loud. There really was no point; he would know I felt it, too. It was safe to assume that all Terrans stranded on Earth missed Terra.

“Do you ever—” he paused, and then cleared his throat. “Okay, thank you for your help, knight.” Then he hung up. After knowing him all these years, I would never get used to his changing moods.

I headed over to the pool party after football practice. I kept up appearances as best I could.

“So why doesn't Emma know?” Ashlyn, or Ash, as she had asked to be called, questioned me as she tossed a beach ball at me once I was in Emma's backyard.

“Because her parents didn’t want her to know. They wanted her to be raised like the people here.” Almost as soon as I arrived at the party, Ash pulled me aside and started bombarding me with question after question. I couldn't blame her. I doubted Glasson ever gave her any solid information. He was Glasson, after all—and, in being Glasson, he was extremely difficult to talk to, let alone be around. I took pity on her for a few moments. He sure was rough around the edges. If he did not have a powerfully strong melody, although not as strong as Shad’s one would think he were a rock.

“Yeah, but she should know—I mean, I would be pissed at Glasson if he never told me who I was.”

“Who exactly are you?” I asked. My interest in her peaked. She shrugged her shoulders, her straight, red hair hung wet around her face.

“I am a Terran, same as you.”

“Yes, but what kingdom? What loyalties do you have?”

“How should I know? That dude doesn’t communicate well. I mean, he talks when he has to, but other than that, I don’t get much out of him,” she tried to explain—but I could sense a lie. People with melodies rarely lied. It was so easy to spot them, unless of course they shield their soul for the telling of the lie, and then let it out again after. It isn't something easily done, or often trained for as it leads to corruption. Ash moved her hair from around her face, and I saw a flash of light which caught my attention. I moved closer to her and saw a gold chain around her neck with a tiny stone at the bottom. I reached for it, and she didn't stop me as I held a clear seeker’s crystal in my hand. The power within it hummed warm against my skin.

“Glasson? Did he give it to you?”

“My parents gave it to me.”

“Why?”

“How am I supposed to know? I haven’t seen them since I was a child.” She looked into my eyes. So much sorrow was there, and I could feel her melody hum within the sorrow. Crystals were interesting. Some could guard or shield a soul completely, and some just dulled the melody. It seemed that the crystal that she wore was one that only dulled her melody.

“I am sure you know how to shield your soul?” I asked, letting the crystal drop from my hand resting against her collar bone.

“Don't we all learn as children?”

“Yes, so why don’t we give this crystal to Emma, who has no idea how.”

She grabbed the crystal. “I like Emma; I do, but Ryker, this was the only thing I still have from Terra, from my family. I have to believe they gave it to me for a purpose, and anyways, Glasson said never take it off. I know you are looking for one. I’m sorry that the crystals here are all useless now.” She paused and looked away from me. “He really likes her.” She motioned to Shad who sat by the side of the pool with Emma. The way her soul was blaring to life, I was surprised that I had not been distracted by it. She was so enraptured by him.

“I really dislike that prince,” I groaned.

“So he is truly the Embran Prince? I’ve heard rumors about him.” Ash looked at Shad with interest in her purple eyes—her very purple eyes, which I had seen somewhere before.

“Yes—“ I paused. It was so obvious. How had I not noticed before?

“Seeker?” I whispered. Ash snapped her head back to look at me. Terror flooded her face.

“No, I’m not.”

Clearly, it was a lie her melody sung the lie loudly between us.

“You have seeker blood. How else would your eyes be purple? Are you from Thorn or from Sorra?”

“My mother had these eyes,” she said, whispering. “Please, will you be quiet about it?”

“Is this why Glasson is guarding you? Because you are a seeker?”

“He is worried about what Terrans would do with someone like me.”

“Yeah, I would worry, too. He should have told me that I was keeping watch over a seeker!”

“Are you serious right now?” she snapped and splashed water in my face.

“What? You know what the seekers did,” I said with anger in my voice.

“Yes, but I am not one of those seekers. I have never had the ancient gift.” It was odd that a child born with purple eyes did not have the ancient gift of the seeker. I wondered if she was lying to me, but her melody never changed as it had before when she certainly had lied. Perhaps, she really did not know. Perhaps, she thought that she was telling the truth—because she didn't understand.

I said goodbye to Emma that night and told Ash that she better keep quiet about Terra when she was around Emma. I realized that things had become way more complicated than I had ever expected. What on earth is a Seeker doing here? I knew a few things for sure—I needed to figure out who killed Lamont and Ara, figure out how to get a crystal, and then, if it became necessary, take Emma back home, because Earth wasn't looking very safe.

Chapter 11

The Prince made an irritatingly great effort to be in Emma's life. I wasn't surprised. I was angry. I knew anger led to corruption, but I was sure my melody could never be fully released again anyways, so what did it matter? However, because Shad was helping Emma, I felt a gratitude for him, that left a horrid taste in my mouth. No matter how much I brushed my teeth, it would not go away.

It was bitter, and it tasted like metal on my tongue.

"How are things coming along then?" Prince Glasson asked as we sat at my kitchen table going over updates. Prince Shad's friend, Keil, who was a warrior from the Kingdom of Reoll, had given me some information with the promise of even more. He confirmed, however, that soulless were being created. I was pretty sure they were being created by the same person who killed Emma's parents. There couldn't be two soulless Terrans walking about reeking havoc on innocents. Could there be? Shad and Keil had found many soulless people in the eastern part of the country. Their information was mostly the result of the monitoring they had done of the soulless Terrans they had both discovered and cared for before their untimely deaths. They both had record after record, as well as notes, documenting the measures they went to in order to try to keep them alive. They were trying to figure out a way to help soulless people live, even without having melodies, or to come to understand what it actually was about their melodies that made Terrans unable to live without them—seeing as humans on Earth went about their lives just fine without melodies at all, and for a time our people did not have melodies until they were restored after the Great War. I understood the reasons for their research, especially if such a large number of Terrans had been discovered, stripped of their souls.

“There are an increasingly growing number of soulless in all the kingdom colonies, and everywhere else, it appears—across the board,” I noted.

“That isn’t good,” Glasson remarked, typing on his computer.

“No, it’s not.” I tried not to show through my facial expression the horror that came over me. I knew how bad it really was. It was horrible. My people, all those Terrans, did not deserve such a fate, banished from their homes and then stripped of their melodies—as if they were mere animals, being turned soulless in order to be used and then slaughtered. At least my soul was shielded, and Glasson couldn’t know the true horror and worry that I held inside of me.

“So what is the move then?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I am not sure why someone would want an army of soulless. Soulless die after a few months.” It was true; to a Terran, a melody was essential for life. Once stripped of it, we would slowly and very painfully die. Removing a Terran’s soul had only been imposed on the worst of the worst criminals before being banished to King Falcon’s realm, under the mountain within the Dungeons of the Mist.

“They’re getting desperate.”

“Maybe,” I wondered out loud, still thinking it over. Things just didn’t add up. What could someone gain from this? I asked myself.

“Ashlyn told me about the party.” Glasson’s face was as frozen as ice as he spoke. I tried not to feel intimidated by him, but it was no use. As much as I disliked it, the royal heirs always intimidated me.

“Yes, she and Emma became fast friends.”

“Did you speak with her?” he asked, picking up a piece of paper and examining it.

“Of course.” Wasn’t that the reason Glasson had helped me? Because I would help him with Ashlyn in return?

“What about?” he asked while playing with the hem of his sleeve.

Was he nervous? It was a completely new side to him, one I had rarely seen before anywhere.

“Why do you ask?” My curiosity was getting the better of me.

“Ashlyn talks too much—says too much,” he added.

“Really? She barely told me anything I wanted to know. For instance: what your favorite color is, what your favorite thing to drink is, your favorite song—She did tell me that you liked some all girl band, and I told her that that had to be a lie—because I mean look at you. You probably don’t even listen to your own melody, let alone songs,” I teased.

“Are you done yet?” he interrupted, rolling his eyes.

Darn, I really wanted to get more out of him. He was a stone, a rock: emotionless. Glasson stared at me and crossed his arms across his chest.

“She wouldn’t know any of that. I, unlike you, know my boundaries and my place with my charge.”

Low blow, but I did expect it. He did not know that I knew Ash was a seeker. I would keep that to myself for now.

“All I told her was that Emma doesn’t know who she is, and that she needs to keep it that way. She was also wondering about Prince Shad.”

“I need to speak with him,” Glasson sighed. “He is my cousin after all. I do not want him to think I have betrayed him. Had I known Emma had a melody before now, I would have informed him—”

“You would have told him to come here?”

“It is no secret he has been searching for her. You are a fool to think you could keep her secret.”

“Possibly, but it was requested by the Heirs I served.”

“Regardless, he is helping us now, and I would like to make sure he knows I am with him.”

“Yes, having Embra behind us could be invaluable, although I despise him.”

“It is foolish to despise someone. Your melody—”

“My melody is fine.”

He set the paper down and leaned back in his chair. “I see that Prince Shad is spending a lot of time with Emma these days.”

“Not anything above average. They see each other at school; they have a few classes together,” I responded, convincing myself that nothing else could happen.

“So is that the reason he is walking Emma across the street and fighting the urge to kiss her—to kiss your royal heir?” I wanted to ignore Glasson. He knew that I had

feelings for Emma, which I wasn't supposed to have—because I was her guardian knight. But I could not sit by after such a thing had been said. Kiss her? Kiss her? How dare he even consider—think such a thing.

I shot up from my seat, causing the chair that I was sitting in to slam to the floor. I heard Glasson laugh as he followed me out the front door. Ah, so he could laugh. I logged that away. I stood on the edge of the lawn and watched as Prince Shad said his goodbyes and walked down the steps of Emma's house. Emma shut the door, and I wanted to tune out her melody, which was screaming her feelings for Shad—that she liked him—feelings that were loud and very disturbing to me. I worked hard to keep my dinner down.

“Shad,” I called his name with a sneer as I left Glasson on my porch and walked over to Prince Shad.

“Ah, knight—it has been a while.” Shad stood tall with a smile on his face, and I could not help but feel the urge that raged inside of me to punch that smile off of his face. If my melody had not been shielded, no doubt, he wouldn't have been standing there in front of me, seeming so confident. I folded my arms across my chest, letting my muscles bulge; it was all I had over him.

“Stay away from her,” I snapped at him.

“Truly? Ryker, we just discussed this. You had your time with her, and now it is my time.” Shad stood so calm, like always. “And do not act as if you can even sense my melody with yours so guarded.”

“She doesn't like you.” I wished that it was the truth, and hoped beyond anything that it could be true.

“I am sure, even though you are becoming soulless, you can still sense her emotions

and are well aware that you are wrong. She cares for me.” There of course was no doubt in my mind that he could hear her melody—and her emotions. She had no control over it. I was grateful then that Emma didn't know who she truly was either, that she didn't know she was a princess of Haleston. If she did know that, she would have been broadcasting it loudly within her melody, along with those horrible feelings she had for the prince.

“She doesn't know how she feels. She doesn't know everything about me. If she did, you would not stand a chance,” I said, grateful again that my soul was shielded so that I could hide so much from him. Neither Shad nor Emma knew half of what I was or even half of what Emma was.

“I think how she feels is extremely clear,” Shad said with a smile.

“She is my girlfriend. Ask anyone at school; we are together,” I wondered as I spoke if anyone would miss him if he just suddenly went missing. I was pulling at straws there, but I couldn't just watch it happen—him pulling Emma further and further away from me.

“You are betrothed?” Shad asked with a raised brow.

“‘Girlfriend’ doesn't mean a betrothal; it is a courtship of sorts, but she loves me; she may have some feelings for you, but the feelings she has for me are much stronger,” I said. Telling lies was getting easier and easier. Betrothal? Shad had no idea of the half of it. I smiled at him.

“I did not know. You agreed to give me time with her. So I will be her friend.” He fixed his tie and looked at me as if he didn't believe me.

“That—”

“What do you want from me, guard? I can not stay away.”

“I want you to hold off. I need more time with her, just a little more. If she comes to you, fine—but until then, give her space. If you confuse her anymore, I don’t know what will happen. She has been through a lot in the last few months. She needs her best friend; she needs me.”

“I am an honorable person, Ryker. I will wait, but are you ready for what will happen?”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that this connection I have with her is undeniable. It isn’t easily broken; it isn’t something that can ever go away. Even if she has feelings for you, I know how she feels about me.”

“You just met her. I have known her for years. I have watched her throughout her life.” I hoped that me sharing that information did not give away who Emma was. I knew he probably suspected she was from Terra. I just didn’t want him to know who she was connected to, not yet.

“That may be true, but”—He paused and watched me for a moment. “We share a song, Ryker.”

“That isn’t possible. No,” I said, taking a step back from him.

“If you listened at all with your soul exposed, Ryker. She is—”

“Shut up.”

“What?”

“It means to be quiet. You can’t have a song. The Ancients haven’t created one in hundreds of years; it’s a fairytale.”

“Maybe, this is what the Ancient One meant. Maybe, this is how Emma will heal Terra—with me at her side. Songs are real, Ryker. I told you that after the dungeons.”

“You by her side? Do you even hear yourself? You don’t even know her.”

“Our bond lets me know and understand her more than I thought anyone could ever know another.”

“Shad, I am—”

“Ryker, it is fine. I am not worried. I will take a break from her so that you can get your house in order. I am honorable after all and am not worried that time will lessen our connection. But, I have waited my entire life for her, and I will not stay patient for long.”

I wanted to groan. He was so annoying. Of course, he would think anyone would be in love with him. All he had to do on Terra was to let his soul sing, and every woman was a goner, but not my Emma. She wasn’t his, no matter if she thought that she was, or that she wanted to be.

“I appreciate it,” I said, dumbfounded.

“But do not doubt what the Ancients have blessed; it is clear to me.”

“Did you see all of this?” I knew about the rumors concerning Embra, knew about the whispers.

“What?” Shad said, touching his cufflinks. Oh, gosh; he had cufflinks. I rolled my

eyes.

“If this is true about songs, then you were blessed by the Ancients. I know about the powers you would have to have.”

“All of the royal heirs are blessed, Ryker. It is no secret.” He paused, looking right into my eyes. “I can tell you, however, that I have known of Emma’s existence for every single day of my life. Our hearts beat the same.” Then he turned and walked away, crushing what felt like the bones inside of my body into oblivion. I walked back to the house and heard Glasson laughing.

“A song?” he asked in between bouts of laughter.

“You find this funny?” Great, he could laugh, the one time he showed emotion, and he used it to mock me.

“Oh, Ryker. You know you are not supposed to fall in love with your charge. It seems the Ancients are aware of this.” He kept laughing, and my stomach ached.

“I don’t care what I have to do, Glasson, but in the end, I will keep her away from him.” I would, I had to.

“But will she want that?”

As Glasson and I finished discussing the details of our plan, I could not forget those words rolling over and over and over again in my head: But will she want that? If songs were real, who could deny a song?

Chapter 12

“ S o, we’re still on for today, right?” I asked, sliding next to Emma at the lunch table. I had been spending all of my time with Glasson, piecing the puzzle together about who had destroyed Emma's family. I knew from our connection and from the pull that I had for her that she needed me. I’d texted her earlier that week, making plans with her for that night. I knew that being with her meant that I needed to fight the pull that grew and intensified each day that her soul was exposed, but she did need me, and I couldn't deny it any longer.

I watched as Emma looked up at me and then nodded. I stared into her beautiful, vibrant, green eyes, hearing her feelings pulsating through her melody.

It was hard to hear her feelings exactly, especially with my soul shielded, but I had learned how to let it out just enough in order to sense her. She was thinking something about reading a letter, about seeing my name, and being confused by it. Confusion, that was what radiated strongly from her soul. I shielded my melody entirely once again as Emma responded: “Of course.”

“Awesome,” I smiled, placing my hand on her shoulder, feeling its warmth.

“What’s today?” Sam asked, sitting down at our table. I knew that in order to keep up appearances I needed to act like I was friends with the students here, but it was tiring. They were the least honorable boys I had ever met. The things they spoke about to each other about the females were very disturbing. I assumed that if they had melodies, theirs would have been corrupted long ago.

Sam was soon followed by more football players. I could tell from the way Emma smiled and nodded at my teammates that she wasn't thrilled to be with them either. But I had a part to play. I wasn't Rykerian, the guardian knight of the heirs of Haleston at that moment. I was Ryker Dall, the football-playing boy. I put an arm around Emma and breathed in the scent of her coconut shampoo. How badly I wanted to pull her into my arms and bury my face in her hair.

"Oh, Emma has been waiting all week to hang out with yours truly. Sorry about all of my practices getting in the way," I said, winking at her. As I focused on her eyes. All I saw were emerald pools of confusion.

She seemed uncomfortable with my touch, which was starting to become a new normal. I did not like that.

"My parents are out for the night," I raised my voice for the sake of the football team. Emma nodded, I assumed, not caring in the slightest if my parents were home or not.

"Dude! Score!" Andrew high-fived me. Kevin and John gave me fist bumps. I smiled and acted like I was proud of the dumb things that I knew my comment had made them think. I didn't want people to hurt Emma. My main concern was always her protection. If being her boyfriend caused those disturbing boys to stay away from her, then that is what I had to be, at least make it look serious between us. I had already told them and half of the school that we were together. It had been that way since freshman year. She was mine, not anyone else's.

"So what are you guys going to do?" John asked with a smirk.

Andrew punched his shoulder and said: "Dude!"

"We are just going to hang at his house," Emma said, irritated. I squeezed Emma's knee, and her green eyes found mine. I unshielded my melody to push my apologetic

feelings towards her. I quickly shielded it again. I was pretty good at it by then. It was something Lamont trained me for, so I wouldn't become soulless. She smiled with what I knew was her fake, but warm, smile which meant—"you owe me."

"Hey, guys," I heard Ash say, and I glanced up at her for just a moment, and then I focused back on Emma. I watched Emma as she looked around the cafeteria. Her coming into her melody was something extraordinary. I felt a pain of guilt that I was able to witness it, but that her parents would never be able to see her as she grew. She looked at me, and our eyes met for a moment, and a funny look crossed over her face. I could only stare back until she glanced away. Then I was pulled into a memory.

"Her melody is so captivating," I had commented about Emma, as I sat with Lamont one evening, watching the stars.

"It is, isn't it?" he said reverently.

"Indeed."

"I'm so grateful, so indebted to you, Kerian." I watched as Lamont looked up at the stars. Prince Lamont had been the one who gave me the nickname Kerian when we had first met, telling me that "Rykerian" was too formal. Once I arrived in this realm, I wanted a better, simpler name, and Ryker seemed to fit just fine. It didn't feel right to have anyone else call me Kerian.

"It is my duty and my honor, Lamont; you know this."

"I know how hard it must be, so hard being without Ana."

I tried to stop those memories from making me feel the despair that I so longed to be freed from.

“Everyday, I think of her,” I whispered into the evening air.

“I know, and I wish I could bring her back from the Ancients.”

“What is done is done, Lamont, and I have come to be at peace with it.”

“Have you?”

“I believe—” I started, but Lamont cut me off.

“Sometimes, we get a second chance in life. The Ancients and I are giving you that second chance. I wouldn’t have asked you this if I didn’t think it would bring you great happiness. We are here, stuck, and we might as well be happy. You are the truest and best friend that I have ever had, Rykerian Dallard.”

“I thank you; I do not deserve your friendship.”

“Yes, you do.” He turned to look at me then, and I wondered, not for the first time, how an heir could regard me so highly. “You are more a brother to me than Tarick ever was,” he smirked.

I laughed.

“What? It is true, isn’t it? That idiot tried to kill me.”

“I thank you, Lamont,” I said, bowing my head; he slapped a hand on my back and smiled.

“All will be well again, Kerian; you shall see. We can be happy here.” As the memory of that night faded, I heard Emma’s melody as loud and as pure as ever also fade into that long-ago night.

As the bell rang out, I packed up my backpack and raced from my last class. I walked down the hallway to meet Emma out front. The sight of Prince Shad and Emma together made me sick, but I tried to endure it for her sake. I knew she was growing fond of him, and whatever he had done to weasel his way into her life was working, and it was making her happy. I did not want to be the bad guy who didn't want her to have other friends and act all jealous—or at least, I tried really hard not to be that guy. That was a low thing to do, after all.

“Have any plans this weekend?” I heard Shad ask as I waited outside their classroom. I was partly hidden by a beam, for which I was then thanking the Ancients.

“Yeah, I’m hanging out with Ryker this weekend. You?” She asked, and I smiled so wide. That was probably not the answer he was hoping for. I wanted to unshield my melody in order to hear his feelings at that moment, but I didn't want to risk him sensing my melody. I may have been able to do it undetected, but I didn't want to risk it, especially with my emotions being heightened as they were at that moment.

“Hanging out with Keil, then work. Have a good weekend. See you on Monday,” Shad said.

It was silent for a bit, and I moved from behind the pillar and walked up to Emma. Shad was long gone, just another shape in the crowd of students on their way home from school. I was smiling like the biggest idiot.

“Ready?” I asked, moving to her side. I chuckled as she jumped, surprised that I was there.

“Yep,” she said.

I took her hand, her warmth flooding my insides and led us through the mass of students in the parking lot. We usually walked home. I didn't drive a car to school as

our homes were only minutes away by foot. Shad, of course, had a car because—well, he was annoying. But for me? I wasn't as pretentious as he was. He was a prince after all, and princes just think—I paused in my thinking—well there was one prince who didn't think he was the ruler of the realms—Lamont. I tried to swallow that thought down without wanting to cry. I was too soft. This realm was making me way too soft—and different. “So, my parents aren't home, so we have some privacy.”

“Okay, yeah. I heard you at lunch, but why do we need privacy?” She looked at me, raising her eyebrows.

“I don't know. I haven't seen you in a while?” I shrugged. Honestly, I just wanted to kiss her, but I couldn't do that, not then. I mean, I could have, but the ramifications would have been too costly. It wasn't the right time—as much as I wanted it to be.

“Okay, so what are we going to do?” she asked.

I tried hard not to be like the humans on my football team—I think they were rubbing off on me because I just thought again about kissing her, and holding her in my arms—I needed to cool it.

“Watch a movie?” I said, trying to keep my thoughts contained.

“Another movie, really—don't you get tired of that? That is what we did for two weeks nonstop right after you got home from your trip,” Emma whined.

“What? I thought you liked watching movies with me.” I gave her a frown. I loved watching movies with her. She always sat so close to me, leaned her head on my shoulder. And—the couple of times when she fell asleep in my arms—that was heaven, as they would say on Earth.

Her shoulder brushed mine, and I smiled like an idiot. “No, I tolerate watching movies with you because I love you.” The words struck me to my core. I had known her all her life. All her life, I had lived beside her, and those words directed at me, never before had come out of her mouth. She thought those words plenty of times when, on occasion, her soul had been unshielded, but never out loud before. I felt like I was soaring.

“What?” she asked, looking up at me, confusion in her pretty, green eyes.

I shook my head and smiled, “Thanks, Em. I love you, too.” It was true I did love her. My words came out as a whisper, and I found myself remembering, remembering a past moment with Emma—

“You know, that isn't very nice,” she said, moving away from me with a glare.

“What?” I said, teasing and walking past her down the trail.

“You know what I thought—that you—that we, would—”

“Kiss—right this moment?” I turned back to her and tried to let my feelings calm down so as to not alarm her. I would have been lying if I had said that I had not thought about it, but I wanted it sometime in the distant future. Not right then; she was too young. I was not yet ready.

“Of course,” She shrugged, as if it were the easiest conversation to have in all the realms.

“I—ah—don't think it's a good idea right now, Em.”

“But I need it to be you. Ry, I need my first kiss to be important, you know?” I watched as she sat down, defeated, in the dirt.

“Emma, I am sure your first kiss will mean something. I am sure it will be earth-shattering.”

She looked up at me in disbelief.

“Ry, please?” she begged, looking up at me with those beautiful eyes that made it hard to focus. My nickname, on her lips, was carried from her breath and made alive in the air. She had a way of making everything seem so simple, like breathing. Only she could break me down to just my basic self, with one basic syllable: Ry.

“Not right now, Em; not right now. Let’s go; let's not waste the day.” I held out my hand to her, and she took it. The warmth flooded between us, and I raised my hand to cup her cheek. I had given her a simple nickname, after she had made up mine. One just for her, just from me: Em. She stared at me as if I were the entire world, her melody swirling within mine. I wished I was ready. But I did not want to kiss anyone again, when I would only be wishing I were kissing Ana.

“Okay, fine, Ry—I will watch a movie with you, just as long as it’s not a horror movie,” Emma said, smiling at me.

“Yeah, no, of course,” I agreed as I started walking again, still stunned with the new revelation mixed with the past memory. My life had never been more complicated.

Chapter 13

We walked through the front door of my house and down the hall. I nervously grabbed the door handle to my bedroom and turned to Emma. “I just want to warn you a little that, well—” I stopped and ran a hand across my face. The nervousness about sharing it with her was making my body shake. How would she take the news? How would she take the news that I thought her parents had been murdered? “I’ve been doing some research, and—don’t think that I’m crazy, okay?” I needed to be ready for what I was about to show her, and how Emma was going to take it.

“Okay. What class of yours already has a project? Are we watching the movie in your room? You’re acting weird,” Emma went on. She tended to ramble a bit when she was confused or nervous. I didn’t dare unshield my melody to check because I was barely holding it together as I prepared to show her my research.

I nodded, not answering her questions and opened the door. Emma walked inside. As I approached her, I watched as she took in my room—watched as her eyes roamed over every single thing I owned on Earth. We had been in that room so many times together. I wondered if she had any memories of that. She wasn’t the same person on that day as she had been when we were young. I continued to watch as her gaze wandered over the wall behind my desk. I knew it was a sight to see. Papers and research taped up and charted out.

I could sense her confusion and a little fear. Murderer rose up in her thoughts, and then she had memories of movies. I didn’t catch it all; it happened too fast, but she was confused and possibly thought that I was insane—or a murderer. I needed to clear that up first.

“Okay, so I know it is a bit much, but there is something about having all of my research in one place and being able to always see it.”

She nodded and walked over to a piece of paper with all the dates I had found of suspicious behavior, from the man who caused Emma so much pain, who killed Lamont and Ara. “What is this?” She asked, pointing to the paper.

“I was mapping out any previous attempts.”

“Attempts?”

“Uh, yeah.” I looked at my feet and shuffled.

“What is this, Ry?” Emma asked, moving down the wall to news clippings of car crashes. She stopped when she reached the news clippings from the night Lamont and Ara were murdered. I watched as her body became rigid, and blackness seemed to coat her soul, much like it had in the hospital and right before I had left for the summer. It made me sick to think of the pain that she was experiencing, and I was worried about the corruption that was entering her soul.

“Are you okay, Em?” I asked, supporting her quickly as she began to wobble. I wasn’t sure if she was going to pass out or not.

“Ry, what is this—” Her voice was shaking.

“I know your parents were murdered, Em,” I said, looking into her eyes, pleading within her melody for her to listen to me, to not run away. I felt the horror that she was experiencing as it radiated from her melody, and I wanted to take it all away, remove all of the bad things from her life.

“What?” She finally spoke again after a long silence. Her eyes held so many

questions, and I wanted to answer every single one of them; I wanted to tell her everything.

“It doesn’t make sense— what happened, how it happened,” I ran my fingers through my hair as I shook my head.

Emma looked the entire wall over as if searching for all of the answers that she didn’t even know that she had. “Did you talk to the police?” she asked as she sat down on my desk chair. I knew that she was trying to unravel what it all meant, what it all meant for her.

“Yes, I started with them first, and it was weird. They couldn’t say what happened.” I pulled out a notebook and turned to the page with the sketch of the man. I held it up to show her in the light. I wasn’t sure what kind of reaction she would have to it, but I needed to know as much as I could about that man before I left to search for him again. I didn’t know if she remembered yet that she had seen that man, or that she had actually described him to the police, and that the sketch was made from her own descriptions. Her memories were still a bit fuzzy. I knew that; I knew that she was having trouble remembering anything at all about that night. She often had dreams of that night, nightmares—had she seen him in one of those nightmares? Would she remember the details of that night yet? I wondered.

“Emma?” I asked, moving closer to her. Her eyes locked onto mine, and I could feel peace radiate inside of her. That surprised me.

She remembered him. I could feel it inside of her melody.

“Ryker, this man didn’t kill my parents. He saved my life.”

“One of the officers saw him flee the scene and tried to call out to him, but he drove off,” I questioned.

“He helped me. He didn’t do it,” she insisted as she pushed the picture away.

“But that night—in the hospital, you told me you saw someone, someone who maybe hit your car.” I found myself thinking back to that night.

Emma was passed out on the bed, and Mary let me go in first. The beeping of the hospital monitors, along with the sterile odor of antiseptic and chemicals, made me want to vomit. There she lay, cuts and bruises visible on her face, arms, and neck. Her right leg was bandaged. As I approached her, I could feel her melody swirling free, it was uninhibited because of the loss of Lamont and Ara. It was the most beautiful thing, and yet the most tragically heart-wrenching thing, that I had ever heard. She looked clean; she had changed from whatever she had been wearing into a teal blue hospital gown. A needle and tube were stuck in her arm. There was also something on her finger that made the monitors beep, keeping perfect time with her heart.

I walked over to her. I remembered holding my breath as I reached her side. I knew that I needed to start the process of shielding her soul right away, but I was weak. After losing Lamont and Ara, I wanted to feel her soul and melody. I stood there for a few minutes before I placed one hand over her eyes and the other hand over her heart. A mind and soul became one through a melody. This was thought by our people to be in the chest and the eyes on the body. She did not move as I started the process of shielding her soul. Soon I was done, and I stood back. Her melody was still strong, not completely shielded, but I knew it wouldn’t attract people from great distances anymore like it would have only a few moments earlier. Her eyes opened. I stepped back in shock as she sat up.

“Ryker, he said—he—killed them. I saw someone hit our car. He stopped and helped, but he did it. Please find him, please.” Tears were running down her face like small trickling waterfalls, bursting without a dam to keep them in place. I held her to me.

“Emma, we will find who did this, and they will pay. I swear it.”

She cried and cried in my arms, and I would be lying if I said that I wasn't crying, too, right alongside her.

“They are dead, Ryker,” she moaned into my shirt, clutching her arms around me for strength. And within me, like always being her knight, the strength emerged just when she needed it, because I was her guardian knight, and that was what she needed.

Emma, of course, must not have remembered that conversation. She must not have remembered the moment later, either, when Mary also had placed her hands on her and shielded her, too, as best she could. I looked into her eyes, concerned as her melody swirled, and so many thoughts darted this way and then that way, through her emotions.

“Are you okay?” I whispered.

“Yes. I remembered. I had a flashback; my therapist says that can happen.”

“Emma, I am so sorry.” I moved then to sit on the desk.

“So what are you going to do now?” she asked as if she were trying to be brave by asking like she really didn't want to know., but I knew deep down that she did want to know, and that she did want the murderer found, just like she pleaded with me in the hospital.

“I need to find him—figure out who he is, exactly.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“I've talked to some friends about it. Even if it wasn't this man, maybe this guy saw

someone else. He is the best lead, and he was there first.”

“Friends?” she asked, moving a stray hair from her cheek.

“Private investigators—and stuff—don't worry about it. The point is that I will figure out who he is, and I will give your parents justice.”

She nodded.

I motioned for Emma to sit on the bed, and I was grateful when she followed me. She seemed so off balance; I didn't want her to fall to the floor.

“Thank you, Ry,” she said, falling back against the bed. I lay beside her on the mattress. She turned to me, and it only took me a moment to tuck her into my side, stroking her back. She lay her head upon my chest, and I didn't think as I bent down and touched my lips to her head, not a kiss, but the pull I had for her wanted it to be one. She lifted her face up to look at me.

“You sure you are okay? I feel like a horrible person for just springing that on you. I didn't mean to make you sad,” I whispered.

“I don't know if I will ever be okay.” Her eyes told me the truth of her words, and so did her soul.

After Emma fell asleep during the movie, I watched her as she slept, cradled against me in my arms. I would have been happy to stay there for all of eternity.

Then my father, who wasn't really my father at all, or even a person, really, came into my room. It was interesting just how powerful the ancient magic was. That illusion of a father figure had haunted me for sixteen years up to that point in time. Lamont said that I needed to look like a normal human person with a family, and one day, he was

just here, pretending to be a person, pretending to be my father. I didn't understand the ancient powers fully, and I didn't try to understand. He only came around when Emma was at my house, or when Lamont, Ara, Emma and I were pretending to be on family vacations. It was odd, like a ghost trailing behind me. How it could fool Emma and other humans, I had no idea. I clearly saw through the facade, but then again, I knew the truth, and I knew about the Ancients.

I tried to get him to leave—whatever it was, but it wasn't working, and Emma was embarrassed to be found asleep in my bed with me. I just smiled and couldn't help but joke with her a little as she had overreacted. I smiled wide as I walked down the stairs with her, and my “father” disappeared again.

Mary wasn't home yet, and I knew that I wasn't going to leave Emma alone. I stayed there while she slept, watching senseless television shows. I was clicking through channels aimlessly when Emma started thrashing on the other couch. I walked over to her and touched her shoulders. She cried out, pushing me away.

“Emma, Emma. It's me, Ryker. You are dreaming.”

She opened her eyes, and her eyes locked onto mine as she started to cry.

“It's him, Ryker. I saw him—that night. He kept me alive on purpose. He only wanted them dead.”

“What—?”

“It was him. You were right. He did help me, but he was irritated by the mess of the crash, and he didn't even care that my parents were dead!”

“I will find him; I won't let him ever hurt you again.” I meant those words, just as much as I did the first time I had said them, and then the second time I had repeated

them to Mary. I felt the vow that I had made become stronger, my promise more solid than before, and I knew that I would discover who was responsible for inflicting the pain which Emma endured, and he would pay.

Chapter 14

Her soul was so dark that I could feel the darkness, the corruption, swirling around her, twisting itself inside of her, making a home there. It made me sick. I wanted to cast it away. She needed to be trained soon in the ways of her soul, needed to know her soul's melody—but in order to do that, she needed to know that she even had a soul's melody.

“Em—” I called out to her as I unshielded my melody just a bit and let my hand find hers. I knew what she needed. She nearly collapsed into me as she looked into my eyes. I knew that she was on the verge of tears. I wrapped her into my arms, and she let a few tears fall.

“Ry,” she replied in a soft whisper.

“I should have come by this weekend, Em. I knew you probably weren't doing well, but I didn't know if you wanted to see me so soon after what I showed you the other day.”

“Ry, I'll always need my best friend.”

I pulled her face up to look at me; I smiled. I knew that I needed to hold onto her for just a little bit longer. Her pain was melting away slowly, and she still needed my nearness—needed my melody.

“Em, I swear, I will find him, and I will give your parents the justice that they deserve.”

She nodded, unable to say anything at that moment. The warning bell rang, and students started hurrying to class. I let her go, and it ached. My guardian knight vow always pulled me to her, especially when she was in such pain.

“I will see you at lunch?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Emma, I wish I could fix everything right now.” I could not have said anything more true.

She held up a hand, “It isn’t your fault, Ry. I’ll see you at lunch.”

I nodded and knew that regardless of my plans, I needed to wait until at least after lunch. Information about the man I was searching for had just come in, and I needed to talk to Mary and Glasson about my plans as soon as possible. As I watched Emma’s retreating frame painstakingly walking to class, I was more determined than ever to rid her completely of the monster who had ruined her life.

“I found him.” I paced the floor in the backroom of the flower shop. I left during lunch, right after I made sure Emma was okay. I checked my phone as I walked out of the cafeteria. Another report came in from one of the Terran colonies which Keil had helped me locate. I had the sketch of the man copied during the summer, and I sent it out to all of the Terran colonies that Keil and Glasson had located, to discover if anyone else had seen the man. To be honest, he looked a lot like Shad, and that made me happy, in a way, because, let’s be honest, I hated that prince.

I held out my phone to Mary. There was a map, and I knew she didn’t know exactly what she was looking for, but it was the first piece of good news I had received in a long time.

“I heard that you told Emma about your search. She has been just as miserable as she was right after her parents died, you know.”

“It didn’t go over as well as I hoped it would,” I said awkwardly.

She glared at me, and added, “her soul—it’s corrupting again.”

I raised my hands in a frustrated gesture.

“Be careful with her,” Mary demanded.

“I am always careful with Emma.”

“No, you weren’t, not in telling her and showing her that picture again. She hadn’t remembered describing him to the sketch artist, probably for a good reason.”

“I needed to. She is stronger than you know, Mary.”

She paused; then asked, “When will you go?”

“During homecoming week.” I paced back and forth. I wished that I could have gone sooner, but I knew that it would be easier for me to leave before the football game so that I could avoid the questioning looks from Emma. She was going to the dance with Shad anyways, and I was not interested in seeing that play out.

“I should go with you, Ryker,” Mary said, placing some florist tape down on the back table. She looked so tired.

“Who would stay with Emma?”

“Maybe Glasson could—“

“Mary, are you insane? We can not leave Emma without one of us with her. If we both leave—“

“I understand; I do, but I want to help you. It was my sister, her life—her death we are talking about.”

I placed my hands on her shoulders, and I looked into her blue eyes.

“Mary, I will find this man, and I will get rid of him, or I will die trying.” She gasped and stepped away from me.

“Ryker, no! Take it back!” she yelled, shoving me away.

“I can’t. It’s already been spoken.”

“You are an idiot,” she whispered, looking at her hands on the table as she played with a rose petal. We both understood that I had just made another vow.

“I’m sure that I will find him.”

She didn’t look at me as she nodded.

“We have to tell Emma, Ryker. I keep thinking that she’ll discover something in her parent’s old things, but she doesn’t ask me anything about them, not really.”

“It’s still safer not to tell her yet. She asked me about an old letter that Lamont wrote to Ara. She is getting curious. We will tell her soon, but we need some more time.”

She nodded again and looked behind me. “I miss them so much, Ryker.” Her eyes filled with tears.

“I do, too, but this is good news, Mary. We are one step closer to getting rid of him,” I assured her.

“Yes, but there is still so much to figure out. We need to tell Emma and discover how to get home. Then once we are there, who knows? We don’t even know what Terra is like after all this time, especially after the wars.”

“I know, and sometimes, I wish we didn’t have to go back, but if Soulless are being created here, it’s only a matter of time before all the Terrans in this realm become soulless. I have to go, find the cave, find who did this, deal with it, and then we can be free of it,” I added.

“And this map? This is where he is?” Mary asked.

“The people in these Terran colonies indicated that there are a large number of soulless around this general area. They also told me that there are a bunch of caves around there, and it all seemed somewhat familiar to me. It is in the Northern California area, near Oregon. The cave could be there, Mary. This could be our way home. Possibly, this man has already found the cave and is using it. He might be traveling back and forth to Terra and creating soulless.

“I hope you find the answers we need, Ryker.”

Chapter 15

“ I don’t understand why you are going to such lengths for revenge,” Glasson wondered out loud.

“I told you already that it isn’t revenge.” I shoved some clothing into the backpack which I was taking with me and looked at Glasson, standing there in the doorway of my room. “You give Ash a lot of leeway. Shouldn’t you be watching her, prince?”

“You should watch yourself. You work for a princess. Why do you hate the heirs so much?”

“I don’t hate them,” I responded slowly as I stuffed a few pairs of socks into the back pocket, and then looked at a picture of Emma and me. It was a photograph from one of our camping trips. For most of that entire trip, I had let my melody out, unshielded. It was one of the happiest times of my life. Emma’s melody had been unshielded for a part of the time, too. Her parents had released it just enough so that I was able to get glimpses of what we would be, what we could be—together.

“Shad is trying to take Emma,” I said looking up at him. “How would you feel if someone came and took Ash away from you?”

“Oh, Ashlyn is always trying to get away from me. Right now, she isn’t even at home like she told me she would be. I am always aware of where she is, and honestly, if someone wanted to release me of the duty and vow I have for her, I would gladly let them.” I couldn't fault him for how he felt, even if I felt completely different.

I laughed. How could I not? It was hilarious. I knew Ashlyn could be a lot to handle. After all, Emma had been near soulless for nearly the entire time I had been her guardian knight.

“You laugh, but I am serious. She hates me, and to be honest, I do not blame her. However, I, as you do for Emma, have oaths and vows and promises that bind me to her.”

“I promised her, Glasson, I promised that I would find who did this and make them pay,” I explained.

“But, as a guardian knight, you can not use your gifts to hurt another for your own gain,” he said.

“It isn’t just my gain. If this man dies, we all gain. He is obviously looking for Emma, and if he finds her, he will find Ashlyn, you, and Shad. We have been over this. I thought you understood. No one is safe when soulless people are being created and heirs are being murdered.” I thought for a moment. “She was kept alive for a reason, though. There is no way that her melody was not captivating to him, but why didn’t he take her—and use her soul?”

Glasson shrugged. “Are you sure these Terran colonies are on the side of the Ancients? I worry a bit that if you bring too much attention to us, we will all be discovered.”

“I read their souls, Glasson. I know that they didn’t lie, and I could tell the level of their corruption.”

His brow rose as if questioning me. I had to unshield my soul to read a soul or sense corruption. But he didn't know that I had been training for years to be able to read souls without unshielding my entire melody to someone else.

“I’ll tell Mary that if I don’t reach out to her at least every other day, she can send help.”

“Do you mean me?”

“I don’t mean you. If I am a lost cause, by all means, do not come after me. I couldn’t bear anyone else being killed because I failed in a task, yet again.”

“Do I need to speak with Mary?”

“No—” I paused and zipped up the backpack. “For now, leave her, and Emma, in the dark about your involvement.”

“Okay—”

“Mary will reach out if she needs you—so that is all I ask.”

“Do I stop her if she goes after you?”

“If she goes after me? No one can stop Mary.”

“Then you better not fail, Ryker, because Emma will probably go with her if she does go after you. You know it as well as I do.”

I watched as Glasson turned and walked out of my room. I sat on the bed, trying to shove the memory out of my head, of Emma and I curled up together there. I covered my face with my pillow. I knew that if I was lost, Mary would come for me. They never treated me exactly like the guardian knight I was. I was more family to Lamont and Ara than anything else. The thought of Mary, of Emma, being hurt caused so much pain in my chest that I let out a muffled scream.

I could not fail. I could not. But if I did, if I was lied to by the Terran colony informants, if my information was tainted, I didn't want Mary coming after me.

I sat up and looked at the clock beside my bed. I had about an hour before school was out. It hadn't been difficult for me to keep up normal human appearances during the previous weeks. I ran from the house and into the garage and started my car. I sat there for a moment, going over what I would say to Mary. I breathed in and then out, quickly.

It was always hard to talk to Mary. She treated me like an equal. I didn't like that there seemed to be no boundaries with her, I didn't know what to do with it. She was stubborn. I didn't know why she cared about me after what I had done to her family. But, Mary was a Terran keeper, so it was my belief that she liked to keep the peace, keep the harmony. But I would be lying if I said that I understood what keepers actually did because, in truth, their ways were still mostly foreign to me.

I pulled up to the flower shop. I walked into the yellow building to the smell of fresh blooms.

"What's going on, Ryker—something with Emma?" she asked, without looking over at me. I pulled myself up and sat down on the counter. She gave me a look that said all I needed to know: she didn't want me sitting up there, but I didn't move.

"I have a lead, from the Terran colonies, and I am headed there to flush it out."

She paused in her ribbon curling to look up at me. "Ryker, this isn't safe. I wish you wouldn't." Her eyes locked onto mine

Her melody was partly shielded, but I felt her feelings of worry and fear flood me as I let mine out just a small amount, only what was necessary. I sent back my emotions to her, emotions of peaceful calm like the waves of the sea. She shoved them away

and sent me more feelings of sadness. I looked up at her, and my melody faded away—she seemed done with it.

“Mary—” I responded, reaching out to her.

“If you get killed, Ryker, I don't think—” I jumped from off the table, sensing her tears were about to fall.

“Mary, I will come back.”

She snorted, “Ryker, you and Emma are all I have left,” and she gasped.

“Mary, I have a vow to fulfill—and an oath. Once they are complete—”

She held up her hand. “Just stop. Just for one second, don't talk about being a guardian knight, with duties and honor.”

“That is who I am, Mary.”

“Yes, that is a big part of you.” She looked up at me, her face, showing sadness as she touched my cheek with her hand. “But there is so much more to you than that, Ryker. I wish you knew that—I wish you could see it.” Her melody floated to me, and mine was still partly unshielded, so I could sense her feelings again. She considered me family, felt that I was like a brother; I smiled. I had never felt more loved than when I was with Lamont's family. It was truly remarkable.

“I appreciate it, Mary. Really, but Emma is everything, and I have to protect her. Please, I am begging you. If I fail—if I don't call you, please do not come for me—under no circumstances are you allowed to come after me, Mary. Do you hear me?” I didn't realize the anger in my voice until I was silent and heard my shouts echo off of the brightly colored walls of her flower shop.

“You’re telling me what to do?” Mary stood tall, her shoulders squared and her eyes trying to be fierce as they looked at me.

“Yes,” I said, my chest rising and falling at a rapid rate.

“You—guardian knight, do not tell me what to do.” She was in my face, her finger almost touching my nose. I pushed her hand away.

“Mariela,” I sighed, using her Terran name, looking at her small body and her trembling hand, trying to be something she was not—trying to be commanding.

“No—you are my family, Rykerian Dallard , and I will not leave my family behind. Go. Do what you have to do, but if you don’t call me when you are supposed to call me, I will come after you and save you. That is what families do.”

She had used my full name; she must have been really serious, just as I had been when I used hers, but she wasn't listening. It was important for her to understand. I was nothing in comparison to Emma, nothing .

“She could die, Mary!!”

“This conversation is over. I have work to do. Call me every other day so that I know you are well.” She left the room to enter the front of the store, and I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe. I knew that Mary considered me to be family, and I knew that we cared for each other. How could we not—when we had been living so close to each other for so long—but that? That was desperation because of all she had lost when Ara died, of all that meant for Emma, for what that meant for her life. That was not Mary—that couldn’t be sweet and kind Mary, I thought. Finally, as the door chimed, and a customer started talking to Mary, I slipped through the back door and made it back to my car. I didn’t know what I would do if she came after me, but I knew that the vow I had made to Emma was unbreakable. I had to discover who that man was,

and it was then my chance. I needed to succeed. I could not fail her, not again, and I certainly could not let anyone rescue me. I didn't need rescuing. I was the one who did that; that was my job. That was what I was born, bred, and trained to do, and I would do it.

Chapter 16

I stood in my hotel room at the Terran colonies. I was near the caves, and soon, I would call Mary and check-in. I looked at my phone as a text came in from Emma.

Emma: “Hey, are you doing okay? Will you be back for homecoming? Sam finally asked Ash. Miss you.”

Ryker: “I am out of town, might be longer than I thought.”

Emma: “Your dad said a relative is sick?”

She must have gone to my house.

Ryker: “Yeah, you talked to my dad?”

Emma: “No, Mary told me, she talked to your dad, I guess.”

So she didn't go to my house.

Ryker: “Well, I am doing some research. Promise you won't be mad?”

Emma: “Ryker, I think we need to call the police. You're driving me crazy over this. I do want to find my parents' murderer but not at the expense of your happiness, Ry.”
She sounded like Mary.

Ryker: “I know, but he killed your family, Em, and I can't just stand by and let him

get away. No one is even looking into it.”

She didn’t answer my last text for a few minutes, and I wondered how she was feeling. I knew that she still had a hard time sorting through her emotions. I sat down on the bed for a minute, and then I called her.

“Are you okay?” I asked after she said, “hello.”

“I am waiting for all this to just be some horrible dream that I can wake up from.” Her voice was shaky as if she were about to cry, and I wished I could have comforted her.

“I just have to figure out the last piece of this puzzle. I am so close.” I wanted to reassure her, but I wondered if talking to her about any of my plans had been a mistake.

“Ryker, this is too much for me right now,” I heard her breaths come in, and I knew that the tears were about to come. I wanted to say something. I knew she needed to put the past behind her, but she had also asked me to find out who killed her parents. She asked me to make it right, and I promised her that I would. I swore it; I made a vow.

“Ryker—Ryker, I can’t—”

“Emma, I am sorry.” I was sorry, sorrier than I had ever been before. I leaned my head against my hands as I listened to her pleading words, her confusion spilling through her voice and through the phone speakers like some slowly trickling stream, flowing slowly over a rock.

“Why on earth would someone kill them? Tell me, Ryker. Why? Why would someone want my parents, and possibly me, dead?”

“Everyone has enemies, Emma.” What was I supposed to say? Tell her that there were armies fighting against her family and her family line? Should I tell her that she was an heir, a princess of Terra? I wanted to—how desperately I wanted to tell her. I just needed a little more time.

“My parents don’t have enemies. I don’t have any enemies. I don’t understand.” She cried into the phone, and the sobs wracked my body as if I were the one crying. I wanted to reach out to her, take away her pain.

“Neither do I, Emma. Don’t worry. I am going to keep you safe.” It wasn’t enough. I knew it would never be enough for her, but I would always keep her safe. I would always fight for her.

“I am scared, Ryker. I don’t want to know the truth—but then I do. Mary says I need to move on, move past all of this, but it is so hard.” Her voice was sharp and quick, and I felt anger bubbling within me each time her voice rose more in frustration than in sorrow, because I knew that in just a short amount of time, no doubt, Shad would comfort her. Shad would have his arms around her, and she would be more than happy there. The thought made me want to slam my head against the wall. Instead, I lay back on the bed and tried to swallow the vile thoughts I was having about Shad and Emma. Move on? She wanted to move on. What did that mean? Did she want to move on from me? Was she going to replace me with Shad? All of the years and all of the time spent together, would they melt away? I knew that she didn’t remember everything. It wasn’t right to hold that against her, but the anger was growing within me. I pictured her with Shad, him kissing her, holding her, and I wanted to punch him in the face.

“How are we supposed to just move on!? Oh, I get it—how you are moving on to Shad, huh!?”

“Excuse me?” she asked, completely taken aback, and I wanted to slap myself. I sat

up and then stood, moving over to the wall and hitting my head against it, chastising myself for letting the anger, the frustration, flow out of me and hit her. She didn't need that.

"Never mind. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I'm just—frustrated is all. I should've been there that night with you guys." I lamely tried to explain my anger.

"Part of me wishes you had been there so that I wasn't alone, but that's selfish. If you'd have been there, you probably would be dead right now," she breathed into the phone.

It felt good to be wanted, to be needed—I was grateful that she didn't want me dead. That was something. But she didn't know the truth, the truth that Lamont had asked me to go with them—granted he had been okay with me not going. He liked that I was fitting into this realm and being a normal teenage boy. He had wanted me with them, but he understood that I had a commitment to football. I groaned silently. Football was the biggest mistake of my life. If she knew the truth, how I could have saved them all, I doubted she would want anything to do with me.

"Your dad asked me to go, and I didn't."

"So?" She replied, as if it didn't matter, as if the rightful heir of the first kingdom's throne asking for something wasn't important, wasn't what I was sworn to do since birth. But, of course, that was her response. She didn't know who I was, who her father was, or who she really and truly was.

"So—I feel like I could have prevented it."

I heard Emma's humorless laugh on the phone. "Seriously, Ryker? Do you have super strength?"

“Okay, maybe I could not have prevented it. I’m sorry, Emma. I miss them. I am so sorry. I should have been the one who died; it should have only been me,” I choked on the words, regret and guilt eating at me.

“Ryker, no. No, I couldn’t live without you. No one wants you dead.”

“I have to go, Emma,” I whispered.

“Just say goodbye to your sick relative and come home. You’re missing the homecoming dance, and I am so annoyed that I have to go without you.”

“Are you still going with him ?” I couldn’t help the annoyance in my tone. I was so far away, and I hated knowing he would be with her, and I wouldn’t be.

“Yes.”

I was silent, deciding not to speak, not to let my anger spill out on that occasion.

“Ryker?”

“Yeah?” I said, my voice low as I leaned my back against the wall and slid down.

“Are you okay?”

Was I okay? It was a loaded question, and if I got too into the real feelings there, I knew that I would have exploded.

“He likes you; I can tell,” I said, knowing that above all else, Emma needed a friend, needed reassurance. I was her guardian knight after all.

“There is something different about him, Ry; I don’t know what it is.” I knew what it

was if what Shad had told me was true. I knew exactly what it was: the song. I had her melody memorized, and even though I couldn't hear it, I hummed it inside of myself to the tune of my own melody. It wasn't a perfect fit—my melody with hers—still, they did compliment each other so well. What we had, it was what most people wanted on Terra, even searched for.

“He has always thought that he could get whatever he wants.”

“He is not like that at all. You don't know him the way that I do.”

“So, does it even matter what I say? Emma, I have known him for a long time.”

“I mean, I love you, Ry, but I need to grow up sometime, right?”

“This is hard for me,” I mumbled as I buried my face in my hands. It was the biggest understatement of my life.

“Ry, I—”

“I know. I'm sorry. I will fight for you.” The words just spilled out of me. If she didn't know my pull, my vows, and my devotion before, would she know it then? I thought.

“Fight for me? Ryker, we'll always be friends.” Friends, she still thought friendship was all there would be between us. What I felt for her was so much more. The pull I had toward her was more than simple friendship. She was family; she was my duty. She was my heir, yes, but there was more.

“I don't like change,” I said.

“Well, things change. That's part of being human—and living. I am allowed to have

more than one friend, Ry.”

“Look at you—all wise.”

She laughed, and I was comforted by the sound of it. “I know, I’m so wise, and you should listen to me.”

“I really need to go, Emma—” I didn’t have any place to be, but I knew that if I talked to her for too long, I would spill all of my secrets.

“Call me soon.”

“I will,” I answered, knowing that I would; I just didn’t know when “soon” would be.

“Thanks.”

“Love you, Emma. Have fun at the dance, but not too much fun.”

“Sure, Ryker.

Chapter 17

I clicked Mary's number and held the phone to my ear. I wasn't ready for it.

"Ryker," Mary said in a quick snap.

"Upset?" I asked, trying not to laugh.

"This is just idiotic."

"This is what needs to be done." Before she could say anything else, I spoke again: "I won't be able to reach you for a while."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm hiking for three days there—and then three days back, so for about six days, I'll be away from cell service."

"You expect me to wait six days when you are walking towards a man who wants to kill you?"

"Who said he wants to kill me?"

"Me."

"I can't talk long, but I wanted you to know," I laughed

"Okay," I heard her say, and then I clicked off the phone.

The hike did take me three days. It was long, and I was very tired near the end of it. I camped in a small grove of trees about a mile or two from the mouth of the cave's opening. I set up my small one-man tent in the clearing near the treeline. I wiped my brow with my shirtsleeve and took a long swig of water from my backpack. I had three hours until darkness covered the mountain top. I wanted to hike the rest of the way to the cave that night in order to check it out before going back to actually enter the cave in the morning. The best thing for me to do was to get a good night's rest before journeying into that cave. I didn't know what was in there or who the man was I was searching for, and I wanted to be as prepared as possible. The hike took about an hour because I slowed my pace to check my surroundings as I walked. I reached the cave, and I noticed guards standing at its mouth. They wore the emblems of the second kingdom, and I was confused. Was this all the second kingdom's doings? I asked myself. I moved closer, noticing the blackness in their eyes and their lack of melodies.

"Soulless," I whispered under my breath. The cave had a larger opening than I had suspected. I sat there, hidden for a few hours, wondering if or when the guards would change. It was around midnight by my watch when I started back for my small camp for the night—with a plan in place.

I woke the next morning to the light of the sun. I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes, and I began putting my things back inside of my pack. I took out a bag of beef jerky; I ate in silence. I packed my small one man tent into my backpack and swung it onto my back, checking to make sure that I had left no sign of having been there.

The two-mile hike took me half of the time that it did the evening before. Being well-rested and aware of my surroundings helped greatly. I hid behind a tree as the cave opening came into view. There were no guards. Surprised, I waited for a good ten minutes before I walked closer and closer. No one. What happened? Had they left?

I inched closer and closer until I found myself at the cave's entrance. The cave was dark. The sunlight that morning wasn't bright enough to illuminate it much. I touched the walls as I maneuvered through it. Tunnels wove through the mountain, and I had no idea which one to take. I walked straight until I heard noises. I followed them, and they grew louder and louder. The sound of voices echoed off of the cave walls. I heard other noises, too. Is that a hammer? I questioned. I spotted a light and followed it slowly to an opening. I crouched down as I peered into the opening of a large interior cavern. There were hundreds of people in it. I looked at their eyes, and they all contained the blackness of a taken soul. They were carving black crystals from the walls and carrying them to large containers. Back and forth, they went. Could those be midnight crystals? Here in this realm? I wondered.

Before I had a chance to leave or find out any more, I heard a noise from behind me, and then there was blackness—I had been discovered.

“Madam, are you well?” I asked, staring into her grey eyes. I watched as she turned her face to the side and coughed up sea water.

“What happened?” she asked, sitting up. I moved to help her, but she moved away as if afraid that I would hurt her. I tried to soothe her with my melody, but then—I paused. She didn't have one. Was she corrupt? Was she a soulless?

“I just came upon you lying here on the beach,” I said.

“I guess I am alive then, right?”

“Yes, you are soulless?”

“Soulless?” she laughed, and I couldn't help but notice how beautiful that sound was—as well as her beautiful smile.

I pulled my melody back so that she couldn't hear my feelings, but then I remembered that she didn't have a melody, so it didn't matter.

“That is funny, but really, where am I?” She tried to stand, and instead, she fell over. I reached out for her again, but she moved away.

“May I assist you?” I asked, worried for her wellbeing, noticing an injury on the top of her head.

“No, you may not. Just, please, tell me where I am.” She finally gave up trying to stand and sank deeper into the clear pebbled rocks.

“The Kingdom of Torren.”

“How am I in Europe?” she asked with wide eyes. I had never heard of such a place before.

“You are in the blessed lands—”

“What is going on?” she asked herself in a hurried whisper. She felt her head, and winced, then touched her strange clothing—a rather strange style of dress. “I hit my head, and am wet.”

“Yes, it seems so.”

“I think I lost my memory.”

“Very possible, maiden—”

“Maiden?” she asked absently, looking out into the water. A hand covering her mouth.

“Let me help you. I can get your head checked by a healer and some new clothes,” I said, worried about the severity of her head injury.

“Oh, I appreciate that.” She lifted her gaze up toward me, the lightning in her grey eyes held me there. Then slowly she swayed, and then before I could catch her, she passed out onto the sand.

“Ah, so this is how a soulless is made naturally,” a voice echoed around me as the Terran blue ocean and grey eyes of a lost girl lingered in my mind for just a moment longer. Blast that box. What was the point in having it if it never kept the memories away? I looked up, realizing that I needed to focus on the present, not on the past. I saw a man before me. I spit at his feet. I would have spit on his face; however, the ties at my wrist and ankles prevented me from standing upright. He held my head by my hair, and I groaned. His black, soulless eyes stared back at me.

“I knew that my informant would do a good job getting you here. I am just sad that you didn’t bring Emma.”

“What do you want with her?” Fear shot through me.

“What do I want with her?” He shoved me back down to the cave floor, and my head hit a rock, causing me to see stars, but I kept my eyes open. I had to keep my eyes open.

“I need her soul,” he said, walking out of my view as I tried to sit up. “I need her soul in order to go back to Terra, and I also need to find the portal that let you through. I have heard whispers that a knight knows where the portal is. That knight is you.”

“You were misinformed; I do not remember where it is.” He walked over to where I lay on the floor, and he kicked me in the side.

“Do not lie to me, knight.”

“I am not.”

“And I assume that you think I am supposed to believe that? The word of a guardian knight used to mean something. At one time in my life, I would have believed you in a heartbeat, but now?” He bent down and moved the hair from my face. There was a gash on my forehead from when I fell, and I felt the sickening, sharp pain as he dug into the cut with his fingers. I pulled against the urge to cry out.

“You are no guardian knight of Terra. You are no honorable guardian.”

“My vows are unbroken,” I retorted as he let go of my hair and face. The stinging pain from the cut on my forehead made me clench my teeth. I tried to focus on it, feel the pain, and let it help me stay awake and keep me from losing consciousness.

“Really? Lamont is dead, knight. Dead—unless I am mistaken, that was a vow broken.”

I flinched. That hurt worse than anything else he had done to me.

“Don’t even get me started on this whole soulless thing you have going on.” He waved a hand at me as he walked around a table and sat down.

“I am no soulless.”

“Knight, I am sorry to inform you, but you seem to be mere months away from being completely soulless. Why not let your melody sing? Why do you hide it in shame? Many would kill—and have killed—for a simple melody.”

“I do not have to tell you anything.”

“This is true—very, very true.” He set his elbows on the table where he sat, leaning his chin on his hands as he looked at me. His eyes, though dark and soulless, seemed to be searching mine, genuinely curious. He was a disturbing creature to behold. His inky, black, oily hair. His nose, which looked to have been broken at one point and never fixed properly, made his face look all the more wrong. His skin was pale and sickly.

“But if you do not tell me where the portal is, I will kill you, and it will not be fast; it will be slow and painful.”

“Do what you will. I will not break my vows.”

“So, it is a vow is it that keeps you silent?” he asked as he stood again, taking more interest in me, coming closer. I shouldn’t have indulged him. I shouldn’t have told him I had another vow. His steps echoed in the large cavern.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” I spat at him. This time hitting him in the face. He laughed as he took a napkin away from one of his soulless men and wiped his face.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked with a smile, but I just stared at him. I didn’t know who he was, other than he was the one who murdered Lamont and Ara. I didn’t care to play his games.

“I asked you a question, knightly-boy.” He took out a knife and cut my arm.

I made no noise, not a sound. I pictured Emma in my mind. I pictured her safe, and I smiled.

“I think you need more of these,” he said as he cut me again.

Still, I was numb. I thought of Emma, and I imagined her being safe. I pictured her

brilliant emerald green eyes, her smile, her hand in mine—so warm and so wonderfully right. I would die for her. Even if it took a thousand cuts to slowly drain the life from me, I would gladly die, gladly sacrifice my life for hers. Maybe someday, I would end up with the Ancients in the next life. I smiled again as cut after cut tore at my flesh.

With bloodied hands and an enraged face, he kicked me, and I felt each cut then, and I gasped. He looked at me, and the pain engulfed me. It was agony everywhere. It hurt as if I was being stabbed over and over again, feeling the blackness of corruption coat my soul. I looked at his weapon and saw the markings it held.

“You cut me with a Corruptor’s blade?” I gasped as I felt the life drain from me and pool around me. Corruptors blades were painless when used, and then the pain was tenfold after the cutting was done.

“Let’s see if this will break that little vow of yours.”

“I don’t care if you kill me slowly, I will never tell you anything.”

“And I don’t care if I have to keep you alive for all of eternity.” He finished wiping his blade, and then he looked at me. “I am Prince Cadian of the Embra, and I will be the next king.” With that, he left the room, and I had to try and repeat over and over again in my head what he had just said. He was a prince of the Embra? He was Prince Cadian? Prince Cadian died. But he looked so much like Shad. Could this man really be Shad’s brother? I wondered. That was the last thought I had before blackness took me, and I hoped it didn't take me back to the beach on Terra with grey eyes and brown hair, blowing in the sea breeze.

“Anymore talking?” Cadian asked for what felt like the ten thousandth time as he stabbed me again. He wasn’t using the corruptor's blade, so I felt the pain right away. I bit my cheek to keep myself upright and alert. How long had I been down there?

Days? Weeks? Months?

“I do not have the information you seek,” I gasped as he slid his silver knife into a patch of flesh yet untouched by him, near my neck. The cave was cold and dark. Half of the time, I just lay there, wondering if I had gone blind—until he came back with a lamp in order to torture me again, and I knew that I could see all too well. What I wouldn't do to feel warmth again.

“Sir,”

I watched as Cadian turned to look at a soulless guard, entering the cavern.

“Yes,” he asked, setting down the knife and shoving me to the floor.

“There is someone in the cave.”

Cadian nodded. “Finally, took them long enough.” He wiped his hands on a towel, for they were covered in my red blood.

A sickening feeling crawled up inside of me. No—they didn't come. Mary, she wouldn't really let that happen, I thought.

“Should we catch him, my lord?”

“No, let him think he has a fighting chance. I would like to see how this plays out.”

The soulless man nodded, and I thought it strange how human-like the soulless seemed to be.

“Don't hurt her,” I begged, hardly able to speak anymore.

“Emma?” he asked, looking at me with fake sadness. “Oh dear, of course not. I need her soul.” With that, he was swept from the room, and I lay my cheek upon the frozen and rocky cave floor.

“Ryker?” I was being shaken as I slept, and I flinched back awake by instinct.

“Ryker, I am here to save you. It's Keil.” I opened my eyes. It wasn't a dream if Keil was right in front of me. Who else was there? I prayed to the Ancients that he was alone.

“Tra-p—” I barely spoke before the doors were shut, and a soulless man took Keil and shackled him beside me in chains.

“Who is it?” Keil asked after the soulless left. His eyes were wide. I looked at his entire person and saw the comforting sight of the ancient warrior armor. How had he been captured if he was a warrior? I wondered.

“Cadian.”

“How is that even—” He paused before speaking again. “What have you done, Ryker.”

“Nothing,” I said, coughing onto the stone floor.

“You are not a noble cause. The Ancients didn't see fit to save you. If they had, I wouldn't be chained here beside you.”

“I have no idea why your abilities are blocked,” I whispered. At the same time, I still wondered if the Ancients wanted me dead because of Lamont and Ara, because I had failed them. Maybe it was what happened to failing guardian knights, or perhaps, it was the corruptor's blade that had marked my soul.

“You better hope that she doesn’t come,” Keil said in irritation. “Knowing her, and only from the little information I have picked up on, she doesn’t give up very easily, and she cares for you.” The words were torture. Emma—is she here? I wondered. Cadian would get everything then.

“Tell me, she isn’t—” I gasped, pulling my body up to look more fully at him.

“Emma, Mary, Prince Shad, and I all came under Mary’s direction to rescue you. Mary said you hadn’t responded in the allotted time.”

I nodded. I was completely aware that Mary would try to find me. That’s when Glasson’s voice echoed in my head, telling me in my mind that I had become too close to my heirs; I had gotten too close to Mary and too close to Emma. It was true, and because they had learned to care for me as I did for them, they were going to be destroyed for it.

I cursed.

“Mary should be coming after me. I told her to keep Emma safe,” Keil said. “Nothing about this is wise. Have you at least discovered what he is doing here?”

“Mining for black crystals and making soulless. He wants to go back home—” I stopped speaking as the doors opened. No one came in, but it was silent for a time, and before I knew it, blackness, blood loss, and exposure, no doubt, overtook me.

Chapter 18

Darkness was all I saw for some time—until a melody floated over to me, stronger than anyone else to exist. I knew it had to be a dream. I was probably on my way to the Ancients. Cade had defeated me. I felt the pain shooting through me and wondered if my failures as a knight had brought so much dishonor to me that I would remain forever with the corrupt—but no, if I was in corruption’s grasp, I wouldn’t be hearing her melody. I was being shaken, shaken awake, and I saw her green eyes, gazing into mine as she sat me up and started tending to my cuts. I wasn’t dead. I was still alive, but why was she there? I wanted, then more than ever, to kiss every inch of her skin, to hold her close and never let her out of my sight.

“You shouldn’t be here, Em,” I mumbled, in a voice that I did not recognize. I turned to the side, spitting blood onto the damp ground, my entire body trembling. I could tell that she was sad, seeing me like that. Her face held so many emotions. Even if I couldn’t unshield my melody enough to know her feelings, I knew her well enough to know her face, to know the thoughts she expressed with her facial expressions.

Emma wrapped a towel around my shoulders and rubbed at my arms, attempting to create warmth for me, but each movement of her hands caused the cuts to hurt even more; still, I didn’t have the strength to tell her. Her caring, her gazing on me with that love and concern in her eyes was all I needed.

“Of course, I should be here—as if I can’t help to rescue people, too. Honestly, you boys are all so ridiculous,” Emma finally answered.

“Emma, please. He will, he will—” I wasn’t able to use my voice fully. It was hard to

get the words out at all. My efforts were useless.

“Please, Ry, don’t talk. We will take you back and get you all cleaned up and feeling better soon. I was so worried about you. I love you, Ry. I am so glad you are alive.” Her eyes locked onto mine as her hand touched my cheek, flooding me with a warmth that was purely hers. That’s when I noticed that her melody was toned down, and I saw a small crystal around her neck. Relief overcame me, for even if I died, at least, she had a melody inhibiting crystal, a seekers crystal, and it would help protect who she was. I covered her hand with my own.

“It is so good to see you, Em. I didn’t think I would—” I tried to speak clearly.

“Shhh—I am here, and we will get you out of here; no one will hurt you anymore.” She caressed my arm. “Can someone tell me why, or better yet, how our secret weapon, that is our undefeatable-warrior-Keil, was bested? I’m not sure I buy into this ancient warrior thing,” Emma spoke scornfully.

“I was not bested, and besides, Ryker isn’t an honorable cause anymore,” Keil answered. Nothing had been more true. I was a total and complete failure in more ways than one.

“What does that mean? I thought you were fighting for me?” Emma questioned.

“Ryker can fill you in when he is feeling better, but I was chained up rather quickly, and we have been left here for hours. Ryker says that their leader is Cade,” I heard Keil speak, but I didn’t take my eyes away from peering into Emma’s eyes, which were also locked onto mine. When she looked away, it was the first time I noticed that Shad was there, too. I wanted to curse him, but I noticed that he was working to loosen the bonds on my legs, and I decided that it wouldn’t help the situation to have him upset with me right then. He had a sword, and I was chained, broken, bruised, and cut. I was no match for him. Although a fight with Shad did sound fun, I would

also enjoy a fight with Cadian, but after I was healed.

“Cade? Are you sure? How is that even possible?” Shad’s voice seemed dark and worried. I enjoyed seeing him worried, and I nodded.

“Who is Cade? Did he—was he the one who caused my parents—did he cause the crash?” Emma asked and turned her head.

“We should not have come,” Shad said, as he finished with the chains around my ankles and moved on to Keil, intentionally ignoring her question.

“Who is Cade?” Emma asked again in a whisper, this time, clearly irritated as she tried to sit me up straight. I wasn’t aware that I had started to slip back down. I was so drained, so tired. It took most of my energy just to keep my soul shielded. My head rested on her shoulder, leaving bloody smears on her shirt. It was taking everything in me to pay attention to the conversation. “He is the prince who has been searching for your melody,” Keil answered, sadly as if the information was painful to extract from his vocal cords.

“He's the one who killed my parents, too?” Emma asked, but I was starting to lose consciousness again. It was hard to keep the blackness at bay.

“And, unfortunately, this is all a trap. We are not going to make it out of here alive,” I heard Keil say.

“Welcome, welcome,” I heard Cadian’s voice from the far edge of the room. My body shook from instinct, readying for the corruptor's blade to inflict even more damage to it. “It has been a long time, has it not, brother?” Emma was torn from my arms, and I fell into Keil’s embrace with a grunt. Unaware of what was going on, I tried to focus on the words, but soon, and far more quickly than I wanted, blackness overtook me, and the cold stone floor was beneath me once again—so much for

Keil's help. I found myself transported back in time in my mind once again.

"You didn't even know him!"

"Know him? I do not have to know him, Em. He isn't good for you. Just stop being so difficult."

"I'm not difficult. Stop trying to keep me away from everything! I'm allowed to have other relationships."

"I am not going to talk about this anymore. I did what I had to do, Em, to keep you safe."

"Safe from Brian?"

"Yes, from Brian. It was clear that all he wanted was to make out with you."

"So! What if I wanted that!" she was shouting, and her anger made her eyes very bright. I tried to hide a smile. Her father and her mother had let her melody out a bit again, and of course, as soon as they did that, she was out flirting with boys and going on dates. Her emotions were back, and she could feel things again.

"Emma, calm down. It's not a big deal," I said, pushing hair out of my face. She sat beside me in the back seat of my dad's car, and I could see in her melody that her anger was fuming. I could see that she wanted to be kissed; she wanted to know what a kiss felt like. She turned to me, and I tried to hold back a smile as she glanced at my lips, wondering not for the first time what a kiss would feel like—from me.

"If you would have just kissed me that summer like I asked you to—" she trailed off, and I felt her melody swirl around me, and I knew that she really wanted to try kissing. She was a curious little thing, I would give her that.

“What about sweet sixteen? Isn't that important to girls?” I asked, gripping the door handle to steady myself from kissing her senseless that moment.

“Ah, you're impossible. That's three years away.” She leaned against the seat.

“Some things are worth waiting for, Em.” I said, trying not to imagine what her lips would feel like pressed to mine.

“If you say so,” she grunted, folding her arms.

“How about I promise that when you are sixteen and I'm seventeen, if you still want to kiss me, I'll kiss you?”

“You mean it?” her voice was excited as she turned to me.

“Sure, but you know that usually people kiss because they like each other.”

“I like you, Ry; you are my best friend,” Her smile made it hard to breathe, but somehow, I managed.

“So, you'll wait to be kissed until you are sixteen then?” I asked, as my dad pulled into her driveway.

“Yes,” she said with a nod and turned to look at me. She took my hand in hers and squeezed it before she slipped out of the door and ran up the porch to her house. At least, she would be safe for the next few years. After that? Who could know what I would have to do then?

Chapter 19

I tried to stay awake as best I could. It took all of the energy I had not to collapse. A soulless stood me on my feet and pulled me toward the cavern's door. The memory of Emma's hand in mine the night I drove her home from the school dance still felt real. I tried to remain conscious as I noticed my surroundings, focusing on the present. What was happening? Where was I?

I didn't understand what was happening to us as we reached the other side of the cave. The guard disappeared, and the door closed behind us.

"What is happening?" I asked as I slumped against the wall. Slowly, the memories of the past faded away, giving way to the dread of the present, and I heard Emma's soul in pain. I wanted to know where she was, where Cadian was. Flashes of memories of being kicked over and over until I blacked out came to me. I shook my head, trying to regain myself. I was so disoriented.

"Emma and Shad are inside with Cadian. They made a plan to appease him in order to get him to set us free."

I looked at Keil with anger in my eyes. "What did you let them do? They are of the Ancient line. Are you insane? I am nothing in comparison to both of them." I spit out blood and coughed, surprising myself that I could even yell anymore. I spit out blood for a while as the cough became even worse. Keil moved over to my side and felt my skin—I assumed to assess my physical state. I was cold and numb. At least, I felt very little. He moved over to my chest and side, and I winced from pain that I hadn't realized was there.

“We have to go; I think you punctured a lung with your broken ribs or something,” Keil said as he stood over me.

“I cannot leave without her.” I wondered why I wasn’t stronger. Where was the ancient magic? I wondered why I wasn’t able to charge in there and take Emma away. I knew the answer, and it pained me too much to dwell on it: I had offended my vows, and the Ancients didn’t think I was fit any longer to be a knight.

“Look, Ryker—I am not your biggest fan. I have half a mind to kill you for getting Shad and Emma into the situation that they are in, but regardless of what I want, you are important—Emma says you are, so I will carry you if I have to, but I will take care of you.”

“Emma is the one who needs taking care of. Just let me die. Go save her!”

“Shad will help her. I assure you, my prince knows what he is doing, and Emma will be well.”

I tried to speak again but found that the words would not leave my lips. I was surprised as Keil lifted me from under my arms to stand me up.

“Can you walk?” he asked me, as I leaned there against the damp cave wall. I nodded, noticing the soulless guard had been ever so kind to leave a light for us. Keil picked it up, and I slowly but surely trailed after him, wanting with everything in me to run to Emma, but no matter how much I wanted it, I knew she didn’t need me. Right then, she only needed—and wanted—one person by her side. As her guardian knight, I knew that. I knew that she wanted Shad above all else, and it pained me, but not as much as it should have, because of the one person I just could never let go.

Chapter 20

The box that I locked away inside of me begged to be opened again. I wanted to stay away from it, I wanted to run from it, but the key clicked, freeing the lock, and the box lid opened once more. Memories tumbled out like an avalanche down the face of a mountain. With my eyes closed, I felt the cold, damp floor, and my memories found me once again as I cursed my weak body.

"Truly?" she had asked me as I held her hand. The electric pulse increased within my heart, and I nodded. Melody or not it never mattered, our connection had been instant.

"When should we tell them?" she pressed. The excitement, dancing in her eyes, made my heart swell. Oh how much I adored this woman.

"Tonight." I smiled, pulling her into my arms. I kissed her cheek, and she buried her face into my chest. The scent of her filled me and reminded me of that beach with unreal, blue waters, where we first met—when I had found my soul.

"I never thought that I could be this happy." She tilted her face up to mine. She had never gained her memories back, but she had a happy life here in Torren, here with me.

I cupped her face in my hands. I had held nothing more precious in my entire life between those hands of mine, not until that moment. She was every single thing in all of Terra I would ever need.

"Especially not here," she whispered.

"The vows I make to you, to be yours forever, are the most important and most sacred that I will ever hold," I said, and my voice was low and gravelly as if I hadn't used it in a while. I was sure that she could read the feelings in my voice. She smiled a crooked smile, eyes glowing like lightning. Her memory not returning also meant we didn't know why she had no melody. She also had to relearn life here, from wherever she had once been. She said words and things that did not make sense to me, nor her, but the new life she carved out for herself was incredible. She was such a strong person. It was also a strange thing to have to ask what she is thinking, and not being able to sense anything within her, like I could with a normal person.

"You know why?" I brushed a strand of hair off of her cheek and softly touched her velvet skin, which I had exposed. She trembled in my arms, and I knew from her movements, even without a melody, that she wanted more, needed more. It was satisfying that I could read her, without a melody. I wondered if she thought about our lips touching. My thoughts made it hard for me to not do that very thing. Instead, I pulled away.

"Our love, nothing can break it," I whispered into her ear, finally finishing what I wanted to say.

"I will love you even after my last breath," she whispered.

Blackness surrounded me, and an echo of another memory came into focus. I couldn't stop those memories from attacking me.

"I love you, Rykerian." I smiled at my Ana. Lamont stood beside me, and I held both of Ana's hands in mine. Her beautiful storm-sea-grey eyes reached into my soul.

"I love you, Analiea." I looked back and forth between her, and then at Lamont. "What now?" I whispered. I heard her giggle, and I looked at her mouth.

“Now, Lamont will do what I asked him to.” She nodded in his direction. I stood and watched Lamont come between us.

“Rykerian Dallard, do you vow before the Ancients and Ana to be hers?”

“Yes, of course,” I said with a smile. The rest of the ceremony had always been a blur in my mind until the part where Lamont smiled widely, and his melody sang out to me with the same joy I was feeling.

“You may claim your vowed!” he said, and I leaned in and kissed her. The electric flow between us was so strong and so powerful that she melted into my arms. She was mine, and I was hers; forever, she would be with me forever. It was a first kiss—the promise of beginnings and of possibilities. As I deepened the kiss, and her lips matched and moved with mine with just as much passion, I knew what true happiness really was. I wanted to keep it forever—keep her forever.

Soon after the little ceremony, we entered the door of my home. It then became our home with Ana cradled in my arms. She touched my cheek.

“Kerian, I am so sorry that I do not have a melody like everyone else.” She called me by that name, too: Kerian. I knew, suddenly, that I never had been concerned with her lack of melody as I had gotten to know her more. I knew that she was worried about it, people often made her feel less than for shielding her soul, because of course that is what they assumed. She had mentioned it more than a dozen times after I asked her to be my companion, my wife, my everything.

“I do not care about that, Ana. Please stop feeling bad about that.”

“It's just that you are blessed by the Ancients, and you have powers and are basically like—” I put my hand over her mouth to stop the craziness spilling from her lips.

“I will tell you every day for the rest of my life if I have to, but you, Ana, are everything to me; nothing else matters.” I kissed her lips, and she leaned into my mouth. Her hands held the back of my neck. I made our way to the main room, and she slid from my arms. I still kissed her, leaning over to capture our lips together again and again, I knew I would never get enough kisses from that girl. No other thoughts other than of Ana flitted through my head, and my melody swirled around us like a fire.

I woke to blackness, and for a few moments, I wondered if I was still inside the cave. Something was beeping, and there were voices talking. The pain in my side and head was too much to bear awake. Ana called to me, and I wanted to be back with her, back in my memories of her—the memories that for so long I had kept hidden away, kept tightly tucked inside a box. I had found her again, and I smiled, letting the memories free. Going back to her.

“You are home!” Her smile lit up her face in a way that I had never seen before. She pulled me from the doorway and laughed, her feet were barefoot as they always were.

“What is happening? Are we under attack?” I laughed at her urgency. I leaned down to kiss her, and my lips found her neck, and I quickly traveled to her throat. She leaned into me, her hands in my hair. I lifted my head and rubbed my chin on her soft cheek, which she hated when I hadn't shaved. She laughed and tugged at a few strands of my hair so I would stop. I looked into her eyes, pulling away from her. Her smile was so bright. I wanted nothing more than to take her and hold her in my arms for the rest of the afternoon and evening. She leaned closer to me and kissed my lips softly. My lips reacted like they always did when hers touched mine, electric fire flamed inside of me. She pulled away abruptly as I tried to deepen the kiss, and I pouted at her.

“There will be plenty of time for that, Kerian,” she whispered, moving herself even farther away from me. I frowned, and she smiled.

“Hurry, it's been a long day, and I need you.” I winked, and she ran.

“Come catch me, knight!” she called over her shoulder as she ran her dark brown hair falling in waves down the back of her blue dress. Blue always looked beautiful on her. I laughed, chasing after her. I would always catch her, always find her, and always follow wherever she went.

She reached the back door to the small estate home I had received after being given the guardian knightship over Lamont of the kingdom of Haleston and didn't stop as she opened it to the outside. She smiled so wide, looking back at me, and I watched the sunlight glistening off of her hair. Her hair was hanging down about her face, and her breath was a bit labored. We ran, and finally, when we reached a small grove of trees, she stopped, and I wrapped my arms around her waist as she giggled. This was the only time of year in Haleston when there was a season of melting. Usually Haleston was covered in snow and cold, but it had been melting for days and seeing greenery was a welcomed sight.

“Here we are,” she smiled. We had been married for six months. I had never known a more blissful time in my entire existence. I looked at a blanket and some juice drink that she had no doubt bought from the market in the village sitting tidily on a blanket on a patch of newly exposed grass.

“What is all this?”

She pulled me down, and I sat. She was across from me, but I reached over and pulled her onto my lap.

“Kerian, you are—” She didn't finish as I began to kiss the back of her neck. “Let me down, for just a moment.” She was laughing, and I moved away as she poured the drink into two glasses and handed me one. She still sat on my lap because I insisted, but I didn't tickle her or kiss her like I wanted to.

“We have been together for six months, Kerian.”

I was worried that I had forgotten something important, so I started to apologize. She put her hand over my mouth.

“Stop it. You haven't forgotten anything.” I kissed her hand, and she smiled, moving it away.

“Are you sure you don't have a melody? You always know what I am thinking,” I teased. She rolled her eyes.

“There are many ways to tell what you are thinking, Kerian. You are not that difficult to read.” She looked at the glass in her hand and then back at me.

She seemed nervous? I didn't understand it. What was she so nervous about? “Are you okay, Analeia?” I asked, gazing into her storm grey eyes. She had seemed tired for the previous few weeks. Had she remembered her past life and wanted to leave? No, that was foolish.

“I am wonderful, Kerian,” she smiled, and it eased some of my worries. “I am more than wonderful, actually, because I honestly think you are already the best future father ever.” She smiled at me, and I shrugged, taking another sip from my glass, letting her words sink in.

“What? A father?” I asked, nearly spitting juice all over her. I held my hand to my throat as I attempted not to choke.

“We are going to have a baby!” she squealed and jumped into my arms. I fell onto my back, my cup spilling into the grass.

“You mean? You are? We are?” I gulped, looking at her. She nodded with a huge

grin and kissed my mouth. I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her again and again so she would know exactly how I felt about it.

“A father,” I whispered in astonishment—later, back at home—that same night. I played with her hair as she lay on my chest in our bed. The lantern light casted rippling shadows against the walls.

“A father,” she whispered back into the night.

It echoed around me, again and again, and she slipped from my arms, and there was darkness, cold, sorrow, and no more grey eyes, no more warm smile, no more Ana.

The hurt built up in my chest as I remembered her. Images of her and our short life together flashed before me. The memories of Ana slowly faded. It hurt. What we had was precious; what we lost was precious. I knew that, and forever I would mourn it. But as the memories spun and swirled inside my consciousness, I realized something—I realized that I didn't need to hide the box with her memory inside of it. I could remember her with a smile on my lips, her love in my heart. I could remember her storm grey eyes and beautiful brown hair, her laughter and her smile, and it was possible to not hate my existence without her. I wanted to live for her.

I could remember her with fondness. That realization shocked me. We would reunite someday; I knew it. The ancient lands were always said to be a place of rest once our mortal bodies leave this world—a heaven. Ana and I would someday reunite. Lamont had been right. I would always love Ana. While my heart would always have a special place just for her, and for what we could have been together, and for the family we missed out on having, I also hoped that I could love again, that I could find happiness again. Lamont had given me that understanding, that second chance.

“Ryker,” I opened my eyes to find that Keil was still beside me. I shook my head, trying to rid myself of my memories. The pain of waking up was more acute than it

would have been simply from my injuries, because I woke up without Ana, without my child—and for a moment—I forgot what had caused me to wake up in that terrible place—I was disoriented and in pain.

“Ryker,” he called again to me. I turned my face toward the call of his voice.

“Keil?” I mumbled.

“Yes, Ryker, I am here,” he answered, and then, as my eyes rested on his, I felt blackness overwhelm me yet again. Would I ever stay conscious? Was I doomed to play through memories of my life for all eternity? I faded, I must have been in the corruptor’s grasp, I was being tortured for my dishonor.

“I want you to know, Rykerian, that you are a brother to me.” Lamont was walking back and forth in the living room. His wife, Ara, was in the bedroom, resting near Emma, who was in the cradle beside her bed.

“You are my brother, Lamont,” I returned, placing a hand over my heart. It was true. Lamont and I had a friendship that tested the very limits of the guardian knighthood and the heirs. We had become closer than friends; we had become brothers. I would lay down my life for him, and as wrong as it was for an heir to do it for a guardian knight, I knew he would do the same for me. I, however, made him swear that he never would, because that was my duty.

“I am so sorry about Ana,” he gulped, looking at me. “This must be incredibly difficult for you.” His melody was swirling with so many thoughts, and I knew that he worried for his little girl, and at the same time, he was concerned about my pain and what I had lost.

“I am nothing but so happy for you, Lamont. You have to know that.” I watched as he nodded at me, folding his arms across his chest.

“I loved her, too, Ryker,” he added, and I knew that he meant Ana.

“I am thankful for that,” I whispered. I didn't want to think about Ana. My melody swarmed with emotions, and I knew that Lamont had heard them. I didn't want to dwell on the pain of losing her.

“I want your happiness above all else in this world. I want you to be an equal; you are my equal.”

I knew these words of his. He had offered them before. I knew this realm was different from Terra, but no matter how many years I would be on Earth, I would always hold firm to my duty as a guardian knight to him. My soul sang this to him, and he nodded, his melody answering back with understanding.

“I ask this, because of what you have lost. I ask because you are the most noble and brave Terran that I have ever met. You are free to decline. I only ask it of you because I hold you in such high esteem.” His melody was shielded. He obviously wanted me to hear his voice first, along with what he had to say, before I heard it in his melody.

“Anything you ask, my prince, I will do.” I bowed.

“Please, Kerian. None of that,” he said, motioning for me not to bow.

“What do you ask of me?” I said from one knee, looking up to him.

“I do not order you to do anything. I am giving you an option, a choice.” He walked closer to me and turned to look out the window. “You heard her melody. You know what my daughter, Emma—what she is. You know that her powerful melody—makes her a beacon. Who knows who has already heard her when she was born—and from what worlds or realms?”

Her melody was so loud at her birth that I wouldn't be surprised if all of Terra heard it—and even beyond.

“Her soul is remarkable,” I said with a smile, looking down the hall to the closed door where the little baby slept along with her mother.

“I am asking, Ryker, if you would mark her.”

“Mark her?” I questioned. My body was frozen, and I wasn't sure if I had heard him correctly. He unshielded his melody, and I could hear that he was in earnest.

“Yes, then no one will be able to claim her and make her theirs.”

“ You want me to mark your daughter?”

“You have the choice. I would never take that away from you. I would never ask it of you if I didn't believe that someday it could also benefit you just as much as it would keep her safe. I need her safe, Ryker. Tarick is still alive, and if he ever finds me, if he ever kills me, I need to know that Emma will be safe, that she will be taken care of.”

“I will do anything and everything for Emma. You have to know that,” I said, standing up and moving around in the dark living room.

“I do. Of course, I do, Ryker,” Lamont added, walking over to the couch and sitting down. “Still, you do understand that a marking would completely protect her.”

“I understand,” I nodded. Of course, I understood that markings were completed often on Terra, but they weren't ever done between a guardian knight and an heir. We were never to cross that line, that boundary. I knew that my relationship with Lamont had already crossed the line. We were brothers, not servant and master. Although I

tried to be his servant, he wouldn't always let me.

“I will not force you, Ryker. I am merely asking. I know how Ana’s death broke you; I know she took a piece of you with her when she moved on to the Ancient Lands. I feel the hurt in your soul. I would do anything to help heal that for you, for you to know happiness again. Being here in this realm, this is your second chance. It is a new life, a new chance for you, just as much as it is for me. I also know that you would be good to her. You would be devoted.”

“I am not worthy of your daughter, Lamont. It is that simple,” I said, turning to him and pausing in my pacing.

“You know, you are the only one who thinks that.”

This was common on Terra, but not here on Earth. I had not thought of this suggestion, it was a complete shock. I knew he was thinking of me. It was a great honor. I was sure that I couldn't ever love anyone again like I loved Ana. I also knew that I was broken a bit from it all, but there he was trying to heal me. I also knew that it was true: if we marked, and if we both kept our souls properly shielded, it would keep Emma safe. That was my job—to keep the heirs safe. I would do whatever it took to do that. If that meant to mark her, I would.

“It would be an honor to protect another heir, even in this way, Lamont.” I bowed, and he pushed my shoulder.

“Stop bowing. It’s exhausting,” he smirked at me, and I read his soul. He was beyond happy, beyond grateful that I would do it. He hoped for my happiness just as he hoped for his daughter’s. I couldn't promise love, but I would keep her safe. I would make sure of it.

“I am more indebted to you than ever before. How will I ever be able to repay you?”

he asked with tears in his eyes. “She is more precious to me than anything.”

“You have repaid me. Your friendship is more than enough.” We walked into the bedroom, and he cradled Emma in his arms.

It happened so fast. One moment I was just a knight, the next—marking someone. Her soul and my soul combined for just a moment, and then as I moved away from her, I could hear my melody inside of hers, right before Lamont shielded her soul once again.

“It is done,” he said with a smile. He turned to Ara and held her hand. She was beaming.

“We know you will keep her safe, and we thank you, Ryker. You are the noblest of knights, and the dearest of friends—our family,” Ara added.

“My brother,” Lamont smiled, his eyes watering as he placed a hand on my shoulder. I looked at Lamont and then down at Emma, at her sleeping form. Her melody and mine were combined. She was my mission, the most important one I would ever have near me. I would do anything and everything to keep her safe. That was my new purpose, new reason for living; keeping Emma safe.

“Until my last breath, I will keep her safe,” I vowed.

The fog of memories mingled with the familiar beeping sounds. I tried to divide the two—tried to be free of the memories, to stay awake, to find out if, indeed, Emma was safe. I needed her to be safe. I cursed myself for being weak and falling at the hand of the corruptor's blade, for being so wounded that I couldn't pull her from that cave to safety. I cursed at myself because she had come to that place, looking for me. She was too much like her father. She cared about me too much. I couldn't survive if I lost her. I could not live, could not accept more air into my lungs if Emma were to no

longer exist. My soul, my body couldn't handle that much shame.

Then I heard it, a faint familiar sound, taking away the darkness, the thoughts of worry, and the despair that unfurled around me. The melody was the most beautiful thing that I had ever heard, there was a part of her melody that reminded me of Lamont's. But her melody mourned; it was tortured. I felt a warmth on my palm and a piercing in my soul and heart—from our connection.

I opened my eyes, blinking once, twice, three times—faster and faster as the room came into focus. I looked to my side and saw her there, whole and safe. Tears were on her cheeks, and her face looked pained, but she was alive. She was there, and most importantly, she was safe. She turned to me, and her vibrant green eyes seemed to glow even in that darkened room. Her melody swirled around me, and I felt her every feeling for me. It was peace, joy, but mostly, it was all her—all Emma.

“Emma, you are safe,” I whispered.

“Of course, I'm here, Ry.” Her voice was the most breathtaking sound in the universe. I smiled, or attempted to, at least. “I'm so glad you're safe.”

She wiped her tears.

Chapter 21

"Ryker," she whispered again. I squeezed her hand, and she smiled, her brilliant green eyes anchoring me. I sat up as best I could. It hurt, but I needed her nearer, closer. I pulled her to me. She was against my chest and crying. "I thought I lost you," she sobbed.

"Never," I smiled. She sat up in my arms, moving the tears from her eyes, confusion in them as she saw me. I smiled. "You could never lose me," I said.

"Ryker," she said, and I felt it in her melody, through her feelings—feelings of love. Her love swarmed me through her melody. It covered my entire body and made me feel like I could fly.

"Emma," I choked out. It was all I could say, it seemed.

"Ryker. I'm so, so happy that you're safe," she whispered, her eyes tearful yet holding a hopeful spark inside of them that made me feel warm inside.

"Me, safe? Princess, of course? I was about to die when Keil pulled me away from the cave, but I passed out. My body is weak," I said as I pulled her to me even closer. "But not too weak for this." The heat between us grew so powerful, so beautiful and perfect that I couldn't hold back anymore. I couldn't resist. I kissed her cheek. "I was so afraid, afraid that I had failed you yet again." I trailed kisses to her jaw, then neck and throat, and it felt different—something ached inside me but I tried to ignore it. I could not believe what I was doing. She wrapped her arms around my neck and leaned against my chest.

“I love you so much, Ry, you are the best friend and my family—” she whispered as tears stained her cheeks. She kissed my cheeks and forehead. I knew it then; her feelings swarmed me. But, just as soon as they came, she was out of my arms so fast that I almost thought it was all in my head.

"Emma, get away from him," I turned to look at who spoke, but I unfortunately knew the voice all too well. His arms were wrapped around her stomach. She didn't move away from him, only looked surprised.

"This is none of your business, Prince Shad." I snarled as I watched him pull Emma into his arms tighter.

"I think you need your rest, Ry. I'm so glad that you're okay," she added with tears streaming down her cheeks, and fear—fear was all I saw in her eyes and soul, and it pained me.

"Emma, you don't have to go," I pleaded, looking behind her to an altered Shad who I almost did not recognize. His eyes were black, and there was no melody around him. I heard Emma's melody ache at the loss of him, the loss of Shad's soul. How had I not noticed it before? Her pain was so powerful.

"Mary wanted me to go back to our room a long time ago anyway. I will come see you tomorrow."

"Keep your hands to yourself, Shad," I growled.

"Sleep well." He smiled as he pulled Emma away and out the door, trailing his hand down her arm and watching me, as if mocking me.

I ached everywhere, not just physically, but my very soul ached, too—the loss of her was too much. When giving away a heart, there is no guarantee that it won't break.

No wonder I had kept my soul shielded. How had I forgotten that I shouldn't kiss her? Had I just ruined everything?

The darkness in the hospital room was equal to my sorrow, as happy—perfect memories of Emma plagued me. Eventually, exhaustion overtook my body, but even as I slept, lightning grey eyes and vibrant green Terran eyes haunted me. I felt pain at kissing Emma, as if I had betrayed Ana, and yet a slight happiness at the closeness Emma and I just shared. I tried to close the box and lock it up again that night, adding Emma inside of it. I tried to catch every memory, every touch, and every word spoken between us. I tried to lock them up, to stop the pain, but I couldn't. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't fix the box. The lock was broken, the lid was cracked, and my feelings were there, raw and spilling out.

Hours later, as darkness swarmed in, and I started to fall into the nothingness of sleep, three words fell from my lips—three words, with three pleas. One plea to the Ancients, one plea to the Lamont, and one to Ana:

“Please forgive me—”

Then, there was blackness again.

Shattered Heir Bonus Scene

The trail back to our make-shift camp was my own personal death march. What else other than the death of everything I loved was I walking toward? Still, I kept moving because I knew that I couldn't stay there, alone on that trail. The shadows of the trees on the forest floor danced before me as if mocking me by displaying the dark pain that was swelling and smoldering inside of me. The blood from my fingertips and legs dripped into the dirt and onto the brittle leaves as I passed, leaving a trail of crimson sorrow in my wake. I was panting. I could hear my own breaths coming out labored, and there was a ringing in my ears—as if bombs had just exploded in front of me, and all sound was muffled. It wasn't a bomb; it was Shad's horror-filled scream that caused the ringing in my ears. Had I gone deaf from it? Each step I made could be measured in ragged breaths and blood splatters. I paid my toll to the forest for each and every movement forward. I thought that each step I took would be my last. I didn't know if I had enough energy inside of me to keep moving, to keep putting one foot in front of the other. I didn't have the energy, but the monster—the beast inside me? She did. I let the beast overtake me as I walked, let the hatred and anger rage inside me. Anyone looking at me would have seen a bloody and bruised girl, struggling just to walk there in that forest, but inside of me, all Hell was breaking loose, and it consumed me. I let it burn.

There was a slight part of me that questioned those beastly shadows, flickering over my melody. There was a brief moment when I had the chance to push against them and shove those shadows away, but I didn't; I was stronger with them. I didn't think about why I had to keep walking; I only understood that I had to—and that was enough for the monster of anger inside of me, for each step brought me closer and closer to my destination.

After what felt like hours, with a small sliver of light left in the day, I reached our campsite. I fell to my already bruised and bloodied knees as I saw the familiar sight of our tents. I tamed the monster inside of me, telling her to rest, that she had done her job, and I breathed in and out slowly, trying to let my melody recover from the darkness of the shadows.

“Emma!” a warm voice, that I knew, shouted. I could hear again, and I registered a whimper of a cry, and then, I was in someone’s arms. I was picked up and placed at the fire pit. I sank down on a log, letting my head fall into my hands. My head felt so heavy that I couldn’t continue to hold it up. I set my elbows on my thighs. As I glanced down at my legs, hands, and shirt, it seemed that every single inch of me was caked and covered with crimson blood. Was it mine? Was I bleeding everywhere? I couldn’t remember. Hands were on my body and touching my face. Blue eyes looked at me, worried, as words were spoken, words that didn’t register with me, so I didn’t respond. My melody had gone silent, and so had the monster. It was as if they both knew that I needed tending to—or I would die.

“Here, hold this.”

I made out the words as something cold was wrapped around my fingertips. I looked down to see a wet towel in my hands.

“Wipe that dirt away, or it will get infected,” the voice continued.

I didn’t respond, but I did follow the directions. I needed to survive, so I did what I had to do. I looked long at my hands, bloodied and bruised and covered with dirt. I moved the towel over the dirt and scrubbed. I scrubbed and scrubbed, wiping away all the filth, all the rocks, all the grime, and all the mud away. I feverishly wiped and scratched, trying to clean myself, to rid myself of the horrid place which I had just escaped: from the look in Cade’s eyes; from the cry of horror from Shad’s lips; from Ryker’s bruised and broken, half-dead body on the floor of the cave; from black, soulless eyes. Warm hands were placed on top of mine, and I stopped.

“You will hurt yourself even more; it’s already clean. Here, let me bandage it.”

I said nothing as bandages were wrapped around each individual finger. I closed my eyes and tried to remember where I was. I am in the forest; this is Mary; she is helping me, I repeated in my head over and over again, hoping that the monster that wanted blood wouldn't force me to attack Mary in my rage.

“Let me get your legs now,” she said softly, and I placed my hands in my lap.

I still couldn’t feel them. I couldn’t feel anything except the beating of my heart and the pounding in my head. I watched as she cut off my pants’ legs to expose the cuts on my knees. She poured some antiseptic into my wounds and patted them softly; then she bandaged them. She stood up and reached for me, touching my shoulders.

I pulled away, surprised by the contact, afraid that I would hurt her. She just fixed you; do not hurt her, I told myself, even though it was mostly for the benefit of the monster within me.

“You are okay, Emma,” she said, and I looked into her blue eyes, so familiar, so warm, and so kind. She wasn’t touched by the horror; she was clean of it. I gasped as she pulled me into her arms, and I sobbed.

“We have to go now, Emma. It isn’t safe to stay here. Ryker and Keil have already gone. I have been waiting for the two of you. Ryker was so badly injured that Keil had to hike down to find cell service in order to get a helicopter to fly him off of this mountain and to the nearest hospital.”

I heard the words she spoke, but it was like my brain was extra slow at computing the meaning, as if my brain was a computer, and it wasn’t connected to the wifi, or it was, but running at a super slow speed. I sat there in silence for a few minutes after she finished, and I nodded my head.

“Shad?” I asked as I spoke for the first time in what felt like a lifetime.

“He went into his tent. Was his soul really taken?” she asked, her voice hopeful that Keil had told her wrong.

“He is soulless now,” I said, trying to stop the tears from flooding my vision, but it was useless. Mary nodded, but I could feel an air of change within her. Sadness flowed to me from her in waves.

“I am sorry, Emma,” she said, her eyes cast down.

“I will save him,” I responded quickly, standing up.

“Emma, there is nothing anyone can do for a soulless,” she whispered, tears dripping down her face.

“I can save him, I will,” I repeated. Her eyes were sad, and she nodded, defeat echoing in her movement.

“I will go get him. We need to leave right away.”

“Even though it’s night?” I asked, suddenly realizing it had become completely dark.

“Keil said that we needed to get off of this mountain as soon as you both were back.” She stood and walked to the tent which Shad and Keil had shared the night before.

How had everything happened so quickly? I heard the zipping of zippers and turned around to see Shad standing outside of the tent, talking to Mary. I couldn’t hear them because I was either too far away, or I was still blocking things out. I didn’t feel as if I was in full control of myself anymore. I looked over at our campsite: a small ring for the fire pit, a few logs to sit on, one small tent, and three backpacks. Mary must have packed our tent away already. I watched as Mary took down the remaining tent

by herself. Shad stared into the forest. I tried to focus on Mary, not on Shad, but it was difficult. Does he know me? Does he know or remember Mary? What is he like now? I wanted to run into his arms and have him comfort me. I wanted to kiss every inch of his face. But earlier, when I had reached for his hand, he had swatted it away. He didn't want me, or need me—not anymore.

Book Two coming soon! Pre-order today!

I will save him, no matter the cost.

Not only were her parents murdered before her eyes, her best friend was beaten, the boy she loved had his soul taken, but she also had to come to terms with her new identity as a princess from a magical realm where peoples' souls actually sing. But Emma's newest problem—how to save the boy she loves before there was nothing left to save—felt entirely impossible to overcome. Yes, it is a lot for any teenager to deal with. If she had her Shad, not the soulless boy who looked like him at her side, she knew nothing would be too much for her to handle.

However, when Cadian shows up at her school, Emma adds him to her lengthy list of problems. She tries to keep away from him, but with Shad's melody inside of Cadian, it makes everything more complicated. The hatred she harbors for him starts to change. Is he playing a game? Or is it possible that when he has a soul, he isn't as evil as she once believed him to be?

Emma knows that time is running out for Shad. Forced to go against everything she holds dear, to get closer to the one person she hates more than anyone, she is determined to steal back Shad's soul.

This is book two in The Heir Series, a portal fantasy romance coming 2025.