



The Secret Keeper's Daughter (Legacy of the Hunter #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I always thought the worst thing about my life was shoveling manure. Turns out, I was wrong.

My mother's dying words reveal a devastating truth: I'm half-fae. Before I can even process this, my stepfather announces he's sold me off to a cruel stranger.

So I run.

Into the woods, where fae lurk in the shadows, waiting. The only person I trust is Harek, my best friend. Yet even he has been keeping secrets. Can I trust anyone at all?

Each step deeper into fae territory brings me closer to the truth about my father, the mysterious fae who abandoned me. He's the key to understanding the strange power awakening inside me—power that sets my palm ablaze with an eerie orange light. But finding him means stepping into a world where half-lings like me are hunted and despised, where ancient magic stirs in the darkness, and where every choice could be my last.

As the line between friend and foe blurs, and my feelings for Harek turn into something I'm not ready to face, I begin to wonder: What if the truth about who I am is the very thing that destroys me?

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Chapter

One

If it snows any harder, I won't be able to finish my normal day's workload—not that the weather would be an acceptable excuse for Gunnar. My stepfather's expectations have never been reasonable, particularly where I'm concerned. I'd run away if it weren't for my mother, and I'd take her with me if he wouldn't kill me for it. If leaving wouldn't kill her .

Thinking of her pushes me to work harder. Ever since she got sick, I've been relegated to menial work. Gunnar knows I won't tell her because the last thing I want is to add to her worries when she can't even get out of bed. She's already concerned about us kids, and especially me.

I keep telling her I'll be fine, and I will be. I'm just not sure what that'll look like. Though her husband is the only father figure I've ever known, he's always made it clear I'm not his. Once Mother's illness finally wins, he's either going to give me worse work—if possible—or banish me from the family's farm.

He never misses an opportunity to remind me I don't belong, and he'll never give me anything of his.

I toss the steaming horse manure into a bucket then set the shovel aside. It's almost impossible to see the house through the squall. As snowflakes dance to the ground, I plead to the skies for help. I'm not sure anyone up there is listening, or if there's any entities up there at all, but I really don't have any other option.

Nobody down here can do anything for me, and Gunnar won't.

"Eira! Eira!"

Instinctively, I grab the shovel and start scooping more excrement.

My youngest sister Runa hurries toward me. She slips on the ice then skids to a stop inches from me, gasping for air and loosening the top of her fur coat. "I ran all... the way here... Mother... she..."

"Stop!" I don't wait to hear the rest. There's only one reason anyone would race all this way to tell me about Mother.

She's near the end. This is it. The only reason Runa is here.

The silent tears trailing down my sister's pale cheeks tell me I'm right. She tucks one of her tiny, nearly-white braids behind an ear and chews on her lower lip. More tears pool in her light eyes.

I need to be strong for her, for all of my siblings. In any other situation, as the oldest daughter I'd have been slated to step into Mother's role as caregiver and head of household duties the moment she got sick. Definitely once she leaves the earth. I'll do what I can while I'm able, assuming Gunnar hasn't already thrown my things into the fire.

And assuming she hasn't already passed away.

That's a thought I can't even comprehend.

I take Runa's hand, her skin looking even paler next to mine. "Let's go."

She snuffles as she nods, then we burst into a run. Snowflakes smack my face in tiny icy bursts, but I ignore them. Thankfully my fur coat protects the rest of my body. Between the heavy pelts and running from the animal fields to the house, I'm drenched in sweat as my sister and I race up the creaky front steps.

Runa flings open the front door. "Hurry!"

We barely take the time to hang our coats inside before racing to the big bedroom. All of my other siblings are already gathered around the large canopied bed. I can't even see Mother with such a crowd around her.

"She wants to talk to you alone." My stepfather's fair brows draw together. The warning in his piercing eyes tells me not to take up too much of her remaining time.

If it were up to him, I wouldn't even get to say goodbye to my own mother.

He gathers my siblings, and for a rare moment I get her all to myself. I hurry to Mother's side and take her hands in mine. "I'm here, Mama."

I haven't called her that since I was a little girl—and that's how I feel suddenly. A lump forms in my throat, and tears sting my eyes. I've pushed all my worry and sadness aside since the day she turned ill, and now they threaten to overwhelm me.

My mother turns her head slowly. Her dull eyes light up when our gazes meet. "My precious Eira."

"Mama."

"My time has come, darling daughter."

All I can do is shake my head. I want to tell her she's wrong, mistaken. But we both

know the truth.

“There’s something... I need to tell you. Secrets... I’ve been keeping.”

My heart skips a beat. Is she finally going to tell me about my birth father? She’s always promised she would. Without much time left, the long-awaited day is finally here.

I’d rather have my mother alive and well than know anything about the man who did nothing more than sire me.

“Do you need anything? Can I get you something?” I ask only to put off the inevitable, as if my fussing could add even a moment to her life.

A raspy sigh escapes her mouth. “Your father... isn’t... who you think. Should’ve told you... sooner.”

My stomach drops. I’ve never given any thought to my real father. Literally nothing. The only thing I know is he didn’t stick around to help raise me. Well, that and he obviously has dark hair, eyes, and skin. It’s his features that make me stand out like a palm tree in the snow in a world of blonde hair and light eyes. But other than that, I’ve never wasted my energies pondering his identity or personality. At least, not him specifically. The mysterious half of my heritage, however? I’ve wondered about that more than I’d like to admit.

“You need... to find him. He has... answers. He...” She squeezes my hand. “He’s...”

“Yes?” My breath catches. The suspense is going to do me in. Whatever she’s about to say has to be bad. Maybe he’s in prison for mass murder. Or maybe he’s never been caught. Mother fled here while pregnant. That’s never been a secret. Now I realize she must have been running to keep us safe. It’s the only explanation—I come

from someone who's done terrible things.

"Who is he?" I ask, trying to keep the desperation from my tone. The last thing she needs is any stress right now.

She sucks in a deep breath, closes her eyes. For a moment, I think she took her secret to the grave.

"Mother?" My voice cracks. A tear finally escapes. "Are you still here?"

Her fingers slide through mine and squeeze. She's still with me. "You... should find him."

A thought strikes me. My father isn't a killer, or she wouldn't tell me to find him. It gives me hope that he isn't worse than Gunnar. I need to know who he is, because I'm going to need his protection once my stepfather disowns me. Once Mother is gone, I'll be on my own despite Gunnar's empty promises to watch out for me.

Mother opens her eyes, meets my gaze. "Find him."

"Where? Who is he?" I plead.

"He's... fae."

The words are like a slap to my face. I struggle to find my voice. "Wh-what?"

She can't be right. I had to have misheard her. There's no way my father is fae. It's impossible. I don't have any powers. There's not one thing special about me.

On the other hand, if true, this is a fate worse than death. Everybody hates halflings. Humans and fae hate each other—but both detest halflings. No one accepts them.

That explains my stepfather's utter disdain for me. It isn't just because I'm another man's child. I'm a halfling.

It can't be true. It just can't.

"D-does Gunnar know?" The question escapes my mouth before I can filter it out.

She shakes her head slowly. "Never tell him."

Then my stepfather only hates me for normal human reasons. I can only imagine his wrath if he thought I was a halfling.

Mother clears her throat. "Don't let him find out."

"To keep me safe."

She nods. We both know how dangerous this secret is for me.

Knock, knock!

"You've had enough time in there!" Gunnar's voice booms through the thick door.

Mother squeezes my hands again. "You need to know he's?—"

The door bursts open. My stepfather glares at me. "Do you think you're something special? The rest of us deserve time with her too!"

I glance back down at Mother, her hands limply resting in mine. Silently I plead with her to finish her sentence. To mouth what she was going to tell me. What kind of a fae is my father? And therefore me?

Whatever powers or abilities he has, I have access to as well. I can use those when I'm out on my own protecting myself.

He'll need to teach me. That is, if he'll accept his halfling daughter. The fact that he's never reached out tells me everything I need to know. Unless he stayed away to protect me. No. That's not a good enough excuse to abandon me.

I'm just as much on my own as I thought. Only now more so. The fact that I'm halfling will only mark me as everyone's enemy. Soon, all people—human and fae alike—will look at me like Gunnar is glaring at me now.

“Mother?” I squeeze her hands.

She closes her eyes, and she goes limp.

“Mother!”

No response.

I rest my head on her stomach and wail.

Someone pulls me away from her, and I fight them. It's no use. My stepfather and brothers are bigger and stronger than me.

Gunnar squeezes my arm so tightly that I gasp. His nostrils flare as he stares me down. “Pack your things.”

“But—”

“I already have your future husband on his way.”

Blood drains from my head. “You what?”

“You heard. Go pack your things. I can’t wait for that dowry to be mine.”

I stare at him, dumbfounded. My mother just died moments ago, and he’s marrying me off?

He shoves me. “Get to it!”

The room fills with my nine siblings and other relatives who have been called here for Mother’s end.

I won’t be here to mourn her with them. It doesn’t matter that I’m her firstborn, that she fled to this place to keep me safe . Now I must leave and figure everything out on my own—before a rich, old man arrives to stake his claim on me.

The thought sends a shudder through me. Gunnar wouldn’t care to pick someone kind or compatible with me. He would choose the richest man looking for a wife here in Skoro, and that means only one man. Vog is more than twice my age, is missing teeth, smells bad, and is even crueler than my stepfather. His wife recently died under mysterious circumstances, and there are whispers he had a hand in it.

I have to escape before he arrives, without anyone seeing me go.

Then, in order to survive, I’ll have to figure out who my father is and hope he’ll be willing to help a halfling he never wanted. If he’d accepted me, Mother would’ve stayed with him. But a fae/human couple raising a halfling?

That would never happen.

Fae rule over and oppress humans. They don’t fall in love, and they certainly don’t

take care of each other.

I have to pick a side and hide the other half of my identity. Depending on what type of fae I am, I'm either part of the ruling class or the outcasts—the bloodsuckers or shifters who live in and rule the woods. Whether high or lowly, fae terrorize humans. We're at the bottom of the social chain, lower than the ruthless murderers of the night.

Halflings are even lower than humans.

My father could belong to either class. Either he's an aristocrat who refused to acknowledge his halfling heir, or he's a forest dweller who wanted to kill his halfling offspring. Either way, it's no surprise that Mother ended up on her own. No fae would want me, and I was a baby only a mother could love.

Now I'm a grown woman nobody wants. A despised halfling. I can't live among humans or fae. Except Mother said to find my father. Might he accept me? Is there a chance? If there is, I need to take it. Even though I don't know where to begin.

At least I don't have to live on this farm anymore. Although Gunnar and Vog will surely be after me once they realize I've run away. And I'll be in worse danger if they figure out I'm a halfling. They won't just kill me—they'll torture me. Make me wish I was dead.

Maybe I'll be able to figure out my fae powers on my own and use those against them.

Probably not. From what I've heard, most fae spend years honing their powers. As fae are stronger than humans, I'll probably be safer among them. How can I blend in and find my place amongst their kind? Perhaps my father and his relatives will accept me.

Except my mother moved to Skoro to keep me safe—probably from them. I'm the lowest of the low, after all. Despised by everyone.

Before I can worry about assimilating with my real father's family, I need to escape my stepfather. First I need to pack what I can carry with me. It's time to start over.

Completely on my own.

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Chapter

Two

The two bags weigh heavily on my back as I stand in the doorway to give one last glance to the only bedroom I've ever known. Just like Mother, I'll never see it again. I've burned her image in my memory, and I attempt to do the same with the sleeping space sparsely decorated with four single beds, one dresser, and plain white curtains over a tiny window.

More than anything, I want to give my sisters a tight squeeze goodbye, but Gunnar will never allow that. Maybe one day after I've figured out my powers, I can return and make him wish he'd been nicer to me when he had the chance.

Or I could choose to forget all about him and never give him another passing thought. That might be the better sort of revenge, though making him pay would be more fun.

I shove those thoughts from my mind and head for the kitchen, grabbing enough food to tide me over for the night until I figure out where to get my next meal.

Wailing sounds from the big bedroom. My chest tightens, and a single tear trails down my face. Unfortunately, I don't have the luxury of the mourning week the rest of my family will take.

Come to think of it, returning to make my stepfather pay does sound like a good idea. There's no reason other than spite that he wouldn't even let me take time to cry over my mother. It wouldn't cost him anything to give me a few more days here, but he

wouldn't wait until her body cooled to toss me out like trash.

So be it. The sooner I'm away from him, the better. My only regret is not being able to say goodbye to my sisters. We've always been close, despite Gunnar's many attempts to turn them against me. He can't take away the fact that we're blood—as much as he hates that fact.

I let my bags slide to the floor and return to my bedroom. Once I find a pad of paper and a dull pencil, I scribble a note letting my beautiful sisters know how much I love them and will never forget them.

It will crush them to lose me on the same day as Mother, but there's nothing I can do about that. I'm not sticking around to marry that wicked man. I have to get out of here as fast as I can, before he arrives.

My siblings losing me is on Gunnar. As much as I want to tell them so, I refrain from mentioning him in the letter. It's important they know I didn't want to leave them. They'll understand the subtext. Maybe not little Runa, but the others will explain it to her.

I'm losing everything today, and I can't even take the time to think about it. I leave the note in a place my sisters will find it then return to my things in the kitchen. My heart aches to join my family in the remembrance of Mother. I should be here for all of it, especially the funeral march two days from now, but the best I can hope for is to watch from a distance.

If I'm safe staying in the village.

Even that is nothing more than wishful thinking. I need to get out of Skoro completely. Gunnar is well respected here, so most everyone in town would jump to help him find me. He will stop at nothing to get a fat dowry from my marriage.

The people I've known my entire life will form a mob and drag me through the village to return me to him.

Tears blur my vision. Every time I turn around I face another loss. More than my mother, family, and home, it's everything I've ever held dear. I'm forced to abandon all I've ever known.

The only thing I can afford to think about is survival. I don't know what lies outside the walls of Skoro—only frightening rumors about the fae. And given Mother's last words, I'm one of them. Kind of. Half.

There's a chance they'll accept me, small as it may be.

Here in Skoro, every male who reaches maturity joins the military and serves time protecting our human colony, even though fae rarely make the trek here. Not with the extreme cold weather. They like to be comfortable, so they've taken over the moderate climate areas, leaving the humans to make due in either the snowy regions or scorching deserts. Our kind can only live free in those rare pockets of protected land. From what I've heard, humans in fae territory are either slaves or in hiding.

Not that I can even call humans my kind anymore. Will I ever adjust to being both—and at the same time neither? It's surreal to think I'm half fae, yet it does make sense.

A small fire burns in my chest. What powers do I have? How can I figure them out and use them to my advantage? Will I need to find my father to get any of those answers?

If only my mother had been able to finish her sentence. Of course it had been Gunnar who kept that information from me. Even without trying, he still manages to ruin everything for me.

My stepfather's voice sounds louder. He must be coming closer.

I pull myself from my thoughts and realize I'm just standing here thinking. Trying to make sense of everything that just happened. Despite how much Gunnar hates me, I want to stay. The farm is all I've known, even if my stepfather hates me and wants to make my life miserable.

Loud footsteps echo from the other room. Soon he's speaking with someone... It sounds like his brother. Of course he would bring his family here at a time like this, and not to mourn my mother. Gunnar wants backup should I flee instead of marrying. He's protecting the dowry, coveting the rich man's payment for my servitude.

Heart pounding, I quickly tiptoe toward the door. If he sees me trying to escape, he'll tie me up or lock me in a room until Vog arrives to have his way with me.

Grief overwhelms me as I slip through the doorway for a final time. I'll never see my mother, siblings, or this house again. After one last glance, I hurry away. Heaving a sigh that sends a puff of white vapor into the air, I turn my back on the only home I've ever known then start down the snow-covered dirt road to the end of the property. Hopefully the fat flakes continue to fall and cover my tracks.

I'll have to figure a way out of the village unseen. The army guards the entrances around the clock. It's mostly to keep out the fae, but they also refuse to let people like me leave. Women and children can't exit without permission from their fathers or husbands. I have neither, so one would think that wouldn't be a problem, but I'm still considered Gunnar's. If others know of his deal, people will also see me as Vog's.

My future depends on me escaping as soon as possible. I've heard of places where women can live free and make their own decisions without deferring to a man. If that's true, I'm going to find one—even if it's across the globe. I'm an adult but people still treat me as a child. I only stuck around because of my mother and

siblings—and I'd stay if my stepfather allowed. I've put up with Gunnar's mistreatment this long, I could continue a little longer. But he doesn't want me. Worse, he wants money for me and is insisting on marrying me off. Not only do I have no desire to get married, but I refuse to wed Vog.

That's all irrelevant. I'm on a new adventure now.

It's dusk, which helps camouflage me as I hurry from my home. Even so, I dart near trees, posts, and anything else that will keep me from being completely out in the open.

A wind picks up, brushing more snowflakes against my exposed skin. Even with my warm coat and hat, I shiver. Soon enough, walking with these packs will have me in a sweat.

A furtive glance around tells me I'm still alone. My stepfather isn't after me yet. He hasn't noticed I've slipped away and he's losing whatever riches Vog promised him for my hand... and more. I shudder at the thought.

All of this snow is enough to make me wonder what it would be like at the human establishments in the sunny deserts with no need for thick warm coats just to step outside. They probably have the opposite problems and dream about living somewhere cold.

It's in the fae establishments where things are most comfortable. If I can hide my human half, I might be able to make a home for myself in one of those places. But before I do that, I have to figure out my fae powers. Somehow I need to solve this mystery with nothing to go on. I don't know my real father's name or even which type of fae he is. And if he wants nothing to do with me, I'll never find him. His powers must vastly outshine whatever mine might be—he's had decades or even centuries to hone his skills, depending on what type he is and how old he is.

He might be willing to talk to me. I am his daughter. The fact that he had a relationship with my mother shows he isn't fully against humans, unless of course he didn't realize what she was. He clearly didn't accept her being pregnant with me, or they'd have married. I wouldn't have grown up with a stepfather who despises my very existence.

Everything is a gamble, but I have no other choice than my natural father. He's the only one who can provide the answers I need. Even if he gives me the boot after filling in some blanks, at least that would be better than where I'm at now.

Alone and cold with the only life I know literally behind me.

It takes nearly half an hour to reach the edge of the farmland. I keep focused on the dirt road ahead, ignoring the fields and large livestock. I've spent my life caring for them—before Gunnar relegated me to manure patrol when Mother became too ill to know what was going on outside her bedroom—and breaks my heart to think about never seeing the animals again. I can't handle more loss.

So I concentrate on the road ahead and the dancing snowflakes. With each step I take, I get warmer. More comfortable. My confidence grows in my ability to make this adventure work. Never mind not knowing how I'm going to get through the settlement's walls or what lies behind them. Those are problems for later.

Once I reach the edge of the property, I pause. Give myself a moment to rest and catch my breath since nobody else is in sight. The main gravel road past the farmland gives me three options. I'd rather avoid the middle one that leads directly into the bustling main part of town.

The other two routes will eventually take me to the sides of the territory where I can potentially find a way out. It won't be easy—the walls are designed to keep people on their proper side. But the army can't be everywhere, and everything has weaknesses. I

just have to find one of the wall's secret entrances.

Someone grabs my arm, and a deep male voice booms behind me. "What do you think you're doing?"

My heart leaps into my throat, my knees wobble. Why didn't I grab a weapon before leaving?

I whip around, prepared to either fight or run.

And hopefully survive.

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Chapter

Three

My legs turn to rubber as I take in the face staring down at me. It takes me a moment to find my voice, and it comes out sounding childlike. “Harek?”

My best friend releases my arm, adjusts the same fur hat he’s had since he was fifteen, then glances down the road to the farm. “Aren’t you supposed to be scooping scat? Gunnar’s going to beat you again if you don’t get back to work, and when that happens, I can’t promise I’ll keep my fists to myself this time.”

“I’m running away because he’s sold me to the highest bidder. Vog is on his way to the farm for me now.”

Harek’s brows draw together. His face reddens, the color so deep it’s visible even in the moonlight. “Does your mother know? No way she’d allow that! She’d find the energy to climb out of that bed and pulverize him. And if she doesn’t, I will. She won’t mind—I’m sure of it. No way she agreed to that. He’s slimy and dastardly, and you shouldn’t have to be in the same room as him, much less marry him. Give me two minutes with him and he’ll breathe from the wrong orifice for the rest of his life!”

The tears I’ve been trying to hold back blur him into the shape of a cloud, and my mouth trembles. I struggle to say something coherent but can’t.

“What’s wrong?”

I can barely sputter out one word. “Mother...”

“No!” Harek gasps. “Say it isn’t so—she can’t be gone already!”

The tears gush down my face, my entire body shakes. I can’t hold back my grief any longer. In the safety of Harek’s presence, I can’t push down my pain for another moment.

“Eira, I’m so sorry.” My best friend pulls me into his arms and squeezes me so tightly against his chest I can barely breathe. “When did it happen? Did you get to say goodbye?”

My tears soak the fur on his jacket, making it smell even muskier than before. Somehow I manage to find the words. “She died just a little bit ago.” My voice cracks. “I barely had time to pack my things and sneak out. Mother no sooner took her final breath before I heard about Vog.”

“You want me to mess him up? I’ll do it. Just say the word. Or I can go for Gunnar. You know I’ve always wanted to put that scat weasel in his place.”

“No, forget about them.” I sniffle, choking back more sobs. “I’m running away. I’ll never have to see either of them ever again.”

“Fine, I’ll put them out of my mind for now. Let’s focus on you.” He pats my back. “Come with me.”

“Where?”

“My place. You need food and water.”

“I can’t. Me being there will put your family in danger.”

“We’ll deal with that later. What you need is time to mourn. You can stay with us as long as you need. My parents and I will go with you to the funeral.”

“Gunnar took that from me. I have to get out of Skoro. Staying isn’t an option—not even with you. Especially not with you. He’ll go after you and your parents. I’d never be able to live with myself.”

“We can handle him. That dung licker doesn’t know what... wait. Did you say you’re leaving? You can’t mean for good.”

“I have no other choice, Harek.”

“We’ll hide you. Lie to his face if it comes down to it. You’re staying with us, and I won’t take no for an answer.”

There’s no point arguing with him when he has his mind made up. At least I’m with someone who will take care of me. Maybe I can stay with Harek’s family during the mourning period before fleeing town. I could even watch the funeral from a distance.

Then I’ll be able to make a plan to figure out my fae heritage, crazy as that sounds. Seriously, will I ever get used to the fact that I’m part fae?

I should use the proper term. Halfling. I’m neither fae nor human.

At least I’m used to a life of not being accepted. Now I simply have another reason to be hated. Because of my very essence.

“Come on.” Harek takes my bags from me, heaves them onto his back, then guides me down the road. We stay near the edge of the tree line, making it harder for anyone to see us.

It's nice to have someone taking care of me. I wish I could tell him my secret, but I can't share that I'm a halfling—not even with him.

Nobody can know. My mother was right about that much.

I'll spend a few days with him, enjoying some last moments and memories with my best friend before taking off on my new journey. After that, I'll find both my father and my destiny then start my new life... whatever that might look like. That'll depend on whether my one remaining parent accepts me.

Given when my mother was pregnant she fled from him—I can only assume, since she didn't have time to tell me much—he must not have wanted anything to do with their child. Or he didn't realize Mother was only human when they got together. Finding out would've been unacceptable.

It isn't like fae look any different in their natural form. I've only seen a few in my time, but had I not known what they were, I'd have just thought they were like anyone else. Hopefully things will make more sense once I'm out in the wild and reach my first fae territory.

Before I know it, we reach Harek's home. It's small compared to mine—my former home—but it works for his little family. His father doesn't see having kids as building his empire. Not like Gunnar, who wanted Mother popping out babies one after another so they would all work the farm for him. Everyone except me, because I don't look like him. If I had his pale hair, eyes, and skin, would he want me to stay instead of selling me for a dowry? Probably not. Regardless of my appearance, my very existence is a reminder he wasn't the first man in Mother's life, and Gunnar wants to be first at everything. That alone could be why he hates me so much. Or it could be one of a dozen other things. Whatever the reason, I really don't care. I'm about to start my own adventure.

Harek pulls me into his house and immediately sets a glass of water on the table in front of me.

I gulp it down, only now realizing how parched I am. All my crying must have dehydrated me. I'd mostly held it together until I saw him. Something about Harek breaks through my walls.

"What are you hungry for?" he asks.

"Nothing." My stomach roars loudly.

He lifts a brow. "Really?"

"My stomach and mind don't agree with each other."

"I'll find something." He rummages around then puts some smoked meat on a plate along with some cheese. "Try it. Last time Father and I went out, we struck gold."

"A deer?"

"Better." He beams.

It's rare any of the local archers catch anything larger than a deer out in the woods, though Harek and his father tend to catch large animals none of the others do. "I give up. What'd you get?"

"Taste and see if you can figure it out." He nudges the plate closer to me.

I'm hardly a meat connoisseur, unless it's something from the farm. We eat and sell a lot of chicken, eggs, and pork. Not much else. Gunnar never cooks anything bigger. He sells cows for top dollar, never "wasting" any of the beef on the likes of his

family.

Harek picks up a piece of dark meat and hands it to me.

The rich flavor explodes in my mouth, making me forget my problems momentarily. I recognize it—probably from another time I ate it here—but I can't place it. "You're going to have to tell me."

"Buffalo." He grins widely. "We're going to be able to buy everything we need around here. The meat has been selling like crazy at the market."

"Don't waste your family's food by feeding me this expensive meat."

"Because it's too good not to share with my best friend. Especially after the day you've had."

I glance at the plate. "You're sure?"

"If I wasn't, I wouldn't have offered it to you. Try it with the cheese."

After a moment of hesitation, I do. It's even tastier than the other piece.

"See?" He takes some and eats it. "I can't believe we were so lucky. One animal, and we're set to buy everything we need for a full month."

"I'm really happy for you. Speaking of your parents, where are they?"

"Mother's selling meat at the market while Father prepares the less desirable parts. There's a buyer for every cut. It's just a matter of waiting for the right person to come along."

“And what about you? Are you just lazing around today?”

He chuckles. “Hardly. Everything around here falls on me for now. Not that I mind—this is going to be a great month.”

“No one deserves it more than your family.” I glance at the last piece of meat on the plate.

“Take it,” he says.

I feel bad eating so much of his buffalo, but I need the nourishment if I’m going to travel through the woods and try to find answers about my heritage. I still can’t believe I’m part fae. I don’t know how Mother managed to keep that a secret all these years. She must’ve known whatever my powers are, they wouldn’t present a problem if I accidentally discovered them. What are they? What magical thing can I do?

“Do tell.” Harek’s voice breaks through my thoughts.

Even though I’ve always told him everything, I’m not ready to voice this .

“What’s your plan?” he asks. “Now that you’re finally free of Gunnar.”

“I’m not free until I’ve left the village gates, and now I have Vog to worry about, too.” I sigh, thinking of traveling through the woods on my own. There are all kinds of vile creatures out there—fae so terrible they aren’t allowed in the kingdoms and territories of their own kind. They’re the main reason our settlement has walls. It’s to keep out all fae, sure, but especially the bloodsuckers, the shifters, and the like. Those are the fae that parents tell scary stories about to their children to keep them in line.

The cold-blooded killers who give no thought to taking innocent lives.

“Eira? What’s your plan?”

I turn my attention back to Harek. “I’m leaving.”

“Right now?” Color drains from his face. “You can’t be serious.”

“I know I said I was going to stay a little while, but the more I think about it, the more I just need to leave. We both know Gunnar will stop at nothing until he gets the payment for me. I’m not safe in Skoro. Vog is already on his way to the farm.”

Harek stumbles over his words before spitting out something that makes sense. “You’re actually going somewhere else? Forever?”

“I have no other choice.”

“We’ll take you in. Maybe that’s why Father and I caught the buffalo—to save you.”

I straighten my shoulders. “I don’t want saving.”

He rubs his temples. “At least take some time to think about this. Let yourself mourn your mother. Then you’ll be able to think clearly later.”

“I’ve had plenty of time to gather my thoughts since she fell ill. From that moment, Gunnar had me scooping manure and gathering slop for the animals, which left me nothing but time to work everything out. I have to start over fresh. I wish I didn’t have to leave you behind, but I do. I’m sorry. It’s my destiny now. I knew I had to get away before, but now with Vog in the picture, things are more dire than I thought.”

Especially now that I know I have a real father out there somewhere. Even if he outright rejects me, I have to at least find out if he’ll consider taking me in.

Harek leans closer and rests a hand on mine.

An awkward moment passes between us. We both yank our hands away.

“I just mean...” He clears his throat. “My parents and I are more of a family to you than Gunnar ever was.”

Tears prickle at my eyes. “I know, and I appreciate your offer. However, I don’t want to be a burden to your parents. They’ve already been through enough. Besides, I need to do this.”

My best friend stares into my eyes. “You’re keeping something from me.”

I try to deny it, but can’t get out the words.

“Eira.” He holds my gaze.

I swear he stares directly into my soul.

“You’re right, Harek.”

He blinks a few times. “That you’re keeping something from me?”

“Yes. But I can’t tell you what I know. I’m sorry.”

“Well, at least you’re being honest about it. Can you at least say why you can’t tell me?”

My stomach knots. How would I explain it to him without telling him that I’m a halfling? I’d risk everything. He is the one person I’ve always been able to rely on outside of my mother and sisters. I can’t put him in danger. Plus, what if this news

was too much for him? If he decided he couldn't be my friend anymore, I couldn't take it. Not when I've already lost everything else today.

"Eira?"

"It's complicated."

"Did Gunnar do something that you didn't tell me about? I'll kill him. Nobody'd ever suspect it was me. I'm an archer, you know. I could be in and out before anyone noticed."

"No." Guilt stings. He's willing to kill for me, and here I am doubting he'll accept me after finding out about my real father.

Except my conflicted feelings aren't unfounded. Everyone hates halflings. Up until this afternoon before talking to my mother, if I'd crossed paths with one, I'd have run away and never looked back.

"No, he didn't do anything?" Harek asks. "Or no, you don't want me to kill him?"

"Both." Suddenly exhaustion sweeps through me. "But I'll take you up on your offer to rest here before I figure out my next step."

"I'm glad to hear that. Let me get you settled."

I follow him to their spare room. While this house is like a second home to me, I've never spent a night anywhere other than the farmhouse.

Everything in my life is going to be a series of firsts from here on out. Some of those firsts will put my life in danger.

I hope I'm up to the task. Whether or not I am, everything is about to change.

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Chapter

Four

It's dark by the time I wake from a fitful sleep of dreams about my mother. It takes me a few moments to remember everything that happened. I'm not in my own bed. Mother is gone. I'm never returning to the farmhouse. I won't get to see my siblings grow up.

My true father is fae.

I stare at my hands from the light coming through from the hallway. Some fae have powers that exit their bodies through their palms. I've seen it with my own eyes many years ago. It was one of the few times I actually saw fae. When I was a little girl, some of them came to the edge of the town and put on a show for us just outside the gates. They lit up the night darkness while displaying different powers—fire, water, light, dancing rainbows.

Gunnar scoffed and stormed away, muttering how stupid everyone was for enjoying the show. However, Mother told us kids how fun and magical it was to watch. She did tell us to always be careful around the fae, but she didn't act like they were dangerous monsters and that we were dumb for being curious about or amazed at what we saw.

Now I know why. I only wish I knew sooner. She could've answered so many questions. Maybe she always meant to tell me everything when I got older, but then illness stole that from us. If only she'd had time to tell me what kind of fae I am. That

would've been a helpful starting point.

But here I am. At least I know as much as I do. If Gunnar had kept her from talking to me at all, I might never know about my latent powers.

I stare at my palms and will them to do something.

They don't.

Maybe that isn't the kind of fae I am. Or I don't know how to activate my powers. I really should be careful—the last thing I want to do is burn down Harek's family home. I'd never forgive myself.

Voices sound from another room. Harek is telling someone about my mother.

A lump forms in my throat and hot tears fill my eyes. How can she be gone? It isn't fair at all. Why couldn't fate have allowed her to stay longer? She was a good person. One of the best. Not mean and harsh like her husband. Why don't people like Gunnar ever get sick and die too soon? My mother could've done so much good in the world. My stepfather is only going to serve himself. Nothing more.

While tears stream down my face and I try to choke back sobs so nobody hears me, I rub my palms together. Pull them apart. Wave them around, imagine something happening.

From what little lore I know about halflings, they all have powers. They aren't hindered by their humanity. Whatever my father can do, I should be able to do as well. But without him here to teach me, it's anyone's guess if I'll ever be able to tap into my magic.

That's exactly why I need to head out into the woods and find the nearest fae

metropolis. It could be where my parents met. If it is, my father may still be there. Not that I have a clue how I'll find him, aside from searching for someone who resembles me. I don't look particularly like Mother, so I must have many of his features.

A little spark of hope warms in my chest. Out of all this mess, all this heartache, maybe some good can grow. Even if my father doesn't want anything to do with me, I might get answers. Might be able to learn about my kind of fae. I can start over somewhere and hope it'll be as easy to hide my humanity as it has been to hide my fae side all these years.

Footsteps sound. Someone is heading my way.

I desperately wipe my tears and my nose.

Harek appears in the doorway holding a candle. "How'd you sleep?"

"Great, if you like nightmares."

He frowns. "I can't imagine losing my mother. Can I do anything for you?"

"No."

"I hope you're hungry. My father's making a stew from some of the buffalo parts."

"That sounds great. You're sure there's enough for me?"

"There's plenty." Yet his voice hitches.

His family isn't well off, and here I am eating their food.

All the more reason to take off as soon as I can. I don't want to take their resources when we're only at the beginning of what's sure to be a long winter. They can barely afford to feed themselves.

Harek reaches for my hand, and just before we make contact an orange light glimmers faintly—it's so light I wonder if it's my imagination. I desperately want to find powers, after all. He doesn't seem to notice. Must be wishful thinking on my part.

"Have you been crying?" He helps me to my feet.

"It's hard not to." I sniffle.

He wipes a tear. "Then you definitely have to eat."

"Okay, but then I need to leave." I glance back at my palm, which isn't lit up in the slightest.

"I'm going with you." He squares his shoulders.

I give him a double take. "No. I'm going alone."

"I won't let you." He stares me down.

"But you need to stay and help your parents."

"I should see you through the woods to the nearest human settlement. It's dangerous out there, and I know the land like the back of my hand." He glances at it. "Wait, when did I get this wart?"

"What?"

He grins. "I'm kidding. Let's eat, and then we'll start our preparations."

"I really don't want to pull you from your family. Your parents need you to hunt before the weather gets really bad."

"I'm going with you. You're not changing my mind."

"You're stubborn."

"As always."

I should be grateful my best friend wants to come with me on this adventure, but the timing is terrible. His parents really do rely on him to get through the harsh winters. Not only that, but if he travels with me, it's going to be hard to keep my secret from him.

We really don't keep anything from each other.

Though if the idea of me being a halfling freaks him out, he'll likely hightail it back here and be able to help his parents catch more food. That would be good.

"I hate that you're hurting so much," he says. "I've never seen you so quiet. Though actually, it is a little nice. Usually, I don't have the space to think around you."

I shove him.

He laughs. "There's the Eira I know and love."

"You said there's stew?"

"It's almost done, but we should start planning our journey. I don't know what you

have in your two bags, but I'm sure it isn't enough. Do you have a weapon?"

I shake my head. Not unless I'm a weapon, but obviously I can't tell him that what's inside me might be my best defense. I check my palm again.

It's slightly orange.

My heart leaps into my throat, and I hide my hand quickly. I'm not imagining that. It's real. My palm is orange.

A skittering noise sounds outside. It's just on the other side of the wall.

I practically pull a muscle in my neck as I turn toward it.

"What's wrong?" Harek asks.

"You didn't hear that?"

"Hear what?"

I hurry over to the wall and press my ear to it. Even with my hand against my leg, I can see a faint orange glow. Instinctively I pull my hand into my sleeve to hide it.

"What's wrong?"

"Someone's out there." I point to the wall. "Just on the other side."

"Stay here." He disappears from the room.

I follow him into the hallway.

He and his father are speaking in hushed tones. The front door creaks. Footsteps. Another creak then a soft click.

They've gone outside to face whoever or whatever I heard outside.

My heart races. What if I've just put them in danger?

I have to do something.

The orange glow on my palm is brighter now.

What does it mean? I want to yell at it. Will it help me? Or does it have some other purpose? Why couldn't I have had more time with Mother? Surely, she could've explained all of this to me. She had to have known something about my father's mysterious powers.

Thud!

No time for wishful thinking. I grab a knife from the empty kitchen, throw on my coat, and hurry outside, rounding the corner toward the other side of the house.

Scuffles sound. Angry voices carry on the wind.

Could Gunnar and Vog have come to threaten Harek's family, knowing I'd run here? I shouldn't have come. I'm only putting them in harm's way.

My palm becomes so bright it could rival the sun's ability to light the way—and let everyone in eyesight know I'm a dreaded fae. I shove my dominant hand into a pocket and wield the knife with my left hand.

I turn another corner, avoiding a large stack of chopped wood.

Harek and his father are fighting a man who stands a head taller than them both. They're tall themselves, but this stranger is a giant. And he seems to have the upper hand on the two of them.

An orange glow shines from inside my coat.

It's getting brighter the closer I get to them.

I step away from them. Sure enough, the orange glow disappears. I take out my hand. It's still glowing, but dimmer. I inch closer to them.

The glow brightens.

I'm not imagining it. Why is this suddenly happening? I never glowed before I knew I was fae. Did finding out about my powers awaken them?

Harek cries out in pain.

Without thinking, I run toward them. Harek and his father have their backs to me.

The stranger steps back and stares at me, his eyes wide. His gaze goes right to my glowing hand.

He knows I'm fae.

I hide my arm behind my back, but it's too late. He's already seen the glow.

The man's mouth falls open, staring past them at me. "You're?—"

Harek throws himself at the stranger. They both stumble. Harek's father joins the scuffle.

Despite the attack, the stranger doesn't stop staring at me .

Is that terror in his eyes? No, that's crazy. He's huge, and I'm average. And a woman.
No reason for him to fear me.

He pulls away from them and flees, disappearing into thin air.

My orange glow fades until my palm returns to its normal color.

I run back into the house before Harek or his father see me outside with them.

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Chapter

Five

I'm still trying to catch my breath by the fire in the family room when footsteps sound. My mind races to find an excuse just in case they saw me.

But it isn't Harek or his father stumbling through the door. It's his mother.

"Eira." She gives me a tired smile. "How are you?"

I stumble over my words, not sure how to answer what should be a simple question.

"You poor dear." She wraps me in a hug. "Have you eaten yet?"

My stomach will never go without food as long I'm in this home.

"Harek gave me something earlier."

She takes off her jacket and stirs the stew. "This looks almost ready. Is he or his father here?"

"You didn't see them outside?" I ask.

"No."

"Wait. If you didn't talk to them, how did you know about my mother? Or did you

say ‘poor dear’ for another reason?”

She gives me a sad smile. “The whole village is talking about your mother’s passing. Such a shame. I never met a kinder woman, and now all you have to live without her.”

“At least my siblings have their father.”

Not that he’s much of a consolation prize, even for the ones who like him.

Harek’s mother scowls. “I take that to mean he kicked you out?”

I nod, too exhausted to explain the real reason.

“Did he even let your mother breathe her last before sending you on your way?”

“Barely.”

She mutters something I can’t make out. “Well, you’re welcome here as long as you need. I could use your help at the market and with curing some of the buffalo.”

There’s no way she could be seen with me in town and live to tell about it.

Time to offer her the truth. “I appreciate the offer, but I’m actually planning on trying to find my birth father.”

“Oh.” Disappointment washes over her face. “Do you know where he is?”

“Not yet.”

“The nearest human settlement is at least a week away. Maybe more.”

I don't tell her that isn't where I'm actually headed. I'm not sure what to say without giving away my secret.

For now, nobody can know I'm heading to an unknown fae colony. That I'm a halfling whose palm just started glowing orange.

She stirs the stew again. "Unless you're headed somewhere else?"

My heart skips a beat. "What?"

No response. Does she know something she isn't telling me? Or is she trying to find out if I know more than I'm saying? She and my mother have always been close. Could she know about my father? No. Mother wouldn't have told anyone.

"Where are you headed, dear?" She turns from the stew and looks at me. I can't read her expression.

"To find my father."

She doesn't so much as flinch. "Do you have a weapon?"

"Not yet. There are some on the farm that I can grab before leaving, if I can get back there without being seen. Maybe I'll go tonight after everyone goes to sleep."

Her eyes widen. "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Gunnar."

I study her, confused. "What about him?"

“He’s dangerous, and if he kicked you out I’m certain he’ll harm you if you return. People will be watching while he sleeps. I saw a caravan headed toward the farm on my way here.”

My stomach churns acid as the gravity of her words hit me. She’s right. I have to accept the fact I can’t ever return home.

Clearly I should’ve brought a weapon with me before leaving the farmhouse, but I wasn’t thinking straight after my mother died right in front of me. Too late now.

“We have extra crossbows,” she offers.

“I never learned to use those.”

“You’ve spent hours watching Harek.”

Heat creeps into my cheeks, and I can’t deny that fact. “It isn’t that I haven’t tried. Crossbows and I don’t get along. Everyone is better off if I’m not using one.”

“You’ve still picked up on things watching him use them. If you had to, you could figure out how to wield it.”

“Perhaps.”

“You could. I’m going to see what we have in the shed. There should be some swords and maybe even a mace. I’ll find my son and husband while I’m out there. How long ago did they step out?”

“Not long. I think they’re looking for someone. There was some noise outside.”

“Don’t tell me the bandits are back.”

“I hope not.”

She mutters as she grabs a butcher knife then rushes outside.

I’d help her, but I know the ‘bandit’ is long gone—and probably fae, given the way he disappeared.

That wasn’t even the strangest part. Just thinking of the way he looked at me sends a shudder down my spine. As if he feared me . And it was as if he was going to say what I am. Does he know my fae powers? Are they that obvious?

It seems that way. Not that I can ask him since I’ll never see him again.

Now that my breathing is back to normal, I hold out my right palm. Not even the faintest glow, even when I hold it in front of the fire next to me. I narrow my eyes and try to make it light up.

Nothing.

It seems to have nothing to do with my will. But there must be a reason for it. Unless I really did activate it by learning about my true nature. Was it held dormant because I didn’t believe in it? That makes sense, because before this afternoon I never had any reason to think I was anything other than human. It wasn’t as if I had any reason to believe otherwise.

Sure, my coloring is darker than everyone else’s in my family, but that’s hardly a reason to think I’m a halfling. There are plenty of humans in our settlement with darker complexions like me. Mother would catch me studying them and assure me they weren’t my relatives—that my father’s family is far enough away they would never travel to Skoro.

We never spoke about him, but I think she always knew I wondered about my heritage. Not only do I look different than all my siblings, but there are other differences too. Like my sense of humor and keen sense of danger. There was the time I saved the farmhouse because I sensed something was off, and a fire had started. It barely got off the ground before two of my brothers put it out. Another time I felt Runa was in danger, and when I found her, she'd fallen into a pond and was flailing around. She was only a toddler, and I jumped in, saving her life.

You'd think Gunnar would appreciate things like that and allow me to stay, but no. He's probably been waiting for the day to sell me since before I was born. He knew Mother was expecting another man's baby when he married her and said he'd raise me as his own.

But he's a liar. Mother would hate him if she knew what he'd just done to me.

Maybe one day after mastering my powers, I'll come back and show him which of us is actually the stronger one—and it isn't him.

The door creaks open. I hide my hand even though I can't get it to glow.

Harek rushes in, brushing sweat and dirt from his forehead.

I leap up. "Are you okay?"

"There was someone outside, but he got away."

"That's good."

"I have a feeling he'll be back." He runs his fingers through his hair, sending flecks of dirt to the ground.

“All the more reason for you to stay here and help your parents.”

He gives me a look I can't quite read. “You really don't want me going with you on your journey?”

“It isn't that.”

“What, then?” he asks. “Does it have to do with the secret you're keeping from me?”

Guilt stings. “Like I said, it's complicated.”

“You know I'll never judge you.” He wipes his hands on his pants and checks on the stew. “You been stirring this?”

“Your mother was.”

Harek looks around. “Where is she?”

“Out looking for you and your father. You didn't tell me you've been having problems with bandits.”

“Everyone is,” he snaps. “Only people like Gunnar are rich enough to hire people specifically to keep them away.”

I look away, ashamed of my privilege—even though it's no longer mine, nor was it ever really, despite me benefitting from it in some ways.

“It isn't your fault you're unaware.” His tone is laced with an apology. “He's had you so busy scooping manure that you haven't had time to keep up on anything outside the farm.”

“How much have the bandits stolen from you guys?”

“Nothing yet, but today was close. I don’t know how you heard the noise outside.”
He studies me. “Does that have anything to do with your secret?”

How do I answer that? I don’t know anything about how I heard something he didn’t.
Does it have anything to do with my mysterious powers?

“Don’t tell me. That’s fine.” He turns back to the stew.

I watch him and consider telling him. It’s a risk, but if anyone will accept me as half fae, it’s him.

My palm glows orange. It’s a bright burst, more obvious than the times before.

If Harek was looking my way, he’d know.

A scuffling noise sounds outside the wall.

That fae must be back.

Could he be my father? Does he know about my mother’s death and now wants to know me?

Or he might want to get rid of me. He, like everyone else, might see my true nature as an abomination.

My father has never wanted anything to do with me before.

There’s only one way to find out.

I race outside.

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Chapter

Six

When I reach the other side of the house, the same tall man from before stands reaching for the shed.

“Who are you?” I demand. My palm grows brighter with each step closer to him I take.

He whips around, his eyes widening again.

“You’re...”

“What?” I demand. “What am I?”

His gaze darts between my eyes and my hand.

“Tell me!”

“It’s impossible.” He shakes his head.

“What is?”

“How?” He glares at me.

“What are you talking about?” I throw my hands in the air.

His eye narrow. “Is this a trick?”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about!”

“Liar.” His tone holds a sharp bite.

“Just tell me what’s going on.” I clench my fists, but even that doesn’t keep the light at bay.

“It can’t be.”

“Are you my father?” I take another step near the man, and the orange glow intensifies even more.

The man doesn’t look anything like me, and considering how little resemblance I bear to my mother, I have to take after my father.

This guy knows who—or what—I am, but not because we’re relatives.

Because he’s fae. He’s as intimately familiar with the various powers of our kind as I’m clueless to them.

I hold up my palm toward him, illuminating his features in the light. “Tell me what you know.”

Color drains from his face. “Let me go, and I swear I’ll never return here again. You have my word.”

As much as I want to demand answers, if he leaves for good then Harek and his family won’t have to worry about the bandit anymore. I can find out what I need to know about my powers and my father later. If everything goes according to my plan,

I'll meet plenty of fae—and I only need one to tell me what this guy won't.

“Do you promise?” I inch my glowing hand closer to him.

He shudders. “That’s what I just told you!”

“Then leave. Never come back to this settlement again, not just this house. Or else...”
I shove my palm right to his face.

“Consider it done.” The man runs so fast I can barely see him.

My skin fades back to its normal color.

What just happened? While I don't have any more answers than before, I do know there's some kind of terrifying power within me. I don't know if it's only harmful to that particular fae and his kind, or if it's to everyone.

I'm collecting more questions than answers, but at least a few things are coming together. That guy confirmed that I'm fae, and my magic is impressive if not highly powerful.

Now I have to find the nearest fae metropolis even more than before.

Hopefully my father will be there. Or at least I can find someone who will know where he is. If nothing else, I can glean information about what we are and figure out what my next steps will be.

Even if I can't find my father, or he won't help me, I should at least be able to learn what I need to in order to start my new life.

“There you are!”

I whip around.

Harek is staring at me like I've lost my mind.

At least my hand is back to normal. That's one less thing to explain.

"Why did you take off like that?" he asks.

"I heard something out here."

"And you came by yourself?"

"Right."

He shakes his head. "You're going to get yourself killed one of these days."

"I'm fine. See?"

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"That bandit came back, but I convinced him to leave for good."

Harek cocks a brow. "How'd you manage that?"

"I can be extremely persuasive."

He doesn't look convinced.

"It's true."

"I appreciate your effort, but let's get dinner. You need nourishment after the day

you've had."

"Can't argue with that."

He puts an arm around my shoulders and guides me toward the front door. "Give me your word that you won't keep putting your life on the line. I can't lose my best friend."

"I wasn't in danger."

"You were. It took both my father and me to send him away earlier."

"I'm no damsel in need of saving."

"You're not going to stay away from danger, are you?"

I nudge him. "Do you really think I'm going to shrink back from trouble?"

"Unfortunately not."

"Then don't ask me to."

He sighs. "I'm going with you on your adventure."

"Let's discuss that in the morning."

I plan to be gone before then but don't tell him. As soon as he starts snoring tonight, I'm going to take off.

"After dinner." He holds the squeaking front door open for me.

His parents are already seated at the table. Harek and I scoop stew into wooden bowls and join them.

Conversation centers around my mother. Everyone shares their favorite memories and laughs a lot. My mother was one of those people who never met an enemy. I've never crossed paths with anyone who didn't like her immediately.

It lightens my spirit to have this conversation, especially knowing I won't be around to even watch her funeral from a distance. It's too big of a risk.

I shove those thoughts from my mind. This is better than any service. Friends as close as family and good food. What else could I ask for? Other than a stepfather who would care for me as he promised his wife so many years ago.

But that will never happen, and now I have the chance to get to know my real father. Maybe he never even knew about me. He might want to know more about me once he finds out he has offspring. Unless of course he has a family of his own with other children.

His wife might be as thrilled about me as Gunnar. As long as I can get some information, I'll be good. Just enough knowledge about our powers then I can be on my way. Where to, I have no idea. But I'll figure something out.

Maybe there's a settlement of my kind somewhere. If there are territories of the dreaded human race all over the world, surely there must be something similar for the vile halflings.

Everyone needs community. I'll find mine somewhere.

Harek, his parents, and I continue talking about my mother after the meal. We gather around the fireplace and reminisce.

I'll remember this evening for the rest of my life. I want to express my heartfelt appreciation, but if I do, they'll clue in on the fact that I'm planning on leaving. Instead, I act like everything is normal. They seem to buy it.

We settle in for the night, and I toss and turn on the guest bed while waiting for them all to fall asleep. The little house makes noises that keep me awake. I've grown so accustomed to the subtleties of the farmhouse at night that this place seems foreign even though I've been here countless times throughout my life.

No snoring sounds from anywhere in the house. I've napped with Harek enough times over the years to know the guy snores. He sounds like a wild boar stuck in a trap.

I toss and turn some more, waiting so long I nearly fall asleep myself.

Then finally I hear it.

Snoring.

Now is my time. I need to get out of here unnoticed. I sit up.

Creak.

I hold my breath. Is every sound amplified, or does it only seem that way since I'm trying so hard to be quiet?

Nothing else sounds in the house other than some light snores from another bedroom, so I swing my legs over the side of the bed and quickly stand.

Silence.

I pull on my boots and grab my bags. Listen. Take slow, measured steps toward the hallway. Hold my breath again.

Everything is still quiet, so I step out of the room. My bag catches on the doorknob, pulling the door.

Creeeak!

I freeze. Wait. Then pull my bag free of the knob and nudge the door out of my way.

Creak...

If I can't even sneak out of Harek's house, how do I expect to make it through the woods full of bloodsuckers, shifters, and the undead to the fae city on the other side?

I'm doomed. Maybe I should give up now.

No. I'm doing this. My hand alone scared off that menacing fae twice. Imagine what I could do with a weapon, and Harek's mom said I could take one of theirs.

I'm doing this. I have to. There's no other choice. I have to find out who my father is—who I really am.

Footsteps sound.

"Eira? What are you doing?"

Harek.

I burst into a run.

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Chapter

Seven

I make it all the way to the weapon shed before Harek reaches me.

He leans against the structure and catches his breath. “What are... you doing?”

“I told you, I have to get out of the settlement.”

“You aren’t even going to stay the night?”

“No. I can’t risk it. Gunnar’s too dangerous.” I open the shed and feel around, hoping for a weapon.

“And the fae in the woods aren’t?”

“Of course they are.” My fingers wrap around the handle of a sword and I pull it out. It’s nearly as long as my arm, and exactly what I need. “Will you and your parents be okay without this?”

“I have something better than that.”

“Don’t say a crossbow. I nearly took out a priest the last time you tried to teach me how to use one. I’m better off with nothing than one of those.”

“How could I forget? No, I have something specifically for you.”

That catches my attention. “What do you mean by specifically for me ?”

He releases a long, slow breath. “You aren’t the only one who has been keeping a secret.”

I’m both curious and annoyed. “Are you serious?”

“Follow me.”

“You’re ignoring my question.”

Harek marches on ahead back toward the house, continuing to ignore me.

I catch up to him. “This better be good.”

“It is.”

“I’m not going back inside. You can’t convince me.”

“Noted.” He kneels at the base of the house just outside his bedroom and pulls at a board.

“What are you doing?”

“Shh. My parents are sleeping.”

I should’ve known the light snoring inside wasn’t Harek. I’d have been better off waiting for his boar-like noises.

He reaches under the house and pulls out a smaller sword than the one I found in the shed.

“What’s that?”

“A sword.”

“You don’t say.”

Harek replaces the board and stands, holding it out to me. “For you.”

“Thanks, I think.” I don’t reach for it. “The other one would be more useful, though. It’s longer and the blade looks sharper, admittedly not by much.”

“Your mother gave this to me.”

My knees turn to rubber. “Excuse me?”

He looks away for a moment. “It was around the time she got sick, but before she was bedridden. She said that if anything happened to her, to make sure you got this.”

Now I’m intrigued.

“This apparently belonged to your father. She stole it from him before coming here, believing it would help you some day. That’s all she would tell me but said you’d understand.”

I try to reach for it, but my arms won’t budge. “That’s my father’s?”

“Yeah. I guess she wanted you to have something that belonged to one of your parents. I’m sure she knew Gunnar wouldn’t give you anything of hers once she was gone. I don’t know why she wouldn’t give you one of her heirlooms instead. That would mean more than something from a guy who never bothered to meet you. Right?”

Without a word, I take the sword from him and step into the moonlight. It's heavy, solid, and has intricate carvings on the handle. When I pull the protective sheath from the blade, I see similar etchings on the shiny metal.

More surprisingly, I feel my father's presence as I hold the weapon up to the light. Not only that, but I see a strange, bright street as if it's right in front of me. Conversation sounds around me—almost like I'm at the marketplace, but this is different. I can't comprehend it.

“Eira?” Harek's voice brings me back to reality. “Are you okay?”

“Did my mother say anything else about this sword? Other than it belonging to my father?”

“She said you'd figure out the rest. But what just happened? It was like you were in a trance.”

“I just...” I struggle to find the words. “I feel connected to it. I know it doesn't make sense.”

Or it connected me to my father. Was the vision showing me what he's seeing right now? Or perhaps what he saw the last time he held this sword? If my mother knew it would connect me to him, why didn't she give it to me sooner? Unless she'd meant to give it to me when I was older.

I'll never know. She's gone, and now all I have is this sword.

It's the only thing connecting me to both of my parents.

“Don't lose that thing,” Harek says. “It looks like it's worth a fortune.”

“I think it’s worth a lot more than money.” I slide the sheath back over the blade and tuck it inside my coat. “Thank you for giving this to me. It means more than you could imagine.”

“You still won’t tell me your secret?”

“After I learn more about it.”

“Don’t you think I’ll stay quiet? I won’t tell anyone. You know me.”

“I’ll send word after I get everything figured out.”

Harek frowns. “You make it sound like I’m not going with you.”

“You can’t.”

“Of course I can, and I will. I’m not letting you go through those woods alone.”

“Your parents need you.”

He folds his arms. “They don’t. We already agreed I should go with you.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“I have to do this alone.”

“Why?” Harek stares me down.

“Because it’s up to me to find my father, and this could be dangerous. You’re their

only son. I can't risk anything happening to you."

"And you're on your own. I can't risk anything happening to you."

I try to come up with a good reason that he should stay, but I can't find one. I'd definitely be safer with someone by my side, and who better than my best friend? After having lost my mother and siblings, it would be comforting to have him around. Then I wouldn't have lost everyone I care about.

"Okay," I relent.

"But you need a—Wait. You agree?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Maybe I should change my mind."

"No!" He holds out a hand. "Just let me grab my things. It'll only take a minute."

"You want me to wait while you pack? I need to get going before it gets light out there."

"I already filled my bags. I only have to get them and then we can leave. Don't move." He races into the house.

I'm tempted to split. While it would be to my benefit having him travel with me, he'd be a lot safer staying here. The last thing I want is to put him in any kind of danger. And moving through a forest filled with creatures banished from the fae cities will certainly put us in harm's way.

Just as I'm about to take off, Harek reappears. It's just as well. Honestly, I don't know that my heart could take another loss today.

He gives me a crooked smile. "You ready?"

"Yeah, but are you sure your parents are okay with this?"

"Was I speaking another language before? They want me to make sure you're taken care of, no matter how long it takes. They'll be fine, and we all want the best for you."

A few pieces of my shattered heart come back together. "I appreciate it." My voice cracks as that lump in my throat grows slightly larger.

He wraps his arms around me and squeezes. It's an awkward hug with both of us carrying our packs and now my father's sword in my jacket, but I definitely appreciate the gesture.

"You ready?" He steps back. "We don't have a lot of darkness left. The sun still rises pretty early this time of year. Do you only want to travel at night?"

"I don't know. You're the one who knows the woods. Unfortunately, I only know the farm. Gunnar made sure I didn't get any other life experience."

"Forget about him. He's in your past now."

"It isn't that easy. As much as I'd love to never think about him again, the man raised me."

"Once you have new memories, it'll be easy to put him out of your mind."

“I hope I don’t forget my mother.”

“You won’t. She’s always been on your side. That isn’t something you’ll easily forget.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and blink back tears. Though I’m ready to search for my father, it’s going to be hard to leave the only place I’ve ever lived. Aside from a few brief times, I’ve never stepped outside the gates of this settlement. Every night of my life I’ve slept in my bed within the safety of the farmhouse.

Now I’m about to step into the unknown, leaving everything behind except my best friend and the two bags on my back.

I meet Harek’s gaze. “Let’s do this.”

The journey starts. With my father’s sword on me, I feel like I have my mother’s blessing.

Hopefully it’ll be enough.

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Chapter

Eight

Because Harek's family lives near the town wall, it only takes us about half an hour on foot to reach it. Given they need to hunt so often, living far inside wouldn't be practical. Not like the farm, which is nestled almost exactly in the middle of the settlement.

There's no gate in sight.

I turn to my best friend. "How are we supposed to get out?"

"Follow me." He marches forward, straight into a thick, prickly bush.

"What are you doing?"

He presses some branches back. "Slip through here."

"I'm going to get scratched."

"That's the least of your concerns, trust me."

My stomach knots. He may be used to danger, but I'm not. My biggest worry is usually if I'm going to get manure on me. Gross, but not exactly a risk.

"If you'd rather return to the farm, be my guest."

Point taken. I push my way through the scratchy branches, finding a tiny path. It stops at the wall. “Now what?”

“Nudge it.”

I turn around and look at him like he’s crazy.

“Do you trust me?”

More than anyone, so I do as he says.

Part of the wall budes.

“It’s a door?” I exclaim.

“Basically.”

“But... but people aren’t supposed to be able to come and go without the permission of the guards.” I push it harder. It opens all the way, revealing a vast forest stretching as far as the eye can see. The stars twinkle over the trees and between the two snowcapped mountains on opposite ends of the horizon. A full moon hangs low in the sky, casting the landscape in a silvery glow.

The sight steals my breath. This is so unlike the exit outside the town gates where there’s a wide path and the trees are spread apart. It’s made for traveling to and from the settlement. This is something else altogether.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Harek’s voice is right next to my ear, so close his breath tickles my skin.

A shiver runs down my spine, yet a warmth runs through me.

“You should see it when the sun is rising. One time, I saw a phoenix fly across the skyline. Its wingspan was massive, seeming to take up half the view.”

“And you never told me?”

He rests a hand on my shoulder. “You said it hurt too much to think about things you’d never see.”

I vaguely recall making that remark. It was when we were younger, and after my stepfather had told me in no uncertain terms I would never leave the village gates with Harek for any reason.

Now I’m showing Gunnar. I grab my best friend’s hand and drag him through the hidden door.

The trees nearly swallow us. I take in a deep breath of the pine trees, hardly believing how much fresher the air is just a few feet from the town.

Harek steps out then closes the door. “I’ve always wished I could bring you out here. I knew you’d love it.”

“It hardly seems real.” I don’t even want to blink for fear of missing anything. I try to burn these images into my mind so I never forget. “How can this be so close, yet nobody talks about it?”

“To keep everyone inside.”

“But why?”

An owl hoots nearby, and I squint to try to find it. It must be nestled in the evergreens somewhere in the shadow of the darkness.

Harek puts an arm around me. “As breathtaking as this is, the darkness hides many threats. Staying within the walls provides safety.”

“For people not living under the thumb of a tyrant,” I mutter.

“It’s still safer in there than out here.”

“Have you been keeping something from me all these years?” I mean for it to sound like teasing, but it comes out like an accusation.

If he notices, he doesn’t show it. “Nah. Just the regular old dangers I’ve always told you about. Bloodsuckers love the night, so we’ll have to be extra careful. Shifters in their animal forms can be more unpredictable than natural animals. That sort of thing. Those are things we don’t have to deal with inside the walls.”

“True, but we aren’t defenseless.” I reach for my new weapon to test how quickly I can grab it. Not bad, but it also might not be fast enough in a life-or-death situation.

“No, but we do need to be on extra high alert.”

“Are there more of those?”

“Doors?” He tests it to make sure it’s completely closed. “A couple. Not many—just enough for people with the need to go out for their jobs. We’re sworn to secrecy.”

“You just broke that.”

“Yep. Are you ready?”

I glance over the forest once more, this time seeing more than just the beauty.

Things are hiding in there that want us dead.

My blood runs cold at the thought. Then I remember the look of terror in the eyes of that fae. The guy was legit scared of me. Maybe others will have the same reaction.

I can only hope.

Harek stares at me, reminding me he asked if I was ready. “Guess I’m going to have to be.”

“You planning on telling me your big secret?” he asks. “Especially now that I’ve shown you one that could get my family into a lot of trouble.”

I suck in a deep breath. My best friend loves me, but does he love me enough to accept me as a halfling? If not, he could run now. Return through the hidden door and never look at me again.

“You don’t have to.” He stands taller. “Let’s get started. I know a place we can sleep when daylight hits and the bloodsuckers go down for the night.”

“I’ll tell you what I learned soon, I promise. I’m not ready yet because I’m still processing the reality of it myself.”

“No judgment.”

But he is a little hurt. I can hear it in his tone.

“It’s not personal. You know I love you.”

He nods.

Guilt still stings.

“Can you tell me one thing?”

“What?”

“Does it have to do with that sword I gave you?” Harek gestures toward where I have it tucked away.

“It does.”

“I’m sure whatever you learned about your heritage must be hard to hear, especially so close to losing your mother.”

“Yeah.” Though finding out about being a halfling would be a shock whether I found out today or when my mother was in the prime of her health.

“As long as you tell me once you’re ready.”

“Definitely.”

He adjusts his packs on his back and squares his shoulders. “Let’s do this.”

“Okay.” My heart rate spikes at the thought, and I check my palm.

No orange glow. It’s so random. Hopefully when I find my father, he’ll be willing to explain it to me—even if he wants nothing to do with me. I just need a little guidance on my weird, new power. He could tell me about it in five minutes and then send me on my way. That should be good enough. Afterward, I can figure out the rest on my own. I’m resourceful like that.

Harek and I march deeper into the cover of the trees. The pine scent grows stronger as the darkness covers us.

I shove my hand into my pocket and keep watch from the corner of my eyes. Not that hiding my glow will do much good in this severely shadowed canopy.

My nerves start to relax as we make it further into the woods without running into anything. We're slow as molasses in a winter freeze without a torch, but Harek does seem to know his way around in this place.

I walk right into a branch, taking it in the face. "Remind me why we didn't leave in the light. Especially since the bloodsuckers sleep during the day."

"Because someone tried to sneak away before we fell asleep."

"So this is my fault."

His silence answers my question.

"Didn't you say it was better to travel at night?" I ask. "I'm sure you said that."

"It was definitely better that we snuck out the wall when we did. Guards do check the hidden doors frequently for unauthorized use, but at night many snooze even though they aren't supposed to."

Snap!

We both freeze in place.

My breath hitches as I listen for another sound while trying to figure out where the first one came from. Everything is too quiet.

I glance at Harek, and even though my eyes have adjusted to the severe lack of light I can only barely see his outline.

That doesn't give me a lot of hope for finding whatever made the sound before it spots us.

Crack.

Whatever that was, it's closer than the first sound.

Something is making its way closer to us.

My heart hammers, and I slowly reach for the sword.

"Who goes there?" demands a male voice from the right.

Orange glows from under the fabric of my coat.

Crap.

I make a fist, but that does little to hide the light.

Footsteps sound, and I make out the shape of two people in front of us. Their eyes aren't glowing red like I've heard happens when bloodsuckers are on the prowl. Maybe shifters eyes are different color. Now I wish I'd paid more attention to the whispers. To be fair, I never expected to be in this position.

Yet here I am.

"What's that?" asks one of them.

“What is that?” Harek exclaims.

“What do you have?” one of the strangers demands.

I keep my hand in the pocket. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“I sure would,” Harek mutters.

Great, he’s on their side.

“It’s only my hand.” I bring it out and shove it in the direction of the strangers.

They don’t run like the other guy.

Instead they look at each other, exchanging bewildered expressions in the light of my glowing palm.

Harek mutters something I couldn’t repeat in polite company.

Luckily our new friends are anything but polite. They both say things far more vulgar than what my friend just uttered.

I hide my hand behind my back, not that it does any good. They’ve all seen it. Now we all know I’m a freak of nature, which might not be a bad thing as far as these two others go. They don’t know I can’t do anything with my power.

That’s my only advantage, so I hold up my hand and take a step toward them, even though I can’t do anything other than glow. “Want to see what else this does?”

The two others disappear before my eyes. They run away so fast, it almost looks like they’ve disintegrated into thin air. They also don’t make a sound.

My orange palm slowly returns to normal.

Harek turns to me, his eyes wider than I've ever seen them. He looks horrified.

I'm going to lose my best friend.

Now everything I care about is officially gone.

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Chapter

Nine

The lump in my throat triples in size and my mouth wavers.

“Answer me.” Harek’s tone is filled with ice. “How long have you known you’re fae?”

Tears escape and run down my face.

I’m going to be on my own from here on out. He’s going to abandon me the same day I’ve lost my entire family. It’s time to accept the fact.

“Eira, tell me what’s going on.”

I try to wipe my tears, but it’s fruitless. They’re falling too fast to keep up. “I’m a halfling. I just found out today. My mother’s last words were telling me my father is a fae. You can run from me now. I won’t hold it against you. I understand completely.”

“You... she said you’re a halfling?” Harek’s voice is barely above a whisper.

“No, but I can put two and two together. My father is fae, so I’m a disgusting halfling. She didn’t even have time to tell me what kind of fae he is—what I am. I don’t know anything, other than my palm has started glowing randomly since I found out.”

Silence.

My heart breaks. I should've just left without telling Harek anything. Then I'd at least have the comfort of knowing he still cared about me. Now I have to live with his disgust, too.

"Just go," I say, barely keeping myself together. "Now you know, so leave. You're going to run at some point, anyway. May as well get it over with. I'm a freak of nature. Despised by everyone. Not fully human, not fully fae. Just... hated. Doomed to live life alone. Not that it's much different from the life I've always known."

"Eira, I'm not going anywhere."

"But I'm a halfling . Don't you get it? I'm worse than a highly contagious deadly disease."

"You're no disease."

"Right, I'm worse. Half fae, half human, fully nothing. An abomination. My father probably wants nothing to do with me. I'm sure my mother spent my whole life trying to make sure nobody ever found out about my true nature because I'm so horrible. Only a creature a mother could love."

Harek wraps me in a bear hug. "You're amazing, and the fact that you're something almost mythical makes you even more special."

I step back. "You aren't disgusted? I heard the horror in your voice when you saw my glow."

"That's called shock, my friend. I had no clue—fae can't hide their magic. It doesn't just show up in adulthood. Your glowy hand never showed before today?"

“Never, because I didn’t know about it.”

“That isn’t how it works.” He sounds completely baffled.

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t know?”

I draw in a deep breath. “No. Gunnar never allowed talk of fae in his house.”

“Sorry, I forgot. Fae get their powers regardless of knowledge. I spoke with one who was abandoned at birth and raised by another kind of fae. There was no hiding his true nature—by the time he was a toddler, everyone knew what kind he was.”

“I’m not fully fae—that has to be why.”

“Maybe.” He doesn’t sound like he believes my theory.

“Nothing else makes sense. There’s no other explanation for why mine didn’t show until I found out. My mother told me, then a few hours later my hand started glowing.”

“Could it have anything to do with her death?” he asks.

“You’re trying to blame me for that?”

“Of course not. I just mean, maybe her dying is what triggered your powers. It’s possible.”

Now it’s my turn to be doubtful. “If that was the case, wouldn’t I need my father to awaken my fae side? It isn’t like my mother’s death would pass any powers to me.”

He doesn't respond.

"See? I'm right."

"Maybe. Nobody really ever talks about halflings, so I don't know much about them."

My stomach sinks. "I'm even rarer than I thought. How am I ever going to figure out anything about myself?"

"I'm sure someone knows something. Our best bet is to find your father. I assume now that we're heading for a fae metropolis?"

I sigh. "Yeah. I'm going to see if he's in the nearest one. If not, I'll keep trying until I find him. All I know is my mother fled while pregnant with me, and she settled in the first human town she came to. But that doesn't necessarily mean the first fae town I reach will be the right one. These woods are vast, and I don't know what direction she traveled. You should know this could be a wild goose chase."

Harek doesn't respond.

I can't blame him for having second thoughts. He'll be a lot safer if he turns around and goes home. At least I have my glowing palm in my favor. So far all the fae who have seen it have fled. Maybe no fae wants anything to do with whatever power I have.

I'll have to make sure none of them ever find out I'm clueless about it.

"There used to be a popular trail through these woods when we were little," Harek says. "Nobody ever goes that way anymore, but I wonder if that's the route your mother took. It would've been the right timing."

“How do you know about it?”

“My parents would point it out when they first started taking me out on hunts. They stopped mentioning it by the time I was big enough to hold my own crossbow, but I always wondered why people stopped using it.”

“It might be worth a try. If nobody uses it anymore, we’ll have less chance of running into more fae.”

“Not that we need to worry about them.”

“Bloodsuckers and shifters?” I ask.

“Did you see the way those two bloodsuckers ran from you? I’ve never seen anyone so scared. There’s something about that orange glow that frightens them. You’re better than any weapon.”

“And you don’t know anything about my glow?”

“No fae I’ve ever seen has done that, but there are many types I’ve never come across. Most stay in the cities and never venture into the woods. It’s the outcasts who spend their time out here where we hunt.”

I lean against a tree and take a moment to absorb everything I’ve just heard.

This is all too much. My mother dying. Having to leave my siblings and home. Discovering my new power.

“Do you want to try the abandoned path?” Harek asks.

“You said something about having a place to sleep? My head is swimming, and my

body is exhausted. I think I need a break. Or would we be better off going back to your house for the night and starting over tomorrow?”

“We’re already out here, so we should keep going.”

“Then can we set up camp somewhere?”

“Like I said before, we’re better off resting when the night fae sleep. Otherwise, we’ll be unconscious while they’re roaming around, looking for bloody treats.”

I groan.

“The other option is to sleep in shifts, but that’ll make it harder for us to have the time to travel during the day. If we sleep in the light, we can both sleep at the same time.”

We don’t have any good options.

Harek places a hand on my shoulder. “At this rate, we only have a few more hours until sunrise. We should make the most of it and then we can find somewhere to rest.”

“Let’s do that.” Once we start moving again, my sleepiness will likely wear off—at least for a time. I did get a nap earlier. With any luck, that’ll be enough to keep me going.

“It’ll be for the best,” he reassures me. “You’ll see.”

I hope he’s right.

Chapter

Ten

It's a good thing I brought my father's sword. Not because I need it against bloodsuckers, shifters, or wild animals, but to cut down the vines and branches taking over this supposed trail. If I didn't trust Harek, I'd think he was pulling a fast one on me.

By the time the sun starts to poke over the horizon, I'm ready to fall asleep standing up. I could seriously not wake for an entire week. My eyelids are barely staying open, and my arms can scarcely hold up the sword anymore. Between hacking plants and giving into sobs every so often, I don't have any energy left.

I don't care about anything aside from giving into the slumber calling my name.

"The sun's up." I point to it, even though Harek can see it. "Are we going to shelter anywhere or crash on the ground? I'm game for either."

He points to a bush. "There's a space underneath we can use. It might be a little tight, but I think it'll work."

"Sounds good to me." I wipe vine juice from my sword and tuck it into my jacket.

Harek lifts a branch, revealing a cozy little spot barely big enough for both of us to squeeze in. "Ladies first."

For some reason, my cheeks warm. Thankfully, there's no way he can see me blushing. I climb in, sit. Using one of my bags as a pillow, I shove the other under a branch. My new sword rests on top of my side, where I can reach it easily if needed.

Harek climbs in then wraps himself around me. Now my entire face is on fire. Sure, we've camped together before—mostly when we were kids—but never like this. Not with him pressed so close and his arm slung over me. So much for easy access to my weapon.

“I know it's tight,” he says as if reading my mind. “But nobody will see us even if they're just a few paces away. We're safe and can sleep without worry.”

I just nod, not trusting my voice.

“Sweet dreams, Eira.”

“You too.” My voice sounds weird.

Before long, his breathing softens and becomes rhythmic. I don't know how he can fall asleep so easily like this. I can't focus on anything other than every place our bodies touch.

It takes my breath away. I really shouldn't be reacting like this—he's my best friend. We're out in the woods and have to sleep somewhere. It makes sense that we need to climb into this tight little space to stay out of sight from any predators, human or otherwise.

His breathing starts to tickle my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. I turn my head slightly.

This is the most awkward thing ever. Yet somehow, I kind of like it.

I'm only confused because of everything that's happened today. What I need is to get some sleep. Once we start moving again, I'll need my energy.

Harek's breathing starts to lull me closer toward slumber. Then his arm slides down and his hand rests on top of mine.

My breath hitches, and my mouth dries.

Something is seriously wrong with me, given the way I'm reacting to the guy I've known since I was toddling around, still in diapers. It has to do with my grief and losses. That's the only explanation.

His fingers slide between mine.

Now we're holding hands. I must be dreaming. There's no way we're holding hands. That's what people do when they're in love. Then they kiss and later get married—or their parents forbid the relationship. None of that is happening in this case. Because Harek is sleeping, and there's no way he purposefully did that.

His breathing doesn't seem as rhythmic as it had been. Could he be awake? Or do I only hope he is?

Stop. What is going on? I am not having these thoughts about my best friend.

Ew, seriously. That would be like having romantic feelings toward one of my brothers. Because Harek is like one of them, only better because he's not abandoning me. My brothers all stuck with Gunnar. Any of them could have chosen to stand up for me against the arranged marriage, but none did.

I finally start to relax, close my eyes. Feel myself drifting from my body.

Harek's thumb strokes the back of my hand. No, it's more of a twitch. That's what sleeping people do—twitch, not stroke. There's no way he's purposefully holding my hand, and especially not rubbing it. No way.

It's like when my sisters jerk around in their sleep. Sometimes I think they're having a seizure. That's what this is. And I'm not entertaining any other thoughts about it.

Harek is lost in dreamland, fully unaware of what he's doing or how it's affecting me.

And I'm wasting entirely too much time thinking about this when I need to be sleeping. Even if it's only my brain's way of focusing on something other than the monumental losses I've experienced in the last day. I should be glad I have someone on my side, someone who cares enough to make this crazy adventure with me.

Someone trustworthy enough to keep my secret.

There's no way I could tell anyone else about being half fae. He's the only one who would stick by me. Gunnar would've kicked me out long before if he knew he housed the enemy. He wouldn't have given Mother a say. Actually, he'd have gone a step further and had me killed. No doubt about that.

That's why she kept the truth even from me. She must've worried I'd let it slip. It would've been hard to keep it to myself. My sisters and I told each other everything.

Now it's just Harek and me. Even when we end up going our own ways—which we will at some point—I don't have to worry about him ratting me out to anyone. Just like I'd keep any secret of his.

He releases my hand, rolls away.

I take a deep breath and finally give into sleep.

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Chapter

Eleven

Snap!

I jolt awake and look around, only seeing leaves from the bush. Everything is lit bright, so it's clearly morning, but I have no idea what made that noise.

Harek's arm around me tightens and he makes a soft shushing sound. His warm breath makes my ear tingle.

Crunch.

Something or someone is close, and they keep breaking twigs or branches.

I inch my hand toward my sword. Harek's hand is in the way. He doesn't budge when I nudge him, so I elbow him.

He starts to mutter something, but I shush him. Then I grab my sword.

The etchings glow faintly in the shadows. I let go, and it stops.

I stare in disbelief. What could that mean?

“What—?”

“Shh.” Harek whispers in my ear. His breath is a warm tickle.

It annoys me that I like it.

More footsteps, snaps. A little snarl.

My breath hitches.

Harek’s arm tightens around me, a warning to stay still. I’m not sure what he thinks I’m going to do. Something just snarled . I just want it to go away.

I’m really starting to look forward to the fae city—not that there’s any guarantee it will be any less dangerous for me, a halfling. Everyone there will not only hate me, but be more powerful too. Even so, maybe, just maybe, I can find my place there.

Crunch!

I stiffen, hold my breath. Hopefully whatever is out there can’t sense us. Whether it’s a wild animal or another fae, I won’t be able to relax until it leaves. And even then, there’s a good chance I’ll still be on edge. How could I not be? Literally everything has changed overnight.

Grief over Mother washes through me. I give it a moment, but then I have to push it aside because whatever is nearby is coming closer. The snarling grows louder with each breaking twig.

“Stay here.” Harek speaks so softly, I barely hear him.

I start to object, but he’s gone before I can say a word. On one hand, I don’t want to leave him alone to deal with whatever—or whoever—is out there, but on the other hand there isn’t much I can do. I have zero experience with my father’s sword. Grief

makes my extremities simultaneously feel like rubber and heavy weights. I'm totally useless.

Part of me wants to stay here and cry all day until the pain finally leaves. But I can't. Not only will the pain linger indefinitely, but Gunnar and Vog are sure to be after me.

I'm nothing more than property to them. I will not live under that oppression for another day, and that might mean fighting for my freedom. I'll die before becoming Vog's bride. A shudder runs through me at the thought of that. Death is by far the better option, but ideally I can escape. Get away unseen.

The footsteps outside stop. There's a moment of quiet, followed by a snarl.

"What do you want?" Harek says, his voice deep and commanding.

"Passing through. You?" The other voice is much higher, almost squeaky.

Maybe I can help against that guy. I need to do something for my friend, even if it isn't much—something is better than nothing. It takes all my effort, but I pick up the sword and make my way out of our little sleeping nest. My legs feel twice as heavy as normal.

I haven't been trained in any form of fighting. Gunnar only taught my brothers to be protectors, and now I see why. My sisters and I are nothing more than someone to marry off so he can get money. We either care for the animals, the house, or the smaller kids. Now that I'm gone, he'll probably put a servant on manure duty.

If nothing else, I do have this sword. My palm might not grow bright enough to be seen in the daylight, so while helpful in the dark, it might do nothing when the sun is up. At least with the weapon I can look opposing. My right palm glows faintly brighter with each step.

The fae standing in front of Harek is even taller than him but skinny like an imp in the stories Mother told me as a child. Gunnar never liked her telling fae stories, so he wouldn't allow her to tell my siblings. Or maybe she told only me because I'm part of that world. She knew she needed to prepare me for something she didn't fully understand.

Now I have to look at everything from my life in a new light. She believed in this so much she gave Harek's family this sword to give me. That means she knew Gunnar wasn't safe with this secret, but she trusted my best friend and his parents. It reaffirms what I already knew.

I slink around the bush covering me and march toward Harek, holding the sword as if I have all the confidence in the world. I push my shoulders back and stand tall, keeping a tense expression on my face—all things I learned from my horrible stepfather. Apparently he isn't completely useless.

The fae's eyes widen and he gives me a double take. His skin takes on a greenish hue, and his teeth sharpen.

My heart rate spikes. Hopefully he can't detect that—I think only vampires and werewolves can pick up on those subtleties, but what do I really know? I knit my eyebrows together, giving the impression that this green skin-and-bones giant doesn't bother me.

Harek whips toward me, his eyes full of a similar surprise. He didn't really expect me to stay hidden in our nest while he faces off with this creature?

The fae takes a step back, his gaze glued to my sword. "What do you want?"

Its etchings glow so brightly my eyes almost ache looking at it. I turn my attention to the impish fae. "Me? You're the one bothering us ." I take a few steps closer, holding

the sword even tighter. “I’m not afraid to use this.”

He nods, licking his lips. “I don’t mean any harm.” His voice gets even higher. “The two of us were just having a discussion.”

I glance at Harek. “There isn’t a problem here?”

My friend stares at me for a beat too long before shaking his head. “I think he was just leaving.”

The imp-like creature races away without a word.

“What was that?” I lower my sword and lean on it, my legs turning to jelly.

“You didn’t think I could handle him?”

“Did you expect I’d cower in the nest and do nothing?”

We stare each other down before he relents. “No, I shouldn’t have expected that.”

“What was he? Some kind of imp?”

“Basically.” Harek nods toward our sleeping area. “Let’s gather our things and get moving.”

Now that I know we’re safe, a yawn escapes. “I thought we were going to sleep through the day?”

“It sounds like things aren’t normal right now. I think we might be better off traveling in the light than sleeping in shifts. I know what I said earlier, but this is better.”

“You and that imp were discussing the state of the fae?”

“I didn’t have to. We’ve seen more fae in the last day than I’ve seen in the past year.” His expression turns grave. “Something is going on, but I don’t know what. I was hoping that guy would have some insight, but you scared him off.”

I laugh.

“It isn’t funny.”

“Actually, it kind of is.”

He cocks a brow. “How?”

“I’m just a halfling. Half as threatening as a regular fae.” I sigh. “Probably even less, and nobody’s going to want me. Look at how all the fae flee from me—I don’t fit in anywhere, and I never will. I’m more of an outcast now than ever before.”

He hesitates.

“What?”

“You—”

A shot rings out through the air. Then another.

Harek leaps forward and knocks me to the ground. My sword skitters away.

More shots.

My breath hitches, but I manage to scramble toward the weapon.

Harek hurries my way. “We better get back to the nest now.”

“Do fae use guns?”

“Rarely. Magic is better. Come on .”

“Why is it better?”

He throws me an exasperated glance before pulling me toward the nest. “I can tell you later.”

“Fine.” I yank myself free of his grasp and start toward the nest.

Voices sound. There are at least several of them. I recognize one.

Gunnar.

I freeze in my tracks.

Harek looks at me as if I’ve lost my mind.

“That’s Gunnar,” I whisper.

“All the more reason to hide.” He reaches for me again.

“He isn’t going to stop until he finds me.”

“Exactly. Hiding is your best option. Let him move on.”

“I need to stand up to him. Look at the way all the fae have run from us. He’s only human.”

Harek's mouth falls open. "Have you lost your mind? We're outnumbered! He isn't going to follow us into a fae city. We just need to get you to the nearest one."

"If he can't get in, how are you supposed to?"

"Because I'll be with you." He gives me a look that's part desperation and part demanding. "Let's go."

I glance between him and rapidly approaching voices. "I thought the fae overlords banned guns."

"They did. Rich people like your stepfather secretly pay the blacksmiths." Harek reaches for me like he's about to drag me toward safety. He misses as I lean away from his grasp. If I didn't know better, I'd swear his eyes flash a copper color. "They have guns, and Gunnar is unpredictable. That makes them more dangerous than fae."

That's a good point, and as much as I'd like to see if I can use my orange glow against him, I don't have any idea how to use it. I can't even control when it brightens and dims. So far it's been more of a warning than a defense. It has to be why my mother wanted me to have the sword, which I don't know how to use.

Another shot rings out. Gunnar shouts my name. They're close.

Neither my palm nor my sword glow now. It must mean neither will help me against the humans. My stomach sinks.

Harek grabs my arm and pulls me toward the nest.

I don't fight him this time. Even if Gunnar and his friends saw the glow, they likely wouldn't care. He would also rather me dead than a runaway.

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Chapter

Twelve

It's been at least an hour and the men haven't moved on. It makes me wonder if we accidentally left a sign out there that we're nearby. Nothing comes to mind. We have all our things with us.

I'm shaking despite the heat in this little nest. Harek has an arm around me again, and I must be making little noises because every so often he shushes me. No glow comes from either my palm or the sword, even when two of the men stepped close.

The glows must have something to do with fae. My palm first lit up back at Harek's house, and it turned out there was a fae outside. Then it turned orange again the other times we've run into fae out here in the woods.

Did my mother know about any of this? She had to know something since she didn't want it on our property after her death and she trusted it only to Harek's family. It comforts me that we both trust them so much. I don't know what I'd do without my best friend.

I'd planned on making this trek on my own, but it turns out I need him—and not just because he's dealt with fae out here in the woods for years. Not to mention inside the walls in his own yard. How long have fae been sneaking in? I always thought we were protected there.

It's beginning to look like a lot of things are different from what I always thought.

Now I have to start thinking of myself as one of the fae. They probably won't accept a halfling, but I have to try. Someone needs to help me understand my power. Maybe I can even threaten someone with my bright hand to get some assistance. It clearly scares them.

Harek stiffens next to me, and I pull myself from my thoughts.

No footsteps sound. Could the men have finally left?

Someone clears his throat. He's close enough to touch the outside of our nest.

My breath hitches. I reach for the sword. It scrapes against a rock. Loudly.

Harek turns to me, his eyes widening.

I try to say something, but no sound comes.

Footsteps skitter around outside, close to us. Voices.

Branches of the nest rustle. Twigs crunch just outside. All they need to do is squat and look in our not fully covered entrance.

"Who's there?" a deep voice booms.

I nearly jump out of my skin. Check my palm.

Nothing. I'm going to have to rely on the sword I have no experience with—not that it's going to help me against a bullet. I can't believe Gunnar has been hiding those deadly weapons. I'm sure Mother never knew. She wouldn't stand for such monstrosities to be around her children.

Not that it matters now. He has at least one, and he's close enough to grab me if he knew I was in this nest.

Click.

My heart skips a beat, and sweat breaks out on my forehead. We're never going to survive this. I never should've dragged Harek into my escape. What was I thinking? If I'd been smart, I'd have run away and not told him my plans.

Now we're both going to get ourselves killed, and it's my fault. Why didn't I keep quiet about it? Everything would've been better.

That settles it. I have to deal with this on my own. Gunnar and his friends are out here because of me, so I'm the one who must face them.

I grab the sword and scurry out of the nest.

Harek says something, though I can't make it out over my thudding heart.

The men all have their backs to me. There are five of them—we're more than outnumbered. Maybe I should go back into hiding.

One of them turns to me. Vog.

My stomach plummets then crashes to the ground.

He looks even worse than I remember. Most of his teeth are rotting, and several have already fallen out. He has numerous scars ripping across his face, going into his scalp. A bug weaves its way through his scraggly beard. His leathery, wrinkled skin and white flecked whiskers indicate he's well past twice my age.

Gunnar clearly hates me since this is the man he picked for me to marry. I can only hope he treats my sisters better—they're his own daughters.

Harek bursts out of the nest, his bow at the ready. He turns it in different directions until he sees Vog and aims it at his head.

A slow smile creeps across Vog's face, exposing even more missing teeth. There's even a bug in his mouth.

My stomach lurches.

Harek nudges himself in front of me. "Don't move!"

Vog laughs, spittle landing in his beard.

The others turn around, all four of them. My stepfather and one other man aim guns at us.

Gunnar's brows draw together, making him look like he has only one long eyebrow. "I could throw you in prison for running away, you ingrate!"

I hold the sword higher. It still isn't even close to glowing. "You wouldn't."

"No?"

"It wouldn't earn you any money!"

The other gun wielder laughs. "She's got you there, ol' Gunny."

"Shut your trap." He doesn't move his attention from me. "Get over here. You've been sold to Vog, and I'm going to make good on my word."

“I’ll never marry him!”

The group erupts into laughter. Vog looks at me with hungry eyes and licks his lips.

“I don’t usually go for dark meat, but this time I’ll make an exception.”

A shudder runs down my back, and anger runs through me.

I swear a growl comes from Harek. No, that must be from somewhere deeper in the forest.

He pulls back his arrow, the string of the bow making a stretchy sound next to my ear. “You’re going to have to go through me first.”

“You’re just a kid.” Gunnar looks him up and down. “It wasn’t that long ago your mother changed your diapers.”

An arrow soars through the air with a whoosh. It barely misses Gunnar’s ear.

He snarls. “You missed.”

“It was a warning , you good for nothing shyster.” Harek replaces the arrow with another. “Next goes between your eyes.”

More laughter.

Vog races around the bush and lunges for me.

I swing my sword. It bounces off his beefy arm and doesn’t even slice a hole in his sleeve. What kind of useless piece of junk is this?

His mouth curls up in amusement for a moment before his pupils expand, making his

eyes appear black. He balls his fists. “You’ll learn your place, little girl!”

“Over my dead body!” I hold the sword tighter this time, aiming for his chest.

Something like fabric tearing sounds behind me. A growl so fierce echoes through the woods. Fear chills my blood, and I drop my only weapon.

A wolf brushes past me and slams into Vog, knocking him to the ground.

Vog screams. His arms and legs flail as the animal digs into his throat.

I spin around to find only air where Harek should be. His ripped clothes lie in a pile at my feet.

My body turns to ice. Did that wolf eat him?

Bang!

Instinctively, I drop to the ground. Grab my sword. Back up to the bush, gasping for air.

More shots ring out.

The wolf steps away from Vog, who no longer thrashes around, and growls toward the other men. Given the amount of blood dripping from his mouth—and Vog’s shredded throat—it’s obvious the creepy man won’t move again. That solves one problem.

Bang!

Blood sprays out from the wolf’s fur near its front shoulder. It lets out a howl before

lunging toward the others. Our gazes meet for a moment.

I know those eyes. I've looked into them my entire life.

Harek. He's the wolf. It's impossible.

Another shot. Growls and snarls. A yelp, followed by someone calling for help.

I can't just sit here and hide. My best friend needs me, even though I don't understand how he can be a wolf. I'll have to figure that out later.

The beast has another man down on the ground, tearing into him too.

Something hits me from behind. The sword flies from my hands. I stumble forward. Arms wrap around me. I struggle to get loose. Kick, knee, elbow my attacker. My efforts do no good. He doesn't loosen his grip.

I scream so loud my throat burns.

The wolf turns his head in my direction. Those are definitely Harek's eyes. No mistaking that. He glides through the air, chomping on the arm of the man holding me. The grip loosens, and I squirm away.

Where is the sword? I can't see it anywhere.

Gunnar aims his weapon at me with one hand. My weapon is in his other one. His face contorts. "You've just cost me dearly!"

The wolf leaps toward him. Gunnar falters, his face draining of color. He runs. The remaining men follow him. Harek chases them, growling and snapping.

I fall back, leaning against a tree. What just happened?

Is my best friend a werewolf? That can't be—they're not allowed inside the city walls. He's also never mentioned this to me.

Do I even know him? I can't. Not if he's been keeping this enormous secret from me all this time.

Chapter

Thirteen

I'm about ready to grab my bag and run. Either Harek is a wolf or he was eaten by one, and given the wolf had his eyes, it seems obvious which is most likely. Plus his torn clothes didn't have a drop of blood on them. If an animal attacked him, he'd look like Vog and the other guy on the ground outside this nest. And there is no body.

Footsteps sound, twigs snap.

Out of habit I reach for the sword. Gunnar took it.

My palm isn't even glowing. I'm defenseless without being near it since my palm has only glowed when I was near it. It began at Harek's house, where he was secretly stowing the weapon all along. So much for Mother giving it to them for protection. Now my stepfather has it anyway.

Harek appears outside the nest's entrance. He's in human form and wearing different clothes than before, ones that don't quite fit properly. They seem more like his father's style.

I have so many questions, and they all come out at once in a jumbled mess. "You... what... how... You're?—"

"Eira, I can explain." My best friend gives me an apologetic look.

Anger takes over me with a sudden surge pulsing through my body. Everything takes on a red hue, and I scramble from the nest and lunge myself at Harek. I don't even care that he's much taller and stronger than me—and can turn into a wolf, apparently. Or that Gunnar took my powers along with the sword.

We fly back and crash to the ground. He grunts and blinks his eyes, clearly surprised I would come at him like this. Maybe he should've thought about that before hiding something so huge from me.

I pound on his chest.

“Eira...” He frowns but doesn't even try to fight back. Typical. Harek probably wouldn't hit a woman even if she was beating him to an inch within his life.

“Why did you lie to me?” I punch him as hard as I can until tears well and blur my vision. Then I roll off him and sob. It's too much to take now, after losing everything—Mother, my siblings, my father's sword.

Harek wraps his arms around me. “I was going to tell you.”

“When?” I demand, snot bubbling out of my nose. At least he can't see me from this angle. “I may have waited to tell you about being a halfling, but at least I told you I had a secret! You've been keeping this from me for what? Your whole life?”

“I was going to tell you soon, I swear. With your mother dying and you finding out about your father being fae, I couldn't throw one more thing at you. I was going to tell you before we enter the fae city—that way you wouldn't worry I'd be a target.”

I wipe my nose, sit up, and turn to him. My fury returns. “You've been hiding this from me for our entire lives! How could you?”

“For your safety. And for my own. My parents warned me all the time. Your stepfather is a dangerous man. We’re lucky we were able to be friends at all.” He sighs. “But when our mothers were pregnant with us, yours told my mom everything after finding out my parents were shifters. They made a pact agreeing to watch over us if anything ever happened to the other. My father was furious when he found out, but he respected my mother’s wishes.”

“What? You were surprised when I told you I was a halfling.”

“I honestly was. Really. I had to go with it, because that wasn’t the time to get into all of this werewolf stuff. Plus there’s more?—”

“Wait! Your father didn’t want to help me?”

“Obviously he changed his mind over the years. Now he’d risk his own life to protect yours, just as I would.”

Some of my anger lifts. “How did you turn into a wolf? It’s the middle of the day and the moon isn’t even out.”

“But it’s full. You saw it last night. I can shift at any time for about a day on either side of the full moon. That gives us about a three-day leeway.”

“So, it doesn’t just happen? You can control it?”

“Basically.”

“What does that mean?”

He releases a long breath. “It’s complicated. Not all werewolves are as fortunate as us, and that’s why we can live in a human establishment. It’s also why we’re so much

more successful at collecting meat than other archers.”

“Like yesterday.”

“Exactly. When we turn into wolves, hunting becomes a thousand times easier.”

“So, you don’t have to turn if you don’t want to?”

“No. We do need to shift at least once during the three-day window, or it’ll happen on its own at the end. But because we want to take advantage of hunting, we shift a lot.”

I pull at his sleeve. “Do you keep clothes hidden in the woods?”

“Yeah. Sometimes we have to shift without warning, and you saw how well that works out. So we go somewhere we have clothes hidden, turn back to human form, then quickly get dressed.”

The thought of him without clothes on makes my face flush with heat, so I look away. “You, uh, say other werewolves can’t shift at will?”

“Most can’t. It’s a special line. It’s too complicated to get into now.”

I turn back to him. “You were really going to tell me about all of this?”

“Yes, definitely. I didn’t mean for you to find out like that, but I couldn’t let those dung lickers hurt you. I’m not sorry for what I did, but I am sorry you found out like that.”

“It’s a lot to take in.” I heave in a deep sigh.

“Which is why I wanted to wait to say anything since you’re already dealing with so

much.”

“I guess I can appreciate that.”

Harek gives me a playful nudge. “You guess?”

I shrug.

His expression turns serious. “Before we get back to traveling, I need to return to the city and warn my parents about Gunnar. Now that he knows I’m a werewolf...” His voice trails off and a pained expression crosses his face. “They need to be prepared.”

“We’re going back?”

“Just me. I’m going to take you somewhere safe.”

“Safe like this nest?”

Harek shakes his head. “There’s a cabin protected by magic. Humans can’t see it.”

“Why didn’t we go there last night?” I ask. “That would’ve been helpful.”

“Obviously, but I didn’t think humans would be a problem. I was wrong, and that’s why I’m going to have you stay in the cabin until I come back.”

“I want to go with you. Gunnar has my father’s sword.”

“It isn’t safe.”

“Then what makes it safe for you?” I cross my arms and glare at him.

“I’m used to sneaking in and out of the wall. Plus I can run a lot faster in wolf form. I can leave and return before you know it if I do this on my own.”

“But Gunnar has the sword. I need it for my magic to work! At least I think I do.” I hold up my normal right palm, trying to make sense of it. “It hasn’t turned orange since I lost the weapon. The only thing that makes sense is that I have to be near the sword. It lit up at your house when I was near it, even though I didn’t know it was there.”

“I’ll see what I can do, but I can’t promise anything. We might have to try and get it later.”

“How can I enter a fae territory without any of my powers?”

“You’ll be fine.”

“And you know this how?”

Harek glances up at the sky. “I need to go before it starts getting late. It’s going to take some time getting you to the cabin.”

I really don’t see how anything could get worse, but I don’t tell him that because things can always get worse.

We start on our trek to a secret cabin. Hopefully a half-human can see it, otherwise I don’t know where I’ll be able to hide while Harek returns home to warn his parents about Gunnar. They’ll have to leave the town. Once exposed, the leaders will throw them out into the wild.

All because of me.

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Chapter

Fourteen

This cabin is tiny, cramped, and offers me nothing to do but think about how my life has fallen apart completely. The only good thing is the dried meat and fruits. I devoured them the moment Harek fled and I realized just how famished I was. Now I'm full but miserable.

My mother is gone, and the one thing she left me is now back with Gunnar—the one person she must have been trying to keep it from. If she hadn't been worried about him, she'd have told me about the sword and let me have it.

I hate Gunnar for everything he's taken from me. He promised Mother he'd always care for me as his own daughter. Did she suspect he was lying? The sword makes me think so. She wanted me to have another option.

It took me less than twenty-four hours to ruin that.

I stare at my right palm and will it to glow, even faintly. It's so dim in this cabin I should be able to see even the slightest bit of orange.

Nothing.

I throw my hands in the air and flop back on one of the two tiny beds, landing with a thud. The mattresses are stiff and have little give. I can't imagine Harek's family staying here often. It's clearly for emergencies only.

Exhaustion presses on my bones, and I close my eyes. May as well try to get some sleep while waiting for Harek to return. He mentioned something about sleeping in shifts, and he's bound to be wiped out when he gets back. I'll rest now so he can sleep during the first shift.

My heavy eyelids close, and fatigue wraps around me like a heavy blanket. Just as I'm about to drift off, something lights up on the other side of my closed eyes.

I bolt upright and look around. Nothing is out of place. I listen for any sound.

Silence.

Must've been my imagination. I fluff the thin pillow, and that's when I see it.

An orange glow. It's coming from my palm.

My heart slams against my ribcage as I pull my hand up. The skin is glowing like before.

Impossible. My father's sword must be back at the farm with Gunnar by now. Yet my palm is not only glowing, but it's getting brighter by the moment.

Dizziness envelops me as I try to make sense of it. Just when I thought everything made sense, now it's all flipped on its head again. Could Harek have found Gunnar, taken the sword, and returned already? That doesn't seem possible, although a day ago I would've sworn that Harek being a werewolf or me being fae was also impossible. I can't trust anything I know anymore.

I'm also too tired to figure out what this glow means or why I woke with a start. For all I know, this is all a bad dream. The cabin is protected from people seeing it, so I should rest while I'm safe. Harek is sure to need sleep when he comes back. I can

only imagine what shifting puts his body through.

The thought sends a shiver through me. Going from human to wolf must be so painful. Yet he seemed to turn in the blink of an eye. I can ask him about that later.

A yawn escapes, and I roll over. Just as I'm about to close my eyes, my palm grows even brighter than a moment ago. I bring my hand back to the other side of the bed. The glow dims. Then I swing my arm back to the other side. It brightens.

My hand must be trying to tell me something, but what?

I inch it closer to the wall. The orange lights up more. It's getting brighter the more I move it in this direction.

Something is going on, and I need to figure out what. I scoot as far as I can on the bed until I'm pressed against the wall.

My palm is even brighter now. Unless Harek found my father's sword and is on the other side of the wall, I've misinterpreted everything about this. My palm's activity doesn't have anything to do with the sword—or at the very least, they aren't as interrelated as I thought.

This is a good thing. Since I don't have anyone to teach me what any of this means, at least I'm moving closer to understanding on my own. And Harek might know more than he's let on. He'd already kept a massive secret. There's no telling what else he's been hiding from me.

Anger roils in my gut, and the orange glow brightens. Does that have to do with my emotions? I just got mad and it lit up more. Maybe I was dreaming about Harek, and that's what caused it to light up in the first place.

This is all so confusing. If the glow and the sword have nothing to do with each other, and the orange light comes from my anger, this shouldn't be new. I get furious with Gunnar on a daily basis. The way he treats me when Mother isn't looking has been a thorn in my side for as long as I can remember, but the orange light is new. Fury can't be causing this.

Unless my mother's death somehow triggered all of this. Grief causing my hand to light up? That doesn't make sense. How would that be useful? No, it has to be something else. Maybe her death cut, or loosened, my ties with humanity.

This is so confusing. If only she'd told me more. She must've thought she had more time. I wish she did, even if she never told me anything about my father.

Tears well, blurring my vision. Sobs make their way to my throat, choking me. Now more than ever, I need her and her advice. Who am I supposed to turn to in her absence?

My father—assuming he's still alive. He can help me. Whatever my half-powers are, he has them fully and has certainly spent his entire life learning about them. Even if he wants nothing to do with me, he can at least spare a little time to help me. I'll demand it. He probably sent my mother away, not wanting anything to do with a halfling. That's the only explanation for her fleeing to the nearest human establishment and marrying Gunnar. At least he treated her well, even if he hated me.

I pull the blankets toward my face to give into my cries when my glowing palm fades. It's enough to make me want to break something. In fact, I think I will. Harek will have to understand, given he kept such a huge secret from me all of our lives. Best friends, indeed.

Maybe it's a good thing he revealed his true nature to me the way he did. Now I know I can only truly trust myself. In fact, it might be a good idea to leave and take

this trek on my own. I'll find my father, learn as much as I can about whatever we are, and then figure out what to do from there.

All I have to do is make it to the nearest fae metropolis. Shouldn't be too hard. I know what direction we were going, and Harek was sure that was the right direction. I can do this, even without the sword. My glowing palm has managed to scare away enough fae to give me confidence in intimidating any others I come across.

It's the humans I have to worry about. My powers have no effect on them.

I should see if there are any weapons around here I can take with me. My father's sword is probably ideal since my mother went to such great lengths to hide it from Gunnar—and me—but anything will do. It isn't too likely I'll run into other humans this far out in the forest, but clearly the possibility isn't zero.

Thunk!

I freeze in place. Someone or something is outside. Shaking, I scoot toward the wall and press my ear against it.

My palm lights up to a nearly blinding orange. A mist seems to come from my skin.

What the...?

Thud!

I leap away from the wall. Whatever's outside is close. Near enough to punch through the wood and grab me.

Now would be a great time to find a weapon. If something was here, wouldn't Harek have told me? Not necessarily. He clearly has no problem keeping things from me.

While cupping my ear, I lift the blankets and check under the first bed, then the other. Next I look under the mattresses. Nothing. I press on each mattress—lumpy but weapon-free.

Thunk, thunk!

I jolt at the noise. That was even louder than before. There has to be something I can use to protect myself.

This little cabin is bare, hardly more than a rest stop. Did I pack anything useful?

Thwack!

Whatever that was, it was against the wall. Barely inches away, just on the other side of the wall. The wood may be magically protected, but it's thin enough someone could throw themselves against it and crash through.

There's only one tiny window, and it's on the other side of the cabin. I leap across in one stride, push aside the curtain aside, then peek out.

Nothing.

I let the fabric fall before beginning to pace, all the while listening.

Heavy footsteps sound outside, nearing the door.

My palm is now warming in addition to the strange mist. I try making a fist, but can't. It's too uncomfortable.

If nothing else, I can hold up my hand and scare some fae. Though I'm not convinced every fae will be scared like the ones I saw last night.

Harek is fae, and my orange glow didn't concern him. Probably because he knew about my true identity all along and never told me.

Jerk. I'm definitely looking for a new best friend in the fae city. Someone who won't hide the truth from me.

Thud! Crack.

A line snakes down the wall next to the bed I was in.

I cover my mouth just before crying out. Can't let anyone know I'm in here. I run over to the wall next to the door and press my back against it.

Thud!

It's getting closer. They're getting closer. I'm either going to have to hide or face them.

I hold up my palm. The mist has practically formed a ball.

Maybe I should see what it can do.

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Chapter

Fifteen

Whoever is outside has circled the cabin multiple times now. The craziness that is my palm hasn't gone down any, even when they move from the door to the other side of the building. Why they haven't tried the door is beyond me. Unless they can't see it.

Crash!

Another crack forms, this time on the wall next to the window.

I wipe beads of sweat from my brow and suck in a harried breath. Even if the people or creatures outside can't come in, it's clear they're going to keep trying.

It's also clear I have a built-in weapon. I don't have anyone to teach me about it, but I'm capable. I'm a strong woman who has already survived so much—a stepfather who hates me, never having met my actual father, my mother dying, finding out I'm a halfling.

I'm on my own in every way possible. My own nature is trying to tell me something.

Time to listen. My body knows what to do, so hopefully my brain will catch up.

Here goes nothing. I fling open the door with my non-magical hand.

It's unnaturally dark. Like a storm or the night settling, but it's too early for that.

Must be fae who can control the weather.

I'm crazy to think I can hold my own against them. But they aren't leaving me any other choice. I hide my right hand behind my back and creep around the side of the cabin toward the last noise I heard.

Thunk!

That wasn't far. I'm going in the right direction, not that I could go the wrong way around this small square structure.

I'm tempted to turn around and run away when I round the corner.

Two tall, wart-covered fae with crooked noses and pointy ears spin my way. The taller one has hunched shoulders, and the shorter walks with a limp.

Maybe they won't be so hard to scare away. They clearly aren't at the top of their game.

The short one cackles. "Looky here. I knew there was someone inside the building."

"She'll fill us both up nice." The tall one licks his lips, exposing sharp teeth. Part of a finger sticks between two of them.

A finger?

My stomach sinks. These two aren't as weak as I gave them credit for. How am I going to fight off both of them?

"Come here, little girl." The short one—who is still taller than me—looks me up and down with his beady eyes. "You'll do just nice."

The tall one snorts. “Better than the last one. She barely whetted my appetite for this one.”

I glance around. Where’s Harek when I need him?

Both of the creatures in front of me hold out fingers and bend them toward themselves. This is just another day of killing humans for them.

Except I’m not just a human. I’m a halfling, and they won’t see that coming. Not to mention my glow.

The tall one lunges for me, clearing the space between us in the blink of an eye.

My breath catches, and then almost without thinking, I whip out my right hand and hold it up.

He skids to a stop, close enough I take in his rancid breath. It makes my stomach roil. His face drains of color.

They both shriek, a doubly piercing wail that feels like knives on my skin and eardrums.

Instinctively, I aim my palm toward him and jut it out. The orange mist ball flies from my skin, right for the smelly fae.

His eyes widen with terror, and he holds up his hands. The force knocks him back. He stumbles, crashes into the cabin. Mutters and grumbles.

Another mist ball forms in my hand. I throw that at him too.

It hits him directly in the chest. He gasps. Flails about.

The short fae backs away even more.

I aim another orange mist ball at him. It flies directly into his face. He crumples to the ground, gasping and choking. I repeat the process on both of them until they're both lying on their backs. They twitch for a moment before going still.

Did I kill them? Horror washes through me. I've never killed anything—not even a bug. I couldn't have taken the lives of two fae. It's not possible.

I glance at my right palm. It's back to normal. There isn't any glow, mist, or warmth.

This can't be happening. I take a step closer to them. "Hello?"

Silence.

A black mist rises from the short one. It swirls around over the fae.

Then the same thing happens with the other guy.

I stumble back, trip over a branch, barely manage to remain standing. What's going on? I've seen death before, but never anything like this. Gunnar often makes me watch when he slaughters animals for our meals. I just saw Mother die yesterday, and nothing like this happened.

This must be a fae thing. I've never seen one of them die before. The black swirls must be their magic leaving them. It's the only explanation. Could I never see it because my own fae powers hadn't been activated? Now I can see more?

I continue backing up, not daring to take my gaze from them. Why have I never heard about this before? Kids always whisper rumors about fae. I thought I'd heard everything, but nobody ever mentioned their magic leaving them upon dying. This

seems like something people would talk about. It's horrifying... yet fascinating.

Is it something only other fae can see? Since I'm a halfling, I must have the ability no human does. Still, how could this be kept secret so well? Surely a fae somewhere would spill it to a human.

I'm still trying to make sense of the black swirling mists when something terrifying happens.

They point toward me. How a mist can point is beyond me, but it's happening. Like it wants me.

Ridiculous as it is, I close my eyes. Put my hands out in front of me.

Swoosh, swoosh.

That can't be good.

I crack open one eye.

Both mists are rushing my way.

My feet move before I realize what's going on. I nearly slam into a tree. The swooshing sounds behind me while a wind picks up. I run faster, glance back.

The swirls are chasing me. Are the two fae still trying to kill me, even in death? If they're actually dead. Maybe they have some weird kind of magic that separates from their bodies.

I know so little about fae. Hopefully it doesn't get me killed.

Something slams against my back. I fly forward. Crash into a tree. Scrape my eye down to my chin. Gasp in air. Turn around.

Both mists twirl and swirl, aiming right for me.

I can't move, can't get out of the way. Pressed against the trunk, bark digs into my body.

The cold air moves through my nose before my eyes register the black blurs entering into me. The icy cold chill runs down my nose, through my throat, and into my center. A chill spreads through my body, and I shudder. Shiver. My teeth chatter. It's as if the temperature dropped, and it was already cold with the snow covering the ground.

I cough and gag, try to vomit out the mists.

Nothing. I try harder. Only manage to expunge the food I'd eaten earlier. Great, I need that. I shake and dance, but the mist refuses to leave. Like it wants to be part of me now.

I'm too cold to be outside, so I run. Nearly trip over the taller fae. Just as I'm about to dart inside, something catches my attention.

They're melting into the ground, just like ice on a summer day.

This is too much. I can't deal with this. I leap inside, slam the door behind me.

How could this have happened? I never wanted to kill anyone. Now those two fae are dead because of me. Worse, their black magic is inside of me.

It's swirling around in there. Like the two fae are dancing and taunting me. Angry

with me for taking their lives and making me pay. But that's impossible.

Isn't it? How would I know?

I'm going to have to ask Harek. He's a werewolf, so surely he's killed plenty of fae. This is probably old news to him, something he sees all the time. Do fae get more strength and magic from killing other fae? It seems if that was the case, there would be fae wars all the time. Never ending. It would be a battle to be the strongest by taking the most lives. Yet I've never heard anything like that.

Sure, there are plenty of power grabs. Power-hungry tyrants love to rule over everyone. Fae or human—it doesn't matter. That's why our establishment is where it is, walled off from the rest of the world. It's why most humans don't venture into the woods. But wars? Mass killings? Nothing like that.

It looks like I'm going to have to ask Harek when he gets back, and that means I'm going to have to wait for him. No running to the fae metropolis on my own.

I'm not feeling so great after killing those two fae, anyway. I may as well stick around here for a while. There's still a little food I can eat, should my appetite return. For now, my insides feel like soup sloshing around.

I climb back onto the same bed as before, but this time I sit against the wall. I'm not going to let myself fall asleep again. I dig into my bag and pull out the one book I packed. Gunnar never wants us to have books, so I've only ever been able to have a few at a time. Even then, I have to tuck them into a loose floorboard. I've always dreamed of having an entire shelf I could fill. I'd run my fingers along the spines and smell the pages every chance I got. Maybe one day.

The sloshing gets worse as I try to read. I barely get through a few pages before I set the book down. I'm going to vomit again.

I hurry back outside and dry heave. Nothing comes, despite how gross I feel.

It's starting to get dark, and Harek still isn't back. What if more fae show up? I definitely don't want to kill any more. The two I killed have completely disappeared now. I won't have to tell Harek about this if I don't want to. However, I can't ignore this nausea. Not that it's a normal stomach sickness. How could it be when a mist evaporated from two dead fae bodies and entered me through my nose?

What I need is my father. If my mother was here, she could tell me something. She clearly knew my father intimately and must know something. Known. She must've known something. I don't think I'm ever going to be able to wrap my mind around her being gone.

Crunch!

I groan. If that's more fae, I may just surrender. Maybe they can take me to a medicine man who can tell me what's going on then fix the problem. As unlikely as that is, I'm tempted to run toward the noise and beg whoever's there to help me.

Footsteps.

Someone is definitely coming.

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Chapter

Sixteen

My breath hitches as I round the corner of the cabin, half-expecting to see the two dead fae resurrected and eager for revenge. That's obviously impossible since they melted into the ground and their magic is making me sick. My stomach does seem to be settling somewhat. Hopefully all this unease will lift soon.

Crunch.

That was closer. I stop, listen.

Silence. The footsteps have stopped.

Whoever it is must be waiting for me.

I hesitate. Check my palm.

No glow. Does it need to recharge? I won't be able to fight anyone off without my own orange mist.

A terrible thought strikes me—what if the black mist has canceled out my powers? Or overtaken them? Could I have just killed my own fae powers?

More footsteps. They're heading my way.

Dread seizes me. Without my defenses, I'm helpless. Just another human, and now I don't even have my sword, thanks to Gunnar.

I stare at my palm, willing it to glow, to mist. Anything.

It doesn't comply.

Come on . Do something!

The footsteps are so close, I should be able to see their owner momentarily.

I dart behind a tree, hold my breath. The sloshing is settling. At least that much is on my side. I shake my palm. Mentally yell at it.

Clearly, it has a mind of its own and doesn't care what I want. What a fabulously useless power I have.

More footsteps. Then silence.

"Hello?" says a deep male voice.

It takes me a moment to realize it's Harek.

My knees turn to rubber. I close my eyes for a moment then pull myself together and step out from behind the tree.

Harek aims his bow at me, his eyes flashing silver. He lowers his weapon, and his expression softens. "What are you doing out of the cabin?"

"It's a long story."

His eyes widen. “What happened?”

“I’m more interested in what happened to you . Did you warn your parents in time?”

“We need to talk.”

I gasp. “Are they okay? If Gunnar hurt them?—”

“My parents are fine. Let’s go back to the cabin. It seems we both have a lot to catch up on.”

“That sounds—” The misty magic bounces inside, slamming against my ribcage. I grunt and grasp the spot.

Harek’s eyes widen. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s part of the long story.”

“Did someone hurt you?” His eyes flash silver again.

“Why have I never seen your eyes do that before today?”

He draws a deep breath. “I’m not trying to hide it around you anymore.”

“It’s good to know my best friend is finally being open with me.”

“You know it isn’t like that.”

I grunt as the foreign magic inside me slams into the other side of my ribcage.

“What the blazes is going on?” he demands.

“I’ll tell you inside the cabin.”

Harek nods, and we make our way over to the tiny building.

My insides feel a little better as I move around.

He holds the door open for me. Nice to know he can still be a gentleman, despite all his lies. Before I step in, he blocks my path and makes a big deal about sniffing around. “Did a fae die here?”

“Like I said, long story.”

Color drains from his face. “You killed a fae?”

“I am one, remember? Even if merely half.”

He breathes heavily. “Are you sure? You didn’t just injure it?”

“I’m not an idiot.”

Harek swears. “I never should have left you alone.”

“Clearly.”

“Where’d you put the body?” He looks around.

I sigh. “Nowhere.”

“But you’re sure you killed one?”

“Two.”

He chokes on air. “Two ? Without a weapon?”

I shrug. “I’m not completely useless.”

“What happened?” he demands. “Tell me everything. This is important.”

I hold up my palm, which of course is doing nothing now that I have the other magic inside me.

“You killed them with your glow?” He scratches his chin. “How?”

“Can we go inside? I’d like to sit.”

“Where’d you put the bodies? I can’t deal with the stench.”

I sniff, not smelling anything. “They disintegrated.”

“Come again?”

“I’m going inside.” I shove my way past him and plop onto the nearest bed.

He follows me, sitting on the other mattress. “Tell me everything, and don’t leave out a single detail.”

My insides slosh around, making me nauseated again, so I pace, which is the only thing that seems to help. It takes forever to tell him the entire story because he interrupts every other sentence to ask questions. By the time I’ve explained everything in excruciating detail, my insides have calmed enough for me to sit. “Is any of this normal?”

“No.” He scratches his head, looking deep in thought.

“It isn’t?” Disappointment washes through me. “Are you sure? How much do you actually know about fae?”

He turns to me. “Not as much as you likely think. My parents basically raised me as a human until it came time for my first shift. They taught me enough to keep me safe while out in the woods hunting or shifting.”

Things start to come together. “That’s why you guys always get most of your food in one week’s time.”

“Yes, we get the most when we shift for those three days around the full moon.”

It surprises me that nobody ever picked up on that, but I don’t say anything. There’s far more to take in and try to make sense of other than hunting food to sell at the market. “You haven’t seen anyone else’s hands glow like mine?”

“My experience with other fae is limited to those in the woods. The ones in the cities are entirely different—they’re civilized and have more complicated magic systems.”

“Is it true vampires and werewolves live out here, away from the cities?”

“Mostly. Some are civilized enough to handle city life. Obviously, my parents and I have made it work without raising any eyebrows. We aren’t the only ones.”

“Why live with humans and not fae?”

“It’s what my parents preferred. Human life is a lot less complicated, and they like that.”

I rub my temples. “When were you planning on telling me?”

“Eventually. Things are far more complicated than you realize. Especially now that you have these powers.”

“What are my powers?”

“You’re asking the wrong person.”

“My mother never told you or your parents about my father?”

He shakes his head. “I’ve been watching you like a hawk, trying to figure out what magic you have.”

“Do your parents know?”

“No, they’d have told me.”

I grab a pillow and hit it. “Why didn’t my mother tell anyone?”

“Everything she did was to protect you.”

“It’d have been more helpful to know. I wish she’d have said something sooner.”

Harek sits next to me and puts an arm around me. “She must’ve thought she had more time.”

I should shove him away, but his touch is comforting. “Or she feared Gunnar overhearing. Once she got sick, he made sure I was never alone with her.” My voice cracks. “The only time I got with her was right before she died.”

He turns and pulls me into a full embrace. “I’m so sorry, Eira.”

I give into sobs and let him rub circles on my back. Even though I'm mad at him for keeping so much from me, I need my best friend now more than ever. I can yell at him later.

After I've had a good cry, I feel refreshed. Even the sloshing magic has eased up.

"Are you hungry?" Harek asks. "I grabbed some food from home."

I nod, not trusting my voice.

He pulls some dried meat from his bag, and we eat in silence.

Once we finish, I turn to him. "What happened when you got to Skoro? Are your parents leaving?"

"They're staying." He wipes his mouth and wraps the remainder of the food.

"What about Gunnar? He knows your secret."

"And he's going to keep it."

"Really? What's in it for him?"

Harek looks away.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"He still has your sword."

I try to connect the dots, but can't. "What does that have to do with your parents?"

“Gunnar thinks it’s collateral, that he’ll be able to use it in the future.”

“For what?”

“I’m not sure, but by the time I reached the farm he’d already hidden it. I chewed him out for everything and told him to hand it over, but he obviously didn’t. We came to an agreement—he’s going to stay silent about your true nature and my family’s. In return, he holds onto your sword.”

“My favorite part of the story is how I had any say in this.”

He gives me an exasperated look. “He isn’t going after you or my parents, and he isn’t going to try to marry you off to another Vog. We can get you a new sword in the fae city, or if you really want your father’s, I can return and get it. It won’t be easy, but it won’t be impossible either.”

“That sword is tied to my powers. It glows around me only.”

“We can forge a sword with your magic.” He says it like that’s the most obvious thing ever spoken in the history of the world.

“It won’t be my father’s.”

“We’ll figure it out later. One thing is sure—we can’t return. Not now, anyway.”

I cross my arms. “What’s one more loss?”

He frowns. “I tried, Eira. He could’ve hidden it anywhere. It might not even be on the farm. He could’ve stashed it somewhere else altogether.”

All I can do is nod. I can’t believe my stepfather managed to steal one more thing

from me after I'd already run away. I'm just glad Vog is dead, and Gunnar won't receive any money for me. Unless he sells the sword.

I'm definitely coming back to Skoro one day and making him pay for everything. That'll wait until I've learned everything I can about my powers and can use them against him. He'll regret ever having treated me poorly, kept me from my mother during most of her illness, trying to marry me off to the most disgusting man in our settlement, and for stealing my sword.

Harek puts his bag in a tiny closet. "We should get some sleep."

"In shifts."

"Of course. I'll take the first one."

I shake my head. "I'm too wired right now. You get some rest, and hopefully after pacing for a few hours I can get some sleep."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I got a nap earlier. You've been going nonstop since we woke up."

"Okay. After we both get enough sleep, we'll head out for the fae city."

My stomach tightens at the thought. What will we find there?

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Chapter

Seventeen

When I wake, I'm no more rested than before I went to sleep. The new magic inside me has been moving around all night like it's wrestling my own powers. I tossed and turned so much that Harek sat next to me and rubbed my back at one point. It didn't stop the roiling inside me, but it did actually help me fall asleep.

I roll over away from the wall, expecting to see Harek reading the book I'd left out.

The cabin is empty.

Did something happen overnight? I slept so fitfully, I don't know how I would've missed a scuffle. It doesn't seem possible.

My palm is warm. It's glowing orange. The new magic didn't kill my powers. Relief floods me, though only for a moment. The glow means a dangerous fae must be nearby. It never lights up around Harek, who is safe.

He also isn't in here.

I scramble out of bed, slide on my shoes, then fling open the door.

Conversation sounds. I recognize Harek's voice but not the other person's.

My palm brightens, and a light mist forms. Thankfully, it's still orange. My magic

isn't changed, even with the mess I inhaled.

I tiptoe toward the voices, pausing at the corner of the building.

Harek and someone who looks like a normal human are exchanging words, and neither appears happy. That fits with my increasingly warm palm.

As I near, Harek glances my way. He gives me a subtle look which sends a clear message—don't come any closer.

Seriously? I can kill the other guy if need be. But the question is, do I want to? If his magic enters me like with the other two, it could really throw me off. If the stuff inside me doesn't settle down soon, I'm never going to get a decent night's sleep.

My palm is as warm as it was when those other two fae showed up, right before I killed them. I hold my palm up, watching the mist ball grow in both size and intensity of color.

The fae stops talking mid-sentence and stares at me, his eyes widening. "You're..."

"What?" I yell. "What am I?"

If this guy tells me what kind of fae I am, I might just let him live. It's about time someone gives me my answer.

He runs in the opposite direction.

My heart sinks. Of course it couldn't be that easy.

Harek yells after him.

I run over. “Want me to kill him?”

He gives me a double-take. “I can’t believe you’re asking me that.”

“I killed two fae yesterday.”

“Let him go. He isn’t worth it.”

The ball of mist starts to fade.

“It’s just as well. The magic from the others is still messing with me.”

“Just as bad as before?”

“A little better.”

Harek glances in the direction the fae ran off. “Are you up for food? We should head out soon. I was going to wake you a little earlier, but I thought you could use the rest.”

My palm is now back to normal, and I press it against my abdomen. The weird magic is sloshing around in there, but it doesn’t affect my appetite. “Yes, let’s eat.”

We return to the cabin and have more dried meat before setting out. Some of my nausea is back, but I don’t think it’s bad enough to make me vomit again. Walking seems to help, so it’s a good thing we have a long journey ahead of us.

“How far is the city?” I ask.

“I’m not entirely sure.”

“You’ve never been there?”

He meets my gaze. “There’s a reason my family chose to live among humans—fae don’t generally want us around.”

“Why not?”

“What I told you about werewolves earlier is true, but we’re also at the bottom of the chain. We, like vampires and zombies, are like the dregs of the fae world.”

“Even though you can shift whenever you want?”

“Not whenever. We’re still dependent on the full moon, even if we can choose when to turn within those three days.”

“You’re fae, so why should anyone care?”

He cocks a brow. “You scoop manure. Why don’t you lead the council?”

“Point taken.” When he puts it in human terms, it makes sense. “So, basically you’re me?”

“Right. Not that I don’t think you could lead the council. But with people like Gunnar holding power, other people have to fall in line.”

“You guys don’t.”

“Except we do—fae aren’t allowed in the walls except under special approval.”

I give him an approving smile. “So, you’re rebels.”

“You could look at it like that.”

“Nice.”

“So are you.” He gives me a playful nudge. “You just didn’t know it.”

“Speaking of things I don’t know.”

“Uh-oh,” he mutters.

“You knew this line of questioning was coming.”

“As long as you’re not mad at me.”

I look him square in the eyes. “I definitely am, but I’ll forgive you.”

He gives a little nod. “What’s your first question?”

“Do you know what kind of fae my father is? That I half am?”

“No. Your mother took that secret with her to the grave.”

“But every fae I’ve come across seems to know exactly what I am. The orange glowy palm appears to be a dead giveaway, but none of them stick around long enough to tell me.”

“Don’t forget I grew up around you. I only ever go out into the woods to hunt or shift. The majority of my life has been spent inside the walls of Skoro, just like you. I don’t have fae friends or know what the others know. My life is a human one.”

“Aside from turning into a wolf every so often.”

“And bringing home more meat than anyone else inside the walls.”

“Do you parents know what I am?”

“If they do, they haven’t told me.”

“Maybe they know, and that’s why your father initially didn’t want me in your life.”

“Possibly.”

“You don’t think so?” I stop.

He gives me a sympathetic glance. “I really think they just didn’t want to get involved with fae matters, but your mother was so nice and they couldn’t say no to a baby in need—fae or otherwise.”

“They really don’t know?”

“If they do, they’ve kept it from me. And judging by the reactions of the fae who’ve seen you, they’re terrified. You’re either dangerous, or you hold the ability to become so.”

“As evidenced by the dead fae outside the cabin.”

Harek nods. “They really melted ?”

“You don’t believe me?”

“It’s not that. I’ve never even heard of such a thing, or of anyone absorbing another fae’s magic after killing them.”

“What are you saying?”

“You might be a really rare fae.”

My shoulders slump. “In other words, it’s going to be harder to learn about my powers.”

“Maybe, but it seems like many recognize you. It’s just a matter of getting answers from one.”

“So, I’m common. Everyone knows what I am.”

“Just because they recognize your magic doesn’t mean your kind isn’t rare. They all act like you’re the first of your kind they’ve ever seen. I’d say that counts.”

“This is so frustrating!”

Harek wraps an arm around me. “We’ll find answers. It might not be until we reach the metropolis, but we’ll get them.”

“You think so?”

“I have no doubt.”

“If only I had your confidence.”

“Trust me.” He squeezes my shoulders. “If these free roamers know what you are, the civilized ones will too. They’ll have more information, and we can sort through their libraries if we have to.”

“They have libraries? As in multiple?” My heart flutters at the thought. On the few

occasions I've been able to spend in Skoro's little library, I felt like I was in heaven.

"From what I hear. They have streets paved in gold, jewels decorating the signposts, and everything runs on magic."

I blink a few times. "You could live there, but you chose Skoro?"

He chuckles. "My parents picked our establishment."

"Why?"

"They like living a quiet life."

I pull away from him. "I want to see the libraries, gold streets, and jewels. Let's go!"

"That's what I've been trying to do—get you there."

"You're sure it's in this direction?"

"Yeah. My father has only talked about it at least a thousand times."

I shake my head, unable to believe anyone would pick Skoro over the metropolis where gold and jewels are so common they decorate with them. And that doesn't even touch on the books—they need multiple libraries to put all of them.

We set off, and Harek tells me the stories his parents have passed onto him about fae cities. My mind lights up with ideas, and I try not to think about them not allowing us in. Him a werewolf and me a halfling. I can definitely imagine that happening with us being so low on the chain.

But if we could get inside... it would be beyond my wildest imaginings. Bright

colors, happy music, magic as a way of life. What else could they have? Academies? Theaters? Amusement parks? All things my mother told me about when I was a little girl. Things I now realize she must've seen with her own eyes.

The possibilities seem endless.

For the first time since I was a child, I have hope for my future.

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Chapter

Eighteen

My feet are starting to ache, and that's saying something considering I spend most of my days walking around the barnyard, scooping manure. If anyone should be able to handle a trek through the forest, it's me.

Harek stops, and I nearly bump into him. "Sorry. We should eat some more food."

"Is it safe?" I glance around, still on edge from the last group of vampires we narrowly escaped from. Apparently this part of the woods is their territory, but Harek says we don't have any other choice but to go through if we want to reach the metropolis any time soon.

We nearly collided with three separate groups, but thanks to quick thinking managed to stay away.

He digs into his bag. "Should be."

"Should be safe?"

"We need to eat, and I can't smell any."

"If you say so." I couldn't smell the others, so I can only guess his sense is heightened even in his human form. I'm too tired to ask.

He gives me some food, and only then do I realize how famished I am. My stomach growls, and I practically inhale the meat.

Harek hands me another chunk, but I don't take it. He nudges it closer. "Take it."

"We should save it."

"Nah. We're close. The food there will be much better."

"But how will we get any? I doubt they'll take Skoro's coins."

"We'll figure something out."

My stomach growls again, so I take the food. If we have to work to eat, then so be it. I'm not sure what to expect when we get there, but I'm hungry. "What will happen when we get there? I assume they have guards at the gates."

"That's what I expect."

My stomach knots. "What if they don't let us in?"

"We're fae. We'll get in."

"But you said?—"

"Getting in is one thing, becoming part of the community is another matter entirely. I'm not promising they'll welcome us with open arms, but we'll get inside."

"How do you know? You said you've never been there."

"I've heard my parents talk about these things my entire life."

“Must be nice.”

“I didn’t like keeping secrets from you, but my parents convinced me it was for your own safety. The last thing I wanted was to put you in any danger.”

“You didn’t trust me?” I study him.

“It’s not like that. I don’t trust Gunnar, and clearly I was right in that assessment.”

“I wouldn’t have said anything to him.”

“But by not knowing, you didn’t have anything to hide. If he asked you any questions about fae, you would be fully honest in your lack of knowledge. He’d have no reason to push you for answers.”

“I guess I can see that, though I can’t remember him ever asking.”

“You wouldn’t, would you?” He lifts an eyebrow. “But if you were hiding knowledge about the fae world, that would be something etched into your mind.”

He has a point. Even though I wish my mother and friend had spoken up sooner, I can see why they didn’t.

Harek hands me his jug of water, and after we’ve hydrated we set out again.

My heart slams against my chest as I think about crossing paths with more vampires.

“You need to relax,” Harek whispers. “They’ll hear your heartbeat from a long distance.”

I groan. “You can sense my heartbeat?”

“When it’s that erratic, yes. My wolf is itching to get out again and my senses are on high alert. Vampires might not be able to hear it like me, but they’ll smell it. Take some deep breaths.”

“ You take some deep breaths,” I snap, but I know he’s right.

“If we’re in danger, your palm will let us know.”

I glance at my completely not glowing hand. “That does seem to be how it works.”

“All the more reason to stop worrying. Predators can sense that like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Does that make you a predator?”

He stops and looks me square in the eyes. “Not to you. I’ll always do whatever I can to keep you safe, and I’d never put you in harm’s way.”

My heart races even faster at his words. My face flames knowing he can sense it. He can probably even sense my embarrassment. Has he always been able to know my feelings?

Harek takes my hand in between his two. “You may not be able to trust many people, but I will always have your back. Never doubt that.”

Another rush of heat slams into my cheeks and runs down my neck. What is going on? Why am I responding like this?

“Thanks.” I pull my hands away and turn from him.

“Just don’t forget that.”

We set out again, but I can't seem to calm my racing heart. I can still feel his hands wrapped around mine, and it makes my head warm again. I've never had these reactions to Harek before. It must be my awakening magic. Yeah, that's it. He has some too, so it makes sense. Plus I have those other two fae's magic still pulsating around in me.

After a few minutes, while my mind is still racing, my palm warms. I glance at it.

It's glowing orange.

Harek and I exchange a wide-eyed glance.

Vampires must be near. Or some other kind of fae who means us harm.

He glances ahead. "Keep going."

My pulse races. He better not complain about me being on edge. If there is a good time for it, it's now. My palm is growing warmer and brighter by the moment. I shove my hands into my pockets so any predators won't notice it. With any luck, they'll simply leave us alone.

Crunch!

I gasp. That couldn't have been a vampire. The others we ran into earlier were all silent, practically appearing out of nowhere. Had my palm not warned me, we'd have never known they were approaching. Well, I suppose Harek might've sensed something eventually, but my glow was faster.

Someone steps in front of us, blocking our path. He stands right in the sunlight, confirming he isn't a vampire. The ones before stayed in the shadows.

He glares at Harek. “A little out of your territory, aren’t you?” I swear there’s a growl in his voice.

My friend furrows his eyebrows. “We’re just passing through. I’m a wolf too.”

“Obviously.” The other guy glances at me.

I tighten my fists, my right one warming more. I’m not sure if it’s a good thing none of these werewolves can shift today. Maybe so, since I’d be stuck as a human.

Harek squares his shoulders. “Move.”

“No.”

They stare each other down. Another two guys and a woman appear.

My palm is now so warm, it’s too uncomfortable to leave in the pocket. I pull it out and release my fist. A fully formed mist ball releases.

All four of the other werewolves turn to me in shock.

The first one who had been so arrogant raises his hands. “We don’t mean any trouble. I didn’t realize... I mean, I never would’ve thought...”

“How is that possible?” The woman stares at me. “It can’t be.”

The four of them all talk over each other.

I step toward them. “Are you going to let us pass?”

The first guy stumbles backward. “I didn’t mean any harm.”

My orange mist ball practically doubles in size. “My friend told you to move out of our way.”

He runs. The others continue staring, blocking our path.

The woman’s concern melts into a hardened glance. “You need to leave our territory.”

I hold my hand up in her direction. “Then get out of our way.”

“Come on, Kinta.” One of the guys grabs her.

She doesn’t take her gaze from me, her eyes turning nearly black. “Don’t ever come our way again. Got it?”

“Move out of our way.” I hold my arm back like I’m going to throw the ball at her.

The other men flee. She doesn’t budge.

Harek clears his throat. “You should follow your friends.”

“I’m not backing down.” Kinta keeps her focus on me. “You don’t belong here. Leave another way.”

“Are you threatening me?” Anger surges through me and my palm heats even more, though I wouldn’t have thought it possible.

“I’m saying you need to find another way to your destination.”

We stare each other down, my palm growing warmer by the moment.

She pulls out a sword. It's rusty but looks like it could cause some damage.

Harek pulls an arrow to the string of his bow.

Kinta's eyes flash black. "Don't test me."

I ready myself. "You really don't want to fight us."

She swings her weapon toward me.

Without thinking, I throw my mist ball. It hits her square in the chest and appears to spread out in all directions. She gasps, drops her sword. Falls to the ground. Calls me several names, her voice garbled.

Harek stares at me wide-eyed.

Kinta grasps at her throat before closing her eyes and going limp. A black mist rises from her body.

Exactly what I was worried would happen.

Harek stares at her, his mouth gaping. He doesn't move, even as the mist passes right by him.

Toward me.

I can't deal with more magic inside me. So I run.

"Eira!" Harek calls.

I don't stop. If I can outrun the swirling mist, I'll do everything in my power.

It makes a swooshing sound as it comes after me. I don't look back. Need to find a way to get out of its path.

"Where are you going?" Harek calls.

How does he not know what I'm doing? I can't deal with more misty magic turning my insides apart, or whatever it's doing.

Something cold brushes under my nose.

No. Not again. This cannot be happening. But it is.

Unable to keep going, I stop myself unwillingly. The dark mist momentarily blocks my view of anything else, as it swirls around and slides down through my nose to mingle with the other magic. All of the mists slosh and swirl in me.

The nausea returns with a vengeance. I fight against it, not wanting to lose all the food Harek just fed me.

He catches up with me, gasping. "Why did you run off?"

I double over, doing everything I can not to lose my lunch.

"Eira, are you okay?"

Shaking my head, I lean against a tree. Breathe deeply. Now it feels the foreign magic inside me is fighting against each other. It's cold and jostling my organs. I manage to focus on my friend. "I need another weapon. Using the mist balls is..."

My voice trails off as my stomach lurches heavily. I'm not going to be able to keep my food down.

Have to try.

“Eira?”

“I’m sorry.” I turn away from him just in time to expunge all the food he so generously shared with me.

Chapter

Nineteen

The new magic feels like it's fighting the magic from the first two. If I had any food left in my stomach, I'd surely vomit that up too.

"Eira?" Harek calls.

I'd run from him after throwing up, not only embarrassed but wanting privacy as all the new magic had its way with me. Instead of feeling better, it's worse. Doesn't show any signs of relenting and isn't mixing well at all with the other stuff.

There has to be a way to get rid of all this. Other fae who kill must have figured something out by now. They can't all run around feeling like this—not unless it gets better with time. It doesn't seem likely. There has to be an answer somewhere.

Harek must know.

I step out from behind the tree I've been leaning against and face him. "Sorry about the food. I know it couldn't have been easy for you to get that."

"Are you okay?" He rushes over with nothing but concern in his eyes.

"I don't know."

"What happened?"

“Isn’t it obvious?”

He frowns. “I mean, aside from the fact that you had to kill another fae. That’s a lot to take in, I know.”

“I can’t deal with this magic!”

“Magic?”

“The black swirly mist. I assumed it was their magic, but maybe I’m wrong. What was that?”

Harek just stares at me.

“You don’t know what it is either?”

“What black mist?”

It’s my turn to stare at him. “The swirling stuff that came out of that werewolf’s body and flew into mine.”

“I didn’t see anything like that.”

“You didn’t see that? How is that possible? Were you looking the other way?”

He shakes his head. “I was looking right at you. You reacted like something was going on, but I couldn’t see a thing.”

“Let me get this straight. You didn’t see the black mist at all?”

“Nothing like that.”

“It came from her body and went directly into mine, and it was so dark I couldn’t see anything else.”

“We need to get to the fae city and find answers. I don’t know what’s going on, but it isn’t normal.” Harek pulls me into an embrace. We’ve hugged more in the last day than in the entirety of the rest of our lives. It’s actually kind of nice. He steps back, and I kind of wish he wouldn’t. “We should get our bags and start the trek. It’s still some distance away.”

I nod, and we start heading back. For some reason the lump in my throat doubles in size. Probably because going to the fae city holds a finality to it. I’ll be moving fully from Mother and finding the fae who can tell me why I can see the mist but Harek—who understands his powers completely—couldn’t see it. I can’t bring myself to call that man my father. All my life I’ve thought of myself as fatherless. Gunnar certainly never has been anything other than an authority figure. No parental love at all. Not that I expect any from the fae who gave me up before I was even born. That only came from my mother, and now she’s gone.

Harek is my only family now, and he’ll return to Skoro once I settle in at the fae city. Hopefully once I find others like me, they’ll accept me into their fold.

If they’ll be open to a halfling. I may just have to accept that loneliness is my lot in life. Unless there’s a group of halflings somewhere who will take me in. We’re a rare breed from what I understand. Fae don’t often get involved with humans, but obviously it does happen from time to time.

It makes me curious about how my mother came to have a relationship with my father. Relationship is probably too strong a word. It was probably a fling or even a drunken mistake, though it’s strange to think of my mother having either a fling or a casual encounter. She’s the most responsible person I know.

Was. She was the most responsible person I've ever known.

Tears sting my eyes, and I clear my throat.

Harek throws me a sympathetic glance.

"I'm fine." It's true. At least thinking about my mother distracted me from the magical war waging inside me.

We make it back to our bags, and the werewolf's body is gone. Already melted away because her magic left her and entered me.

Harek throws his bag over his shoulder. "Looks like her pack already came for her body."

"Unless it melted like those other two." I heave my bag onto my back.

"In that case, we better leave before they return. They're going to be furious if they can't properly mourn her."

Just what I need—more people after me. Hopefully the fae city will offer some protection.

They could reject me simply for being a halfling since everyone hates us. Maybe someone will be kind enough to point me to a halfling colony, if such a thing exists. There have to be other halflings sticking together. Living alone is dangerous, so those who are alike need each other. Unless they find a way to blend in with either humans or fae. I've managed to live in Skoro without issue my entire life. Perhaps I could find a new colony who would take me in.

As long as Gunnar doesn't have reach there. As far as I know, his entire life exists

within the walls of our establishment. Hopefully I'm right.

Harek and I walk along in silence for a long time. The sun is starting to go down, but that isn't what really catches my attention.

Grass. Weeds. Dirt.

I stop and grab his arm. "The snow is melting! This time of year—how is that possible?"

He grins. "We're moving farther from Skoro and closer to the fae city."

"They really don't have much snow now?"

"There won't be any once we get to the city. They have temperate weather year 'round, with only the occasional heatwave or snow flurry."

"It's so hard to imagine." I unbutton the top of my coat.

"Wait until you see it." He flings his bag around and digs into it. "We should eat."

I frown. "I shouldn't."

"You need to."

"I don't want to vomit it up. That's such a waste."

"It isn't up for discussion. You need food." He hands me dried meat.

Guilt wells up. "But I?—"

“Eat.” He takes a large bite from a hen’s leg.

My stomach growls as the aroma from the meat’s seasoning reaches my nose. “It won’t hurt to try a little. Maybe I’ll be able to keep it down.”

“Good.”

The magic is still moving around inside me, but it isn’t raging like before. Perhaps it’s becoming part of me, or just calming down. If I can’t find anyone to explain this to me, maybe I’ll be able to work with it on my own.

While we eat, the sun quickly sets. We decide to make camp in an abandoned cave. Harek shows me how to string a trap that will make noise if anyone comes near us. It’s loud enough to wake the dead and the moonlight doesn’t reach it, so it’s basically invisible, allowing us both to sleep.

He stays close, wrapping his arm around me and pulling me near. It’s so we stay warm, he says, but I can’t help wonder if he enjoys the contact as much as I do. It also awakens something unfamiliar in me, something I think my mother must’ve felt toward my father. But I push those thoughts aside and just enjoy being in his embrace. Tomorrow will probably bring more run-ins with fae, and I want this moment to last as long as possible. Even the foreign magic inside me seems to have calmed for the night.

I snuggle against him, us fitting together like we were made for each other, and let his soft breathing lull me to a sweet slumber.

Bright sunlight wakes me. A sliver of it shines into the cave, landing directly across my eyes. I yawn and stretch, finding Harek’s arm still wrapped around me. I take a deep breath and savor the moment. Once he wakes, we’ll head out again.

I manage to roll over and steal a glance of him sleeping. He looks so peaceful, and a little smile tugs on his lips. It makes me wonder what he's dreaming about. Running as a wolf, maybe. Instead of being mad at him for keeping a secret from me, I should find out what it's like for him. I can't imagine changing into a whole other creature and racing through the forest.

His eyes flutter and then he slowly opens them. He looks around before making eye contact with me, and his lips form an even wider smile than when he slept. "This is a nice way to wake. Were you watching me sleep?"

Heat flames my cheeks and neck. "I just woke and I was checking to see if you were awake yet. That's all. Nothing more."

Smooth, Eira. Really smooth. The heat creeps to my ears. I hope he can't tell. Sometimes there are benefits to having my father's coloring.

His smile doesn't falter, and he continues holding my gaze. Suddenly the small distance between us seems to scream. We're close enough that if either inched forward, our lips would brush. I'm not so sure that would be a bad thing.

But I also don't want to make any rash decisions when I'm in mourning and dealing with new fae powers. I scoot back, bolt up, and clear my throat. "So, uh, did you sleep well?"

"Never better." He stretches lazily and sits as if this isn't the most awkward moment in the history of awkward moments. "How about you?"

Why is my heart pounding so hard? I swallow. "Much better."

"Glad to hear it." He gives me his usual crooked smile.

I'm glad to be sitting. There's no way my legs would hold me up right now.

What's going on with me? Or us? Does he notice any of this? He sure doesn't seem to think any of it is weird. I wish I could be as easygoing and relaxed as him.

Maybe I'm focusing on something that isn't there as a way to distract myself from my grief. That has to be it. Harek is my best friend—the one person aside from my mother and sisters I can trust with my darkest secrets and even my very life.

Romance ruins good things like this. I've seen it firsthand. My good friend Freja fell for the boy next door who she grew up with, and now they can't even look at each other. I think I'd die if anything like that happened between Harek and me. It isn't worth the risk.

He rises, though not fully as the cave isn't even tall enough for me to stand. "I'm going to see if I can catch a small animal to cook over a fire. Then we can head out."

"Did I eat all of your food?" Guilt stings. I never should've accepted his food after yakking yesterday.

"No, I'm just in the mood for something fresh. I noticed a spring behind this cave, if you want to freshen up while I'm out. I promise not to peek."

My face burns so hot I'm not sure how I don't catch fire. I try to speak, but nothing comes.

"Hurry, though. We should head out soon, and I think I hear a jackrabbit. That'll give us plenty to eat."

I still can't find my voice. The thought of him knowing I'm going to take a dip in the spring is almost too much. Does he want to peek? Is that why he said that? Or does he

have no desire—and also no clue what he’s doing to me?

Luckily, he ducks out of the cave, carefully avoiding the noisy trap he set last night.

I’m not sure how I’m going to survive the rest of our trek together at this rate.

Chapter

Twenty

The water is surprisingly warm, even for a spring. It's tempting to take a dip and get cleaned up. Since Harek is going to cook our breakfast over a fire, I can dry my hair next to that. I have an extra tunic, which can double as a towel when I get out.

It could work. My pulse drums in my ears as I glance around. Unless someone is hiding among the trees, I'm all alone. The only sounds are the occasional bubbling of the spring.

I look around again before taking off my coat and resting it on the large rock my bag is slung against. Then I slide out of my tunic but leave on my underwear before looking around and dipping into the spring at record speed.

Harek better have been telling the truth about not peeking, but worse was not knowing who—or what—could be lurking around, watching? I'm not giving anyone a show, even for a split second.

I slide down, taking in the warmth of the dark water. This isn't like the spring kids play in during the short summer back in Skoro. That water is so light and clear the pebbles at the bottom are visible. Not here. I can't even see my own hands underneath. But when I bring my fingers out of the water, they're clean. Somehow the deep blue water isn't murky because of dirt. Good. If anyone does come by, they won't see anything.

The warmth relaxes me enough that I close my eyes and simply enjoy the moment. Some of the magic inside me moves around, but it isn't aggressive like before. After a little time passes, I dip down fully and massage my scalp. If I'm going to bathe, I may as well do so properly.

When I emerge, a branch snaps nearby.

Instinctively, I cover myself even though the color of the water hides me and my underclothes completely.

"Is it safe?" Harek's voice comes from the woods.

"What?" I call, horrified.

"I caught the granddaddy of all jackrabbits. We're going to eat like the fae kings in the stories we heard as kids!"

"Great. Go away!"

"I'm going to build a fire."

"Have fun!"

"Are you covered?" he calls.

I hurry to the middle of the spring where the water is the darkest. "I'm in the water!"

Harek emerges from the trees, carrying a rabbit about a quarter his size. For a moment I don't care that I'm undressed. "What kind of monstrosity is that?"

"Like I said." He grins. "We'll have enough food for days."

My stomach growls at the thought.

He dumps everything on the ground and quickly starts a fire. Next he arranges parts of the animal over it, attaching the pieces to sticks above the flames. His speed at the task makes me think he's done this plenty of times before.

"Did you do this on purpose?" I ask.

"What?" He adds another log to the fire, and flames burst out, nearly doubling in size.

"Perfect. The meat should cook quickly at this rate."

I glance down at myself, making sure the water still covers me. It does. "Did you tell me to take a dip here, knowing you'd return to see me?"

"No." He turns to me. "I told you I wasn't going to peek."

"But you're here now."

"And I can't see a thing. But I am going to join you."

A shriek escapes me. "What?"

He removes his coat. "Why not? What's the difference between this and swimming at the lake?"

"Um, clothes. I don't know about you, but I didn't pack swimwear."

"Me neither." He pulls off his shirt, showing a muscular physique.

My mouth falls open. The last time we swam together—a few years ago at this point—he wasn't nearly as defined as now.

When he pulls his shirt from his face, he catches me staring.

I could die right here, right now. But I don't turn away. He's magnificent.

"You gonna keep watching?" A smirk plays at his lips.

"No!" I whip around and duck under the water for good measure. I swear I hear him chuckle before I submerge myself.

After a few moments the water ripples with strong waves, jostling me. He must've jumped in, given the force.

It's just as well, since I can't hold my breath any longer. Just before my lungs explode, I burst to the surface, careful not to leap too high and risk him seeing my underwear. I wipe the water from my eyes.

Harek is close enough I could reach out and touch him. His muscles gleam in the light, and I can't get over how big they've gotten. He's all man now—no denying it.

I can't think like that. But the more I try to shove the thoughts aside, the more they scream at me.

He must've set this up on purpose. At least I'm not stressing about my heartache or the magic.

"The water's perfect." He closes his eyes for a moment.

I'm not sure I can even blink. When he opens his eyes, I nod, not trusting my voice.

He closes the distance between us. I don't dare think about how near he is under the water. His expression softens. "Are you okay with this?"

“Yeah.” My voice is about ten octaves higher than normal.

“I love having all this time with you. We’ve barely gotten any alone time together in ages.”

“It’s... it’s nice.” I swallow. “I’ve missed you.”

Harek brushes some hair from my face and tucks it behind my ear, his gaze not leaving mine.

Despite being immersed in water, my mouth goes dry like the ground in the summer heat.

His fingertips don’t leave my ear, nor his eyes from mine.

My skin practically burns at his touch. I don’t want him to let go. Ever. The air between us feels electric, which is dangerous around all this water.

He trails his fingers down to my jawline, tracing it. My skin tingles everywhere he touches. He stops, his hand near my lips.

I lean closer toward him, barely aware of my own movement. His thumb brushes my mouth.

My eyes widen, but his softens. He tilts his head, and flecks of silver appear in his irises. Then he brushes a fingertip along my lower lip. It’s like a trail of sparks.

A gasp escapes me. I want him to kiss me—more than I’ve ever wanted anything.

Some of his hair falls across his eye, and a drop of water trails down his face, landing on his mouth. I can’t take it another second. This moment has been building for our

entire lives, the intensity growing exponentially since we stepped out from the town wall. It was easier for me to be angry with him for being a werewolf than to admit how much I need him.

I close the gap between us and press my lips against his. He cups my chin and returns the kiss. Behind my closed eyelids, a fireworks show puts any real life display to shame. My heart soars as I taste him, pressing my palms against his arms. He flexes and deepens the kiss. I can barely breathe. I'm desperate to take it all in, hold onto this moment forever.

Smoke fills the air. Something's burning.

Harek pulls away. "The food!"

Before I can respond, he spins around and swims the short distance to the edge. He leaps out of the water and lifts the stick holding the meat from the now much higher flame than before.

It takes me a moment to pull my attention from the blaze and realize I have a full view of his backside. His underpants cling to him like a second skin. I stare a moment longer than I should before spinning around to give him privacy.

I struggle to breathe normally, unsure if it's from the shock of the fire or from the kiss—or both.

His voice sounds behind me after what feels like forever. "I managed to save most of it. You ready to eat? I won't look."

"Are you dressed?"

"Yeah."

I turn hesitantly. Thankfully he's fully dressed. I'm not sure what I'd do if he wasn't. But why wouldn't he be? He said he was. His outfit is fresh, making me wonder if it was in his bag or stuffed away in the woods like the last one. But this seems pretty far from Skoro to be a regular spot for hunting with his father. On the other hand, running as wolves might allow them to travel longer distances.

Once I reach the edge of the spring, Harek turns to the fire and keeps his back to me.

"I'm getting out," I say.

"I won't move until you give the word."

Relief washes through me, and it strikes me that I trust him so easily when I've been so mad about him lying about being a werewolf. Not that it was really lying—more of an omission of facts that his parents undoubtedly insisted on. Maybe he always planned on telling me once I found out about my own true nature. That was likely his line of thinking all along.

I get out of the spring and shiver in the cold, drying off quickly then changing next to a tree on the off chance someone is spying from the cover of the woods. I make my way to the fire once I have my coat on.

Harek is not only roasting the jackrabbit meat, but he has a small pot and is making stew from it.

"Stew?" I ask.

"It isn't that hard, and it's going to be delicious. Did you see the size of that thing?"

"Nearly as big as you."

He chuckles. “I wouldn’t go that far, but it was easily the largest I’ve seen.” He pulls a log over and motions for me to sit.

After I do, he scoots next to me. We’ve sat this close a million times before, but it’s different now.

That kiss changed everything, and yet I can’t bring myself to talk about it. I can still feel his lips on mine. The thought of it sends every inch of me on fire.

He takes my hand and traces shapes on my palm. My breath catches in my throat, but I don’t need words. The silence between us, the closeness, is enough. The fact that he’s doing this to my hand and that I’m letting him speaks more than I could say with words.

The moment barely starts before he leaps up and checks the stew. “It’s ready. Let’s eat and then head out.”

I want to suggest making camp here for a few days, but it really isn’t an option. Gunnar is bound to be out looking for us again, as are the friends and family of the three fae I killed if anyone figures out what I’ve done.

A shudder runs through me. I might be able to defend us against them, but do I want to? The crazy magic isn’t something I want to mess with again. Though if our lives are in danger, what other choice do I have?

Harek takes two bowls his pack. After filling them, he hands me one, reaches into his bag again, then hands me a spoon.

My mouth waters at the aroma. I should be able to keep this down, given that the magic inside me has finally settled. It isn’t unnoticeable, but I can live with it like this.

At least until I'm forced to kill again.

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Chapter

Twenty-One

The next few days go by in a blur of boredom as we hike through the forest, but the threat of fae never really leaves. Other species will claim we're in their territory as the werewolves did, but thankfully so far all have run after seeing my glowing palm.

That's another thing—my weird glow always lets us know when someone dangerous is nearby. It hasn't let us down.

I found a large branch on the first day we set out after swimming in the spring. I've been carving the top to make it sharp, but it makes a fine weapon as it is. One whack sent a fae flying, and landing knocked the wind out of him.

I killed another by running him through with the filed limb. Even though I didn't use my glowing mist ball, I unfortunately still absorbed his magic.

Now I know it isn't only using my power when killing that makes me take in their magic, just as I know any time I do that it makes me sick for a while. I swear even after half a week, I can still feel the magic of all the fae I've killed. None of this makes any sense to me.

I just hope I can find my father when we get to the fae city. If not him, then someone like us. He abandoned me, so it makes sense he wouldn't want to help. It's possible he'd even actively hide, or worse, come after me. I'm ready for any possibility, but it's the not knowing that drives me crazy. I have to plan for any possible eventuality,

and there are likely several I haven't even considered. Probably more.

Even if no fae like me will help, somebody has to know something . Anything would be better than trying to figure all this out on my own.

Harek stops walking, and so do I. We're at the edge of the woods.

In front of us is a sprawling city unlike anything I've ever seen. It seems to glow in golden and silver tones, sparkling in the bright daylight. The sun is behind it, as it's late in the day, and that gives it an even more intense appeal.

I finally catch my breath. "Have you seen this before?"

He slides his fingers between mine and squeezes—he's been doing a lot of that over the past few days. "I've only ever heard rumors, but I never imagined it was so..."

"Magnificent?" I offer.

"Exactly."

We stare at the sight for what feels like a few more minutes before Harek turns to me.

"Are you ready?"

My throat closes. I glance down at my dirt-caked clothes. They'll never let us inside. The golden city must not have a drop of dirt or dust in sight.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Look at us."

"You look amazing."

Normally, that would embarrass me but now I want to throw something. “We’re going to stick out! Nobody’ll take us seriously, and that’s assuming we’re even allowed inside.”

“We’re both fae. It won’t be a problem.”

“Even though they’ll think we’re beggars?”

He shrugs. “We’ve been camping. Who cares?”

Usually, I love his optimism but not today. I wave my hands toward the glimmering city. “We don’t belong in there! Not even close. This was all for nothing.”

“We’ll get in there and get cleaned up. Nobody will give us a second look.”

I glance down at my clothes again. “Look at that place!”

“Have I ever steered you wrong?”

“Ever?”

Harek pauses. “Okay, fine. I’m sure I have at some point over the course of our entire lives, but I got you here. We made it—this was your goal. Do you want to find your father, or look like royalty?”

“I just want to fit in. That isn’t a lot to ask.”

“How about this? We dust ourselves off, perhaps even change into something cleaner, and then go in looking as presentable as possible? I’m sure we can figure something out once inside.”

Suddenly, all of this seems like such a bad idea. We don't have any fae currency, we look—and smell—like we belong in the forest, and even if my father is in there somewhere, what are the chances we'll find him? We could spend weeks exploring and still have so much longer to go.

Turning around and going back to Skoro won't work either. Not with Gunnar furious at me and wanting to line his pockets by marrying me off to someone like Vog.

Harek rests a hand on my shoulder. "What do you think?"

I stare at the glorious city with a sinking feeling. "We came all this way. It wouldn't make sense not to try to enter."

"Exactly! Do you want to change clothes or march in as we are?"

"Change."

We spend a few minutes hitting our coats against trees to get as much dust and dirt off as possible without washing anything. Then we hide ourselves and change into clothes from our bags. We do look better, but we still have streaks of dirt on our skin and through our hair. My fancy braid lost all fanciness days ago.

"You don't look convinced yet," Harek says.

"Is there any water to wash our faces and hair? I'm not saying we need a full bath, but I've got to do something about this."

"I have some water in my bag. It might be enough for our faces, but I can't help with the water. I don't think it's going to be worth our effort to try washing our hair."

Says the guy who could cover his hair with a hat. I keep the thought to myself.

“Okay, let’s do that.”

While he digs into his bag, I undo my braid and shake my hair out. Tiny remnants from the woods fall to the ground.

He hands me his water bottle. “You look amazing. They’ll definitely let you in.”

“I’m a halfling, so there’s no guarantee.” I take some water and rub my face and hands. Without a mirror, I can only hope I’ve made myself look better instead of worse.

Harek and I help each other until we look as presentable as possible given our journey.

He returns his bottle to his bag. “You ready?”

I take a deep breath. “I’m not sure I’ll ever be, but let’s do this.”

“That’s the spirit!”

My heart hammers as we start toward the sparkling city. We have to make our way down an incline, and dust ourselves off again at the bottom. The gates are now visible—daunting and intimidating. A lump forms in my throat.

I never imagined I’d even see a fae city, much less try to enter one. But I’m half fae, as evidenced by everything I’ve experienced over the last week. I can’t believe it’s been that long since I’ve seen my mother or siblings. Surely Mother’s memorial is over now, and life has moved back to normal.

The closer we get to the walls, the more noises reach us from inside. Machinery, music, and other sounds I can’t place—things that must be normal and humdrum for

the fae but are a complete mystery to me.

“Relax.” Harek rubs my shoulders. “It’s all going to work out.”

If only I had his confidence.

We reach the gates. Two enormous fae stand on either side.

Everything in me screams to run.

The bulky men look us over, one with a deep scowl, but neither says anything. No protests or questions. They simply let us walk inside.

I glance at my palm, which is normal, and throw Harek a bewildered expression, and he returns it with an I-told-you-so one.

Inside, the streets really are paved with gold—or at least a golden color. Tall buildings loom everywhere, and something in the air is sweet and pleasant. Finely dressed people walk around, all appearing to be on a mission.

Now to see if we can find my father. If we chose the correct city, he was here before I was born, but who’s to say he’s still here? Time to find out. If I’m lucky, we might even learn something before nightfall.

Chapter

Twenty-Two

It takes forever to get through the business district of the fae city—that's what someone told us it's called—because I keep stopping to stare. Many of the fae are nicer than I expected. The ones who came to Skoro always led me to believe they're a frightening species. So far none we've run into are anything like the ones in the woods, the ones whose magic is still wreaking havoc on my system. Coming here seems to have activated those ingested powers, which are now swirling around again as if fighting each other.

The buildings are even more magnificent up close. They're more than made with precious metals and gems. It's as if those things sprang up from the ground and simply formed into buildings. My breath catches every time I turn around, and that's only for the structures. The fae are beyond my wildest imaginings.

They wander around wearing big, bright clothes like I've never seen. They look so elegant and expensive. One shirt here is easily worth more than the entire farm back home. A lady with a kitten face rushes by, talking quickly to a man with fur like a bear, has a shirt that looks like it was made with hummingbird wings. Another man floats by, and I think he actually has hummingbird wings.

Harek nudges me. "I'm as amazed as you, but we really need to find a place to stay."

I stare at a skyscraper across the golden street that appears to be one solid piece of aquamarine. "Maybe one of these buildings is a hotel. Could you imagine what it

would be like inside? We'd sleep like royalty."

"There's no way we could afford anything like that."

I don't take my gaze from the blueish green building. "How would we afford anything?"

"If we can find an inn, we could work for our stay."

All the wonder deflates from my insides, and I turn to him. "But we're on a mission. I need to find out who my father is."

"Maybe he'll let us stay with him."

My stomach sinks at the thought, which does nothing to calm the angry magic inside me. "The man abandoned my mother and me. I only want to find out what kind of a fae he is then move on with my life."

Harek lifts a brow. "Really? You aren't curious about him and your family at all?"

My best friend knows me too well, but I'm not about to let on he's right. I'd jump at the chance to know my father if he had any interest in me, but I don't see that happening. The fae has never shown even an inkling in the twenty-three years of my life.

I decide to change the subject. "Have you noticed how warm it is here? We don't even need an inn. I could fall asleep on the ground and have the greatest night's sleep of my life." A sweet buzzing taste tickles my tongue, not that I understand how buzzing can have a taste. Nothing makes sense in this city. "What's that?"

Harek glances around. "What?"

“The taste .”

“You mean the magic?”

I move my tongue around. “That’s magic? It has a taste?”

“When there’s this much in a single place.” He pulls me along. “We need to get ourselves to another district. This one isn’t for us.”

“I could spend a week here and never get bored.”

A pink-and-green caterpillar half my size skitters past as if to prove my point. If I’d known I had fae blood running through my veins, I’d have come here long ago to escape Gunnar and his mistreatment. I wish I could bring my sisters here—they’d never believe it. But being human, they’d never get past the gates.

“Eira...” Harek says my name with twice as many syllables. “We can come back here later if you want.”

“Oh, I definitely want.”

“But we can’t sleep here. Whether we find an inn or a cave, it won’t be here.”

I hate to leave, but I relent and we hurry past more buildings—ones made of ruby, gold, and even diamonds. The sweet taste of magic grows stronger with every step we take.

Before long, the buildings become smaller and foliage appears. Though the plant life is nothing like what I’ve seen outside the walls. Not that I should be surprised. The colors are more vast than a rainbow on a sunny morning. Everything from tiny plants to towering trees shine like prisms, casting brightly colored shadows in angles I

wouldn't have thought possible just an hour earlier.

Birds flit, darting here and there, moving so fast I almost can't see their wings. Brightly colored predators pad around, not caring about any of the creatures that could be their food—including us. A winged, sparkly, sea foam green saber toothed moose snorts as he glances our way while eating a feathered flower.

I glance at Harek, who is finally as mesmerized as I am. He threads his fingers between mine and squeezes as a crimson lion turns our way. Upon closer inspection, the beast is actually a swarm of butterflies. When I cough, they part and fly in separate directions with a massive flutter.

As we walk farther, branches overhead move in impossible directions, twirling around each other, forming pathways for animals and fae alike to walk on. Music and delicious smells come from up ahead. My stomach growls despite the sourness from the foreign magic inside me.

We round a corner and come to a marketplace of sorts, although it isn't like any I've ever encountered before. Stalls not only stand on the ground but also float in the air. Winged patrons fly from one to another in the same way those using legs walk from one to the next.

My stomach growls again, and I turn to Harek. "What do you think it would take for us to get some food?"

He studies the activity in front of us. "They appear to have coins."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"We don't have any."

“Clearly, but there has to be something we can do.”

“Let’s walk closer and see if anyone is paying another way.”

We walk around, watching and listening. Nobody’s discussing the money they’re using, but they’re having plenty of other interesting conversations.

“The festival this year is supposed to be the biggest yet.”

“I hear some of the winter city dignitaries will be here.”

“The academy had another fire in the first year’s dormitory.”

“Did you know another wild vampire coven was wiped out in the forest?”

“The hunter is weakening even more. I heard a sprite overtook him last week.”

“A sprite? Where do you get your information? From the nursery school?”

Laughter.

“I’m serious! If he doesn’t regain his strength, evil fae are going to start taking over. Things will go the way of Courtsview.”

“That wasn’t because of the hunter! The leaders allowed lawlessness to rule.”

“What do you think will happen if the hunter can’t do his job?”

Harek taps my shoulder and motions for me to follow him.

I wave him off, curious to learn more about the hunter. He sounds important, and the

last thing I want is to make my new home here only to have the city fall apart—not that I can imagine anything bad happening here.

But Harek pulls me away. “We have to go.”

“I was listening to that conversation. Who’s the hunter?”

“Just a legend. I need to get out of here. They kick werewolves out of the city at night. I have to find a place to hide.”

“Who told you that?”

“Like you, I was listening in. They don’t like my kind around here.” He balls his hands into fists.

“Why? It isn’t like you’re going to shift without the full moon.”

“Apparently they don’t take that chance.” His gaze drifts to something behind me.

I glance back and see a well-dressed older couple staring at us. He has wings like an owl, and she appears strikingly human with silky hair the colors of a sunset, changing in waves along with the sky above.

Harek tugs on my arm. “They know what I am.”

Disappointment washes through me, but he’s right. We’re going to have to find a place to hide. He bursts into a run, and I follow. We pass vendors, shoppers, and a wide variety of delicious aromas.

The marketplace gives way to a large field where the strangest band I’ve ever seen plays a mesmerizing song for a large crowd gathered around them. I can see the notes

coming from the musical instruments in bright colors, tempting me to fall into a trance.

I shake my head, grab Harek's arm, and yank him toward the people. We disappear into a throng who are too busy moving to the music to notice a werewolf in their midst. We make our way around slowly, pretending to be into the music. It takes a while, but eventually we get clear to the other side of the band and break free of the crowd.

Looking around, it's clear nobody's paying us any attention, but it's only a matter of time before another fae figures out there's a werewolf in their midst so close to nightfall.

Harek points to my hand. "Your palm is glowing."

I shove my hand into a pocket. "Big surprise. We're surrounded by fae."

"It means one of them is dangerous."

"And there's a big crowd. Nobody's going to do anything here. Let's go."

We hurry toward some foliage. It might be where we have to sleep, not that it'll be any different from the past week or so. Once we reach a large, rainbow bush, we hide behind it and catch our breaths.

I turn to him. "If they kick you out, I'm going with you."

"I appreciate it, but you need to be here. If your father is here?—"

"I'm not leaving you. We can come back during the daytime."

He sighs. “You’re stubborn.”

“Says the guy who traveled all this way after I tried talking you out of it.”

“We need a plan.”

“We have one.”

Harek throws me an exasperated look. “I mean a real plan.”

“It is real—we’ll sleep where we can and then try to figure out what we’re able about my father tomorrow. There has to be a library with information. Maybe even some people who’ll be willing to help us out.”

He starts to respond, but someone off to the side clears their throat.

It’s the woman with sunset-like hair. Now it’s darker but with a few rich hues, like the sky above.

A wave of fear runs through me. What if she kicks us out? I can’t think of any other reason she’d follow us all the way over here.

I swallow. “Can we help you?”

She motions toward a district with smaller buildings than the business district. “Let’s talk.”

I exchange a questioning glance with Harek.

He rises and squares his shoulders. “What about?”

“This isn’t the place.” She glances at me. “You know there’s danger in the crowd.”

Blood drains from my head. How does she know that? Did she see my palm? She couldn’t have.

She motions toward the buildings again. “Let’s talk over dinner.”

I freeze. An actual meal?

Harek looks like he’s trying to send me a message with his eyes. He subtly shakes his head.

The woman almost looks amused. “We can go to a restaurant if that would make you feel better, but I can offer you a shower at my place. And I assure you the food is much better.”

My stomach growls again.

She glances at Harek. “I’ll even let your kind stay overnight.”

He still doesn’t look convinced.

I’m willing to take a chance on her to have a real meal and am about to agree.

Harek speaks before I can.

“Won’t you get in trouble for housing me?”

“No, but you’ll certainly find some if nobody takes you on.”

I nudge him. “Let’s do this.”

He shakes his head.

“Now who’s being stubborn?” I grab his arm and pull him toward the woman. “We’d be glad to join you. Thank you for your hospitality.”

Chapter

Twenty-Three

“Where’s the guy with the owl wings?” Harek asks, once we’re seated in the woman’s dining room.

I kick him under the table. If he keeps up with his rudeness, we won’t be able to eat the mouthwatering food waiting for us to devour. He also doesn’t seem to notice what a nice home this is. I’ve personally never seen anything like it. It seems more like a castle than an apartment.

After I insisted we follow her, she led us through a housing district filled with gorgeous structures of all sizes. Vivvi—she finally told us her name on the way—lives in the tallest one, near the top. I snagged a glance out a window, and the view is incredible.

She also has servants. One took our coats and asked if we wanted them washed. He also showed us to separate bathrooms to clean up, though we didn’t have time for showers. Vivvi insisted there would be plenty of time for that later.

It doesn’t bother me. Eat then shower, or shower then eat. We weren’t even sure we’d get a single bite tonight, and we’d already run out of the food in Harek’s pack.

Another servant led us to the dining room once we’d washed our hands and faces. Harek didn’t look sure then, and he definitely doesn’t now as he waits for Vivvi to tell us about the guy with owl wings she’d been with when we first saw her.

“He’s not my husband, if that’s what you’re asking. My Albert died several years ago, and I’ve been on my own since then.”

On her own, if you don’t count the servants bustling around. Maybe she doesn’t.

A thought strikes me—what if she thinks we’re prospects for her employment? Or worse, working for free? Maybe Harek was right, and we should’ve asked more questions before coming here. Too late, and we can always leave after filling our bellies.

“So, who was he?” Harek asks. “He looked important.”

I throw him a questioning glance. How can one person around here look more important than another? Everyone looks so different. Vivvi, even with her now-black hair, seems the most human of anyone I’ve seen since arriving.

She smiles at Harek. “You’re very observant. He’s a member of the high council. But let’s not worry about him. Eat.” She waves her hands in front of the food.

I don’t have to be told twice and quickly reach for the nearest dish. After scooping something like purple scallops onto my plate, I go for some meat I don’t recognize. Hopefully the weird magic will let me eat and be. This is the first time I’ve had anything inside the gates, and it’s like the magic wants out or something. It’s hard to explain. But it won’t keep me from filling up.

Harek continues interrogating our host, and she doesn’t seem bothered. In fact, she almost appears amused by the line of questioning. I’m not sure if she just enjoys our company or if she actually finds us humorous. As long as we can stay here, I don’t care.

“What about you, Eira?”

I glance up with a mouthful of food. Swallow. “Huh?”

Vivvi looks like she’s trying to stifle a smile. “I asked where you grew up.”

“Oh.” I wipe my mouth with a delicate napkin that’s probably worth more than anything I’ve ever owned. “In Skoro, not far from Harek. His family hunts, and mine farms.”

“Interesting.”

“Why’s that?”

“It just is.” She pours herself a bubbly drink. “Do you want some?”

“Yes.”

Harek nudges me with his foot.

“Please,” I add, not that I understand why he’s concerned with pleasantries when he doesn’t even want to be here with this generous woman in the first place.

An annoyed look crosses his face. Perhaps manners isn’t the reason he nudged me.

Vivvi motions for one of the servants to give me some of the bubbly drink.

It smells sweet, like overripe fruit in the summertime, but it has a bit of a bitter taste going down and makes me feel a little funny inside. Oh, it’s alcohol. I’ve only had it one time, and that was at a banquet. Gunnar never buys anything like this, or at least he never lets me near any. It’s probably expensive, given that it’s here.

“What’s farm life like? That sounds interesting.”

I shrug. “Maybe for others. My stepfather gave me duties that wouldn’t be appropriate to talk about during a meal.”

She bristles. “Oh, my. That doesn’t sound pleasant.”

“Nope.” I sip more of the drink, earning another glare from Harek, then dig into some of the untouched food on my plate.

“What was that like?” Vivvi looks at me with genuine interest in her eyes.

“Boring. Maddening, if I’m honest. My brothers got the best jobs—they got to ride horses and round up the cattle.”

She nods knowingly. “Men always get the best jobs.”

“Not always,” Harek mutters.

“You don’t think so?” Vivvi lifts an eyebrow, and even such a simple gesture seems elegant and expensive on her. Like she’d spent an absurd amount of money on her face.

“My father and I butcher meat. There’s nothing glorious in that.”

“But it must be fun to hunt.”

“During the chase.” He plays with some food on his plate. “But the rest of the time is dull and tedious.”

“What about during the full moon?”

He grits his teeth. “What are you insinuating?”

“Nothing. I rarely talk with werewolves, and I’ve always been curious. It must be so freeing to run like that.”

Harek’s shoulders relax. “Actually, it is.”

Vivvi’s eyes light up. “Tell me more.”

“On any of the three days surrounding the full moon, we shift into our wolf-selves and run free. My father and I typically hunt because we catch better prizes then. It keeps us going all month, selling the meat and hides.”

“Fascinating.” She rests her chin on her palm. “So, you don’t turn against your will?”

“Not unless we fail to shift before the end of the third day.”

“Do all werewolves have the choice?”

Harek shakes his head. “There’s something about my line. Legend has it a witch cast a spell on a group of ancestors and it’s been passed down through the generations.”

“If I’m understanding correctly, your line is elevated above normal werewolves?”

“I’ve never heard it put that way. Each pack is its own entity, so there really aren’t ranks from one to another.”

“Only within a pack itself?”

“Right.”

I set my fork down. “But you’re not part of a pack. How does that work?”

“We are part of one, but we live away from them.” He shoots me an annoyed glance, but I don’t know what he’s complaining about. If he’d have told me about him being fae at any point over our entire lives, I’d have had the chance to ask questions before this.

Vivvi glances between us, landing on me. “You don’t know about his pack history? I was under the impression you two were tight.”

“We are ,” he says.

“Except I never knew about him being a werewolf until a few days ago.”

“It was a week.”

She runs her fingers through her hair. “I didn’t mean to start anything.”

“You didn’t,” I assure her. “Harek and I go all the way back to infancy, but his family convinced him to keep his true nature a secret from me.”

Vivvi turns to him and gives him a look I can’t read. “But you knew about her?”

I answer. “He knew I was a halfling.

She jolts. “Halfling?”

“That isn’t a problem, is it?”

“Not at all.” She gives Harek another weird glance.

“His family has been watching over me in case anything happened to my mother. Now that she’s...” I can’t say the word ‘dead’ so I clear my throat. “Now he’s

helping me find my father.”

“It was recent?” she asks.

I nod, not fully trusting my voice. “My stepfather tried to marry me off to a horrible man as soon as Mother passed, so I fled.”

“That’s awful. He was human and didn’t fear your powers?”

“Nobody in Skoro knew about my being a halfling.”

Her eyes narrow slightly, and only for a moment. “Not even your stepfather?”

Harek scowls. “ Especially not him. I don’t know why her mother stayed married to him. She could’ve done much better.”

“He’s wealthy.” My tone comes out harsher than I intended, but I feel the need to defend my mother. “If she thought she had a better option, she’d have taken it.”

“She did,” Harek mutters.

“If she divorced Gunnar, she’d lose my siblings. No way he’d give them up. He couldn’t do anything about me, but he’d for sure keep his other workhorses.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

I freeze. “What other option would she have had? To run away? My brothers never would’ve gone with her, and she wouldn’t leave any of her kids behind.”

“Never mind.” Now he chooses to focus on his meal.

“What else could she have done?” I demand. “Enlighten me.”

“I said forget it.”

“No.”

We stare each other down.

“Drop it, Eira. It isn’t worth discussing. She’s gone, and we can’t fix the past.”

“If you know something about my mother that I don’t, you better tell me now.”

He sighs dramatically. “I was going to wait.”

“For what?”

“Until we find your father.”

“What does he have to do with anything?” I press my palms on the table and lean forward.

Harek glances at Vivvi. “Later.”

“Now.”

He leans back in the chair, shaking his head in frustration. “Fine. You want to know with a stranger listening? I can tell you everything. Is that what you want?”

“If you’re hiding anything more from me, I want to know.”

Harek turns to Vivvi. “You seem to know more than you should. Do you want to tell

us what you think?”

“I’m far more interested in what you have to say.”

Irritation runs through me. “Would one of you say what you know?” I turn to Vivvi. “It’s obvious you were surprised when I said I’m a halfling. Either you didn’t realize that, which I find unlikely, or you’ve figured out something about my powers that I haven’t. What is it?”

She glances at Harek. “Why don’t you tell her?”

He crosses his arms. “You’re not a halfling, Eira.”

The words are like a slap across my face. “But... but that’s not possible. You’ve seen what I can do. I have powers. I’m definitely fae.”

“You aren’t half fae.”

I try to speak but the air feels charged as the realization of his words hits me. “You’re saying...” I struggle to get the words out. “...that I’m full fae?”

He glances down and plays with a nail before looking me in the eyes. “Your mother comes from the same line of werewolves as my family. That’s why she moved to Skoro, why she entrusted my parents with her secret about you being a mixed fae.”

Vivvi pours more bubbly. “And that’s even more scandalous than being a halfling, my dear.”

“But... but...” Nothing makes sense. None of it. “My mother never shifted. She can’t be—have been—a werewolf. It’s not possible.”

“She never triggered the curse, so you’re right that she never shifted. It was dormant in her, but she passed the genes onto you.”

“And my siblings.” I bury my face in my hands, the gravity of the situation pressing on me like a rushing river.

“It should be dormant in halflings,” he says. “Unless that’s only a rumor. In that case, then yes, they could trigger their curse.”

I look up at him. “So there’s a chance they won’t suddenly shift?”

“That was your mother’s hope in marrying a human. She was careful not to trigger the curse and alert Gunnar to her true nature.”

It takes me a moment to find my voice, and when I do, I turn to Vivvi. “Is it true? Do halflings only carry the genes?”

“I’m not sure, dear. Halflings are rare, so not much is known about them.”

A terrifying thought strikes me, and I turn to Harek. “How does a werewolf turn on their curse?”

He takes a deep breath.

Our host looks amused again. “Are you going to tell her?”

“You know so much,” he snaps. “Why don’t you?”

“If you want.”

He motions for her to continue.

She turns to me. “A werewolf triggers their ability to shift when they kill someone—either fae or human.”

Several thoughts hit me at once. I’ve killed a handful of fae over the last week, as their magic keeps reminding me of their presence. Harek shifts, so he’s killed either a human or fae when he was younger. My brothers have terrible tempers like their father, so the chances of them accidentally triggering the curse is high. And nobody knows for sure if being halflings will protect them. Now Harek’s parents aren’t there to watch over them after Harek killed Vog.

“Are you okay, love?” Vivvi’s eyes are full of concern.

“I... I don’t know.”

Harek gives me a pained and apologetic glance. “I was hoping that you being a halfling would keep you from triggering your curse. But your eyes have turned silver a few times, so I can’t deny it. Your inner werewolf is awake.”

“My eyes have turned silver? When?”

He looks away. “At the spring.”

When we kissed.

“That’s a sure sign?”

Harek nods. “I’m sorry. I should’ve told you sooner.”

My breathing turns shallow. I’m going to turn into a wolf in less than a month.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

The silky brush bristles run along my scalp and down my hair. It's so relaxing, I could fall asleep. I just got out of a hot bath, and if that wasn't a luxurious enough experience, one of Vivvi's servants gave me a bunch of products to use, including separate soaps for my body and hair.

It's hard to believe people actually live like this on a regular basis. When I got out of the tub, it was a mixture of bubbles and dirt. Now I'm wearing silky pajamas that feel like they must be for royalty.

All of this does make me question why Vivvi is giving us so much. Does she feel bad for the poor, travel-weary werewolves? Surprisingly, it's been easier to accept the fact that I'm a werewolf than it was to find out my father is fae. Or that Harek is. And has known about me this whole time.

I suppose I'm getting used to this world, whereas before everything fae-related was so far out of my mind it may as well not have existed. The fae were distant threats, but only if they came near Skoro and we didn't follow their rules. None of it affected me, so I didn't have to think about any of it.

Now I have no other choice. I'm a mix of two fae types, which is even more of a rarity than a halfling. From what I've seen around the city, plenty of them have friends that cross species, but marrying and starting a mixed family is a whole other story. Though I really have to question even that, given all my siblings are halflings

and I'm whatever I am.

I'm not sure what that means for me—not that I'm in any position to think about that right now. But apparently that will make it easier for Harek and me to be together should things continue the way they have been. On the other hand, I'm not sure I want to share my life with someone who keeps hiding such big secrets from me.

If he'd have told me I'm a werewolf, I might've made different decisions when confronted by the fae. I'd have known what I was getting into. Instead of just killing the threatening fae, I was also subjecting myself to shifting into a wolf every month for the rest of my life. Fae live long lives, so that's even more significant.

What if he knew and didn't care? He might've even wanted me to shift so we could do that together. It sounds like he enjoys running free with his parents in his other form.

But that doesn't change the fact that I didn't have a real choice. When I killed those fae, I didn't realize what I was subjecting myself to. Maybe I'd have made the same decision, maybe not. Now I'll never know.

The brushing stops, and I open my eyes.

"You're all done." The servant gives me a pleasant smile. "Do you require anything else?"

"I can't imagine what."

"Lotions, vitamins, something to drink?" She looks at me expectantly.

"A bed?"

“Yes, I will take you to your room.”

My room—like I live here. I wish. I’m only a guest, but I’ll stay as long as Vivvi will allow. This place is like a dream and childhood story all wrapped into one.

She hands me a warm hand towel then heads out the door.

I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do with this, but it’s so comforting I find myself pressing my face into it. It smells of herbs and sends a warmth through me.

She stops at a door. “This is where you’ll be sleeping. You’ll find clothes in the closet, as well as extra blankets and anything else you may need. Should you lack anything, I’ll be down the hall.”

“Thanks, I’m sure I’ll be fine. Is it okay if I explore? I saw a room full of books, and I’d love to see what’s in there.”

“Oh, certainly. The lady of the house is happy to share the knowledge she’s acquired. Some of it is from the mister.” She pauses. “May he rest well.”

I nod. “Thanks for everything.”

“Enjoy your night.” She takes the hand towel from me before hurrying down the hallway.

Rather than going into the bedroom, I meander to the small library. It’s more impressive than the one I’ve always gone to at Skoro. Shelves line every wall from top to bottom, and I can’t see even one empty space. I’m almost afraid to touch anything. It’s all so perfect. But she said I was free to do so.

I walk around, studying the spines. Some appear as old as time itself, but others are

new and shiny. Could any of these tomes hold information about my father? About why my palm warms and forms orange mist balls? In all the stories I've ever heard about the fae, nothing like that has ever been uttered.

The window catches my attention, the city skyline stretching below. The houses look too small to be real, and tall buildings from the business district shine so brightly I'd almost think it was daytime there. Down below, brightly colored fae fill the streets.

"Pretty amazing, isn't it?" Harek asks from behind. He's in clean night clothes too and smells of the same bath products I used.

"Yeah. I knew it would be better than anything in Skoro, but I had no idea it would be anything like this."

"Me neither." He comes over and rests an arm around my shoulders.

I start to lean against him, but then pull away. "How could you not tell me I'm a werewolf? You knew. Somehow Vivvi picked up on that."

"You were already going through a lot. I was going to fill you in when things settled down."

"That wasn't for you to decide! Now I'm going to shift into a wolf every month for the rest of my life!"

"I didn't think you were going to kill anyone. How was I supposed to know you'd trigger your curse?"

"You should have told me!"

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry. If I could go back in time, I'd tell you everything

long before I did.”

“Is there anything else I need to know?”

Harek sighs.

“Is there?” I stare him down.

He motions for me to sit on one of the couches in the middle of the room.

I glare at him before marching over. The cushion is so comfortable I practically become one with the furniture. “What more could there possibly be?”

“Nothing, I swear.” He plops down next to me.

“Why do I have a hard time believing you?” I narrow my eyes.

“I deserve that.”

“Of course you do.”

“Our pack is spread out all over the place. Some of our members live out in the woods on their own in cabins or as wanderers.”

“What does that have to do with me?” I ask.

“I’m getting to that.”

“A little quicker, if you don’t mind. I’d like to get some sleep tonight.”

“Others live in human settlements, blending in and making their monthly escapes to

shift. When possible, we run into each other and catch up.”

“Your point?”

“I’m getting there, if you’d let me.”

“Why did you keep all this fae stuff a secret from me when you knew all along?”

“Your mother kept it from you too. She’s the one who swore my parents to secrecy. Did you consider asking yourself why she waited until her dying moment to tell you? Think of how much she could’ve told you all along but never did.”

“Are you trying to turn me against my mother, whose grave is still freshly dug?”

“I’m simply asking you to look at this from a different angle.”

I scoot away from him. “From an angle that makes you look better.”

“You have to believe I wanted to tell you everything all this time. I truly believed you’d be in danger if you thought you were more than human. If anything ever happened, you could claim to be human in full honesty. If anyone questioned you, they’d have no reason to doubt.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I didn’t want you getting tortured.”

“Tortured?” I gasp. “Why would that ever happen?”

“She was very secretive about your other lineage.”

“Which is...?”

He shrugs.

“You don’t know?”

“I’d have told you.”

I snort.

“Fine, maybe I wouldn’t have. But it’d have been to protect you—just like everything else.”

“Stop protecting me. I can do that for myself. What I need from my best friend is full honesty and transparency.”

“Okay.”

“What do you know about my father’s lineage?”

“Literally nothing.”

Disappointment washes through me. “Not even a little?”

“Like I said, she kept everything to herself.”

“You said she was secretive. That doesn’t mean she said nothing . Did she drop any clues?”

“Can I finish the story I started?”

I wave him on.

“Your mother left the pack for years. There were whispers of her having died because nobody stays away that long even if they can’t shift.”

“That was when she was with my father?”

“Yeah. She came to Skoro, to my parents specifically. It doesn’t sound like she was expecting to stay in Skoro—not as a fae. But when she saw my mother and father thriving among the humans, even while dealing with their shifts, she thought she could pull off a human life. There was no reason for anyone to suspect anything since she’d managed to avoid triggering her curse. She?—”

“Wait. What would’ve happened if she’d have shifted while she was pregnant with me? How does that work?”

“I don’t know. It just does. Pregnant werewolves don’t get a pass.”

I rub my temples, trying to come to terms with that. “If I want to start a family, I’ll have to deal with shifting while pregnant and caring for a baby? How do they shift when the baby?—?”

“Eira, I really don’t know these things. Clearly I’ve never had to deal with any of that, and since we don’t belong to a traditional pack, I’ve never seen anyone dealing with it either. I would imagine that in the case of our particular genes, people shift at different times so others can care for the young. Your mother probably watched me while my parents roamed. Normal werewolves? I guess they figure that stuff out.”

My mind spins, but not out of control. This new information actually makes sense of things. If my mother babysat Harek, that explains why we spent so much time together growing up. All of us being part of the same pack also fits how much our

parents relied on each other, why his family had my sword.

“Are you okay?” Harek’s voice pulls me from my thoughts.

“I will be. Is there a chance she ever told your parents about my father?”

“She didn’t. I asked several times over the years, and they don’t know anything.”

That means I’m stuck at square one, having no information. The best I can hope for is that my palm might let me know if we cross paths. Though if he’s not a threat, nothing will likely happen. “How am I supposed to find him?”

“We’ll figure something out.” He yawns. “Tomorrow.”

“You want me to wait even longer?”

“What’s another few hours at this point? Think of how much more productive we’ll be with a great night’s sleep. I don’t know about you, but after a week of sleeping in caves and under bushes, I’m looking forward to an actual bed.”

I can’t deny how luxurious that sounds, but I’m too wired to sleep. After he leaves, I wander around the bookshelves again. This time, I hold my right palm up to the books. Perhaps I’ll get a warmth or a glow if I’m near a book with answers.

Or maybe nothing will happen.

Chapter

Twenty-Five

Light footsteps sound behind me. Vivvi stands in the doorway holding two steaming mugs and wearing much more casual clothes than before. She gives me a warm smile and holds out one of the drinks. “I thought you could use some calming tea.”

The thought of tea immediately brings me back to the farm with Mother and our many late-night chats when Gunnar was out late. “That sounds wonderful.”

She motions for me to sit on the couch, and I take the same spot I did with Harek. Once we’re both seated, she hands me one of the mugs. The liquid has a golden glow.

Before I can ask about it, Vivvi answers. “The leaves are from a rare plant grown in an arid climate. The soil has properties that gives the leaves a relaxing effect in fae.”

“It looks magical.” I bring it close and take a deep breath. The steam has a sweet but tangy aroma. My muscles relax slightly.

She nods and takes a sip. “It certainly feels that way.”

I move my mug around, making the tea swirl. It turns into rainbow colors for just a moment, so that I question whether I saw any change at all.

Vivvi raises one of her perfect eyebrows. “Did it do something unexpected?”

Our gazes meet, and I hesitate.

She leans forward, her expression full of curiosity. “What did it do?”

“It, um, turned rainbow colored. But only briefly.”

Her irises brighten, almost seeming to glow. “I knew it!”

“What?”

“Let me see your right palm.”

My stomach sinks. “Huh?”

“Trust me, dear. I’ll explain everything. This is unbelievable.”

“What is?” I feel sick in a way that has nothing to do with the weird foreign magic inside me.

She looks me over. “You are.”

I nearly drop the mug.

Vivvi reaches over and steadies my hand with ease. “Drink some.”

My heart races. Nothing feels right. “Why? What are you trying to get from me?”

“The tea not only relaxes, but it reveals.”

A cold realization sweeps through me. “You mean it could tell me what kind of fae I am? I mean, besides werewolf?”

She nods. “Precisely.”

“But you already suspect you know?”

“I think I do, but it should be impossible.”

“How?” I study her, my mind spinning. “Is my father from an extinct line or something?”

“No, but there’s never been a female version before.”

“That doesn’t make sense. How can there be a race of fae with no females?”

“Are you going to drink?” She glances at my tea. “It’s going to turn cold and lose all of its magic.”

What do I have to lose? I take a big sip, and the sweet, tangy tea seems to dance down my throat. Once it makes it to my stomach, my palm warms. It glows ever so faintly.

Vivvi’s face drains of color. “It’s true.”

“What is?”

She glances from my palm to my eyes. “You’re the next hunter.”

“Hunter?” That sounds vaguely familiar.

“Drink. I’ll tell you everything.”

I blink a few times, trying to remember what I’ve heard about the hunter. As I

continue sipping the tea, it comes back to me.

Conversation in the city. Whispers of a hunter weakening.

Harek said it was just a legend.

I look directly into Vivvi's eyes. "Tell me everything about the hunter."

She sets her mug down on a little table. "We all rely on him to find and kill evil fae. He has the important job of keeping the balance—not letting the good be overpowered."

"There's just one?" I try not to think of the implications of that. But they're staring me in the face.

If there's only one hunter, then my father is dead. At least that means he didn't abandon my mother and me. No, I killed him by existing.

I realize Vivvi's talking, and I try to pull myself from my thoughts. The realization that I'm an orphan. "Wait, stop. Say that again."

"It's a lot to take in, especially if you've never heard any of this. Your mother did you a disservice by not explaining any of this."

"Don't badmouth her! She did the best she could. You don't know what we had to live with."

"I didn't mean any disrespect."

"Just tell me what you know about my father."

“Finish your tea. It’ll help you relax.”

“Not that it matters.” But I sip the tea anyway. Whatever it’ll take to keep her talking so I can figure out what my next move is. With my father dead, she’s my only hope at finding out anything about my powers.

“There is usually only one hunter at a time. He?—”

“Usually? Do you mean there can be two?”

“While the son—or in this case, daughter—is growing and until coming into his or her powers.”

The earlier conversation runs through my mind. “That’s why people are talking about the hunter weakening. Are his powers coming into me?”

“I’m not sure if that’s exactly how it works, but when a hunter child grows up, the younger’s powers strengthen while the elder’s weaken.”

“That means my father is still alive. I could find him and get my answers.” Relief washes through me.

“You don’t want to do that, Eira.”

“And why not?”

“Because two mature hunters can’t exist at the same time.”

“Are you saying I’m killing him?”

“One of you must kill the other.”

This time I do drop the mug. It lands in my lap, and is luckily empty. “One of us has to kill the other one?”

She reaches over and pats my arm. “That’s the way it’s always been. I remember when your father killed his father.”

“He... he killed his own father?”

“It was a matter of survival. All the hunters have had to kill their father or son to survive.”

“But why can’t they live together? Work together?”

“The natural order of things. It’s why everyone is talking about your father weakening. He was going strong until recently. You must’ve just come into your strength?”

I nod, unable to find my voice.

“You’re pretty old for just coming into your powers. How is that possible?”

“I thought I was human. It wasn’t until I found out about being a halfling that my palm started glowing.”

Vivvi’s brows draw together. “No, that isn’t possible.”

“What do you mean?”

“Knowledge isn’t what activates magic for any fae.”

“It did in my case.”

She shakes her head. “That had to have been a coincidence. Have you only been around humans since becoming an adult?”

“Yeah! That must be it.”

“It makes sense because?—”

“Wait, no,” I interrupt. “I’ve been around Harek and his family my entire life. Plus my siblings are all halflings. My mom was a full werewolf.”

“None of them are evil?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

She takes my hand. “A hunter’s palm only glows to alert him to evil fae. Those are the ones he’s to kill. It’s his job to keep all of fae kind safe.”

My mind spins. “So the only reason my powers activated was because I was around bad fae?”

“Correct.”

I think back to when it first lit up at Harek’s house. That was when I found him and his father talking to that one fae. It explains why he looked terrified of me. Once he fled, my hand returned to normal.

That means Vivvi’s right. Me finding out about being fae had nothing to do with it. It just so happened that I learned about my true nature and then came near my first evil fae right afterward.

It was coming near the dangerous creature that activated my magic. That was why my

father started weakening. If Mother hadn't died, I'd still be working on the farm never to come near a bad fae.

"But wait." The words fly out of my mouth before I can think them through.

"Yes, darling?"

"But if I'm a hunter, then why didn't anyone within the walls react fearfully when they saw me? You didn't. Shouldn't you be afraid of me? Shouldn't all fae?"

"Just the evil ones. There's no reason for an average fae to react to you. Neither of us pose a threat to the other."

"So only good fae live here in the city?"

Vivvi sips her tea. "I wouldn't go that far, but there's definitely a continuum. Some are better than others, but the evil ones do tend to stay away from here."

"What makes it so that a fae can tell who I am? Just my glow?"

"I would imagine. I'm hardly a hunter expert."

"You know a lot more than I do."

"I've grown up around all of this and studied a lot. There was a time I was fascinated by the concept of the hunter. That was when your grandfather was in his prime. He was handsome beyond measure, and I was hardly the only fae who took an interest in him. But he had no desire to mate and risk having offspring."

"Then how did my father come about?"

“All the hunters eventually fall in love, my dear. It’s the nature of the beast.”

The magic inside my stomach starts to swirl back and forth, making me slightly nauseated. “Do you know anything about hunters absorbing magic?”

She gives me a double take but takes another sip before answering. “Absorbing magic?”

“Yeah. What do you know about that?”

Vivvi scoots away from me, almost unnoticeably. “Are you absorbing other fae’s magic?”

“It’s happened, and I don’t like it.”

She tilts her head. “How so?”

“It makes me feel sick.”

“That’s fascinating.”

“Not really. I’d really like to get it out of me.”

“You can feel it right now?”

I press my palm on my stomach. “Right.”

“How did you come to absorb it?”

My breath catches in my throat. If I explain that, I’ll have to tell her that I killed some fae. She isn’t going to want a killer under her roof. Or am I thinking in human terms?

Even though I've apparently never been human.

Vivvi scoots closer again. "You can trust me."

My mouth dries. "Can I have more tea first? I'm feeling a little... off."

"Because of the magic that doesn't belong to you?"

I nod, my heart pounding faster now. Killing might be more acceptable among fae, but I still don't know how she would feel about it.

"Certainly, darling." She gives me a kind smile before leaving the room with my mug.

My muscles relax, but my stomach doesn't feel any better. Does she know Harek has killed? He's a werewolf, so she must know. Maybe telling her wouldn't be so bad after all. It isn't like my palm has glowed around her.

Or maybe it would be the worst decision I could make. I have to keep it a secret just in case. If she presses for details, I'll tell the stories without mentioning the magic came to me after the fae died. If I end up fully trusting her down the road, I can give more details then. For now, Harek and I don't know why she brought us in. Was it to help some lost fae, or does she have other motives?

Not knowing is what concerns me, as much as I love everything she's gifted to us. I never imagined I'd be in a private library after just having the best meal of my life, a hot bath, and magical tea. If only my stomach would calm down, then everything would be perfect.

Vivvi returns, handing me a new mug. "Chamomile and peppermint. It should help your stomach."

I'm a little disappointed that it's just a normal drink, but I thank her and sip. It seems to have a little something extra added, giving it a surprisingly sweet taste.

"Does that help?" She sits next to me, tucking her legs underneath her.

"Actually, it does."

"Good, good. Now tell me more about your ability to absorb the magic of others."

I jolt. If she notices, she doesn't indicate it. I take another sip. "I don't understand it. It comes from the fae like a mist and enters me."

Her eyes widen with what appears to be delight. "How does it come from them? And how does it enter you?"

This is going to be a long night.

Chapter

Twenty-Six

The late morning light shines in through the window. Despite sleeping in what has to be the world's most comfortable bed, I hardly got any rest. I was plagued with dreams of finding my father and of him killing me on the spot.

It's either him or me. We can't both exist, if the lore is right. If Vivvi is telling me the truth. I'm not giving her my full story, so I can't assume she's telling me everything either. As much as I want to believe I'm starting to wonder if she has my best interest in mind, I know too much about the world to trust her so easily. And that's saying something since I know so very little about this world.

When I finally give up on what should be the best night's sleep of my life, I find Harek eating alone in the same chair he sat for dinner last night. He glances up at me. "Can you believe the beds here?"

"Super luxurious." I yawn and plunk down across from him.

He studies me. "Did you get any sleep?"

I shake my head, not wanting to get into it.

"Why not?"

"I just didn't."

One of the servants arrives with a plate full of food and sets it in front of me.

My stomach roars immediately, so I dig in. I even drink the coffee without any sweeteners, not that it helps given how exhausted I am.

“Why didn’t you sleep well?” Harek asks.

“I had bad dreams.”

“What about?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe the fact that both my stepfather and father want me dead.”

He arches an eyebrow. “You haven’t even met your father.”

“There can only be one hunter, Harek. Do the math.”

“Doesn’t mean he wants you dead.”

“If I’m alive, he can’t be. That’s why my mother fled to Skoro—this is even worse than I thought. He didn’t just abandon us, but he wants me dead.”

“He might not. Think about it, Eira. He had to kill his father, so he knows the position you’re in. It sounds like he’s been hunting for well over a century. I’ll bet he’s ready to pass on the job to his offspring.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly why my pregnant mother ran away from him.”

“You should get a nap after breakfast. You won’t be so grouchy after.”

I glare at him.

“All you’re doing is proving my point.”

“Whatever.” I turn my attention back to my food and clear the plate without another word. The nutrition helps me feel a little better, though I’m still dragging.

“Do you want to head out now?” Harek asks after I set my fork down.

“We should say goodbye to Vivvi.”

“I talked to her before she left, and she said we were welcome to stay as long as we need. If we go out, all we have to do is mention her to the fae at the entrance. Our names are on an approved list to come up.”

“Doesn’t that seem odd?”

“That she’s letting us stay longer?”

“Right.”

“Now who’s the suspicious one?”

I sigh. “It doesn’t make any sense. She’s obviously rich, so why is she so eager to take care of us?”

“Maybe she misses having people around after her husband died. Their kids grew up over a century ago. We probably remind her of them.”

“I guess.”

“Get dressed so we can explore the city. From what Della was telling me, we’ve barely scratched the surface. This place goes on and on.”

“Della?”

“The one who brought your breakfast.”

Of course he’s already on a first name basis with the staff. I stifle a yawn. “Where are we going to explore?”

“She told me there’s a five-story library in a nearby district.”

“Five stories?” I could spend a month in there and still have plenty more to explore.

Harek grins. “I knew that’d get your attention. Perhaps we can find something about the hunter line there.”

“It sounds like we can find anything we want on any topic.”

“Let’s get ready to head out then.”

“I’m all set.”

I grab my plate and cup, but before I can even turn toward the kitchen Della returns and takes them from me. “Do you need anything else, my lady?”

I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to this treatment. “Um, no. Thanks.”

She nods, then seems to disappear into thin air.

Back in my room, I find the bed is made and several outfits are set out. I hold each up, not sure what to pick. They’re all much nicer than anything I’m used to wearing, but I’ll easily fit in when walking around in any of them. I pick the one with the least bright colors and put it on. It’s a perfect fit, like it was tailor made for me. I stare in

disbelief at my reflection in the wall mirror for a few moments.

I wish my mother could see me like this. She always said I was beautiful, and this is the first time I think she could be right. It's weird seeing myself as anything other than a manure shoveler, but here I am in clothes like the richest of Skoro.

As soon as I open the door, one of the other servants rushes in, guides me to the bathroom, and starts fussing over my hair and face. I'm not used to anyone being so close to me—except when Harek kissed me—so I have to resist the urge to put up my hands for space.

Some of the powders, lotions, and sprays make me sneeze. That seems to amuse her.

“What's your name?” I ask.

She looks at me confused as she sprays something sticky in my hair. “Guests don't usually inquire about that.”

I sneeze. “I'd like to know what to call you.”

“Summer.”

“That's pretty.”

Pink fills her cheeks and she looks away. “Let me touch up your eyes, and then you and the mister will be ready to leave.”

She moves around, brushing and rubbing things onto my skin. I hold back another sneeze and my eyes keep closing on their own as she does her thing. Finally, she stops and steps back. “What do you think?”

I blink a few times before turning to look in the mirror. The woman staring back at me is a stranger. I reach up to touch my hair, and the only indication the regal person in the mirror is my reflection is that she moves exactly as I do.

“Do you need me to fix anything?”

“I... no. It’s perfect.” I stare, trying to find any remnant of me in there underneath the fancy clothes, the stiff hairstyle, and the makeup.

“Are you sure? I can touch up your lips.”

I just shake my head, still unable to believe the sight before me.

“Very well.” She exits, and I take another moment to commit the sight to memory. How is it possible that I look like a completely different person? I’m still me. Just... fancier.

A knock sounds at the bedroom door. “Eira?”

My heart leaps into my throat. Harek. What will he think of how I look?

“H-hold on. I’m almost ready.” I close the bathroom door and gasp for air as I take in my reflection again. He might think I look ridiculous, because I do. I should be in rags scooping scat. How is it possible I have people serving me ?

I’m such an imposter. Everyone will take one look at me and know it. I shouldn’t be here, shouldn’t be in these clothes. Nobody gave me a second glance yesterday because I wore dirty, dingy clothes and was caked in dirt with pine needles sticking out from my hair.

That’s me. Not this person. But there isn’t anything I can do about it now. It would

probably hurt Summer's feelings if I undid all of this, and besides, I need to get to the library and see what I can find out about my father—and if he's really weakening because of me.

As nice as Vivvi has been, feeding us and giving us such a nice place to stay, I can't assume anything she says is true. We just met her and don't know her motives.

She could be completely wrong about my father, and he might be willing to give Harek and me a place to stay. Something a little more normal. Not that I don't enjoy this high-class life, but I'd feel more comfortable in something a little less extravagant. And we need to get out of this building to find any of that.

I take a deep breath while taking one last glance at the stranger in the reflection, then I swing open the door.

Harek is at the bedroom window, looking out. His clothes are just as ridiculous as mine at least. We'll both look about the same while wandering around the fae city.

He turns around, and I don't recognize him any more than I recognize myself. This just isn't us, but I can't deny how good he looks. I could get used to this.

No. This isn't us. We're not afraid to get messy—something we clearly can't do in these clothes. We just spent a week in the woods, warding off evil fae. But also struggling to fill our bellies. Now we're eating food better than I ever could have imagined two days ago.

His eyes widen, and he makes his way over to me. "You look..."

"Ridiculous?" I offer.

"Gorgeous."

“Oh.” Heat floods my cheeks. “Thanks. So do you.”

He adjusts his shirt. “The clothes are so stiff.”

“They’re definitely tighter than I’m used to.”

“So, you want to find that library?”

“Yes. I need to find out everything I can about the hunter line. If what Vivvi said is true...” I let my voice trail off because I don’t know what I’ll do if only one hunter can live at a time. I just lost my mother. There’s no way I can kill my father.

Aside from that, what would happen if I absorb his magic? He’s probably far more powerful than the fae I killed. There’s no telling what his magic would do to me.

Harek holds out his hand. “Let’s do this.”

I hesitate before taking his hand. Hopefully I’m ready for whatever we find.

Chapter

Twenty-Seven

Nobody even gives Harek or me a second glance as we walk down the golden streets. For as much as I feel like I stick out, apparently we fit right in. Nearly everyone else has similarly styled hair and clothes.

When we ask someone for directions to the library, he happily points us in the direction and doesn't question why we're looking.

Shortly after we enter the education district filled with different colored buildings, the library looms over several smaller buildings. It looks like a mixture between a massive oak tree and a small version of a skyscraper.

I don't know how any of this is possible, or if I'll ever get used to any of it. Everyone else seems to walk around like all of this is completely normal. I can't even imagine feeling that way.

We cross through a park where several groups are gathered and appear in deep discussion.

Harek leans closer. "I think those are academy study groups."

I stare in disbelief at people in their teens and even older. Some looked to be about my age. My brothers had talked about their brief time in nursery school—Gunnar never allowed any of us girls to go, and even the boys only went long enough to learn

basic skills. They didn't get any certificates of completion like most of the other schoolchildren.

The group nearest us is discussing an ancient fae battle that destroyed much of the known world at the time, even knocking out an entire mountain.

"We should get going." Harek pulls on my arm.

"I want to listen."

"Don't you want answers to your questions?" He gives me a knowing look.

My shoulders slump. "You're right. I'm sure the library has all the ancient history I want to know."

"And the current events involving your father are much more useful than something that happened a thousand years ago."

"True." I keep my pace slow as we make our way through the rest of the park, trying to listen in on more discussions.

Someone says something about a woman ruler, and I stop in my tracks.

Harek turns to me with a pleading look.

"Did you hear that?" I lean a little closer, trying to hear more. Skoro never had a woman leader. Could this place have one? Or is this group also talking about ancient times?

"Let's find what we can about your father, and then I promise we can sit and listen to all the discussions you want."

“Yeah, you’re right. The first thing I’m going to dig into is a woman ruler. Could you imagine the reactions of the older men in Skoro? They might just fall over dead at the thought.” I chuckle.

“I wish that was all it would take. I’d have told Gunnar about that long ago.”

My heart warms. I love how protective of me he is.

“But if your father takes you in, then maybe he’ll be willing to go back and deal with Gunnar. Can you imagine his face if the fae hunter came after him?” A slow smile spreads across my friend’s face.

I can easily picture it, and I hope one day it comes to pass. That gives me the resolve to leave behind all these interesting conversations in the park to see what I can find out about my heritage. I grab his hand and drag him toward the library.

We pass tables where more groups are holding discussions. It looks like so much fun, just sitting around talking about things from days long gone. Perhaps one day I can take a class and participate.

Harek skids to a stop.

“What are you doing?”

“Listen.” He nods toward a group of older fae gathered and speaking in low tones. They’re probably the teachers.

I turn slightly away from them, trying not to be obvious in my eavesdropping.

A man with the nose of a cat and hair like rain adjusts a bowtie. “It was completely ravaged. My cousin sent a message asking for supplies. His house is a pile of rubble.”

“Nobody could stop them?” asks a woman with shimmery skin like scales.

He shakes his head. “There were too many of them.”

The second man, who looks like an imp on steroids, crosses his arms. “It’s just like last week.”

All three of them nod knowingly.

I want to ask what happened last week, but they probably don’t know Harek and I can hear from this distance. Before, I always wondered why my hearing was so much better than others in Skoro, and now I know it’s because I’m a werewolf.

The three teachers discuss another fae town that was ruined by evildoers—and they blame the hunter. Apparently my father has been slacking lately, due to me coming into my powers, and because of this, the fae world is getting turned upside down.

Things are even more urgent than I imagined. Either my father and I need to work together to solve this issue, or one of us is going to have to kill the other.

I really hope Vivvi is wrong about that. There has to be another way.

But if there isn’t, the results could be catastrophic.

Harek and I exchange glances then hurry toward the library. My mind is racing so fast, I barely register the high shelves filled with books as far as the eye can see.

There’s so much destruction out there, and it’s only going to get worse if I don’t do something. But what? With all of these, it will be impossible to know where to even begin looking.

“Where do we start?” I ask.

“I think here.” He walks over to a screen and taps it.

It lights up, and words appear. He taps the image of a button, and more words appear. Harek interacts with the device like he’s been using it his whole life.

Maybe he has. Well, not this exact one but a similar one. He’s been familiar with all things fae his entire life.

Whereas everyone has hid it from me.

I try not to be bitter about that and attempt to lean into how helpful his knowledge will likely be. He can read the strange letters, whereas I cannot. He knows about magic, whereas all I seem able to do is absorb it and get sick.

If only we could simply find my father and have him explain everything—that would save so much time. We wouldn’t have to research where to find the books and then spend however much time reading them.

Harek returns to me. “We need to go to the third level.”

“That’s where the books are about my father?”

“It appears there are a few of them. We might find more in other places with a little digging.”

“Why is it so hard? Don’t they list all the books?”

“They do, but you have to know where to search. It’s a complex system that keeps outsiders from finding out too much.”

“Outsiders like us?”

“Technically, you belong here.”

I glance at the screen full of lettering I can't understand. “How did you learn that language? Did your parents teach you?”

He nods. “You'll pick it up quickly. It's a similar system to the one we're used to.”

“If you say so.”

“I'll start teaching you as soon as we find the first book.”

“Let's get started.”

We find a map to a spiral staircase that takes us up to the third level. Harek follows signs with weird lettering to a maze of shelves with book spines of every color imaginable. There are actually a few with titles I can read.

I stop and pull one from its place. “They have human lettering?”

“Apparently. Come on.” He waves me toward him.

Reluctantly, I put the book back then hurry to catch up. We go down one aisle, up another, zigging and zagging until I'm not even sure we're still in the same building. There must've been a portal that took us somewhere else because the inside is at least ten times as big as the outside of the structure. Or that's just the way of magic. The foreign magic in my stomach is the calmest it's been.

Harek stops walking, and I bump into him. He doesn't seem to notice as he pulls out a book so black it seems to suck in the colors around it. The gold lettering is almost

too bright to look at compared to the rest of it.

“Is that a hunter book?” I ask, even though it’s obvious it is. That’s what we’ve been scouring the library for, and the only reason Harek would stop.

He nods and hands it toward me.

My breath hitches. Am I ready to find out my legacy?

Chapter

Twenty-Eight

The book sits on the table in front of Harek and me. I still haven't touched it, hardly able to believe it could hold answers about my father that I've wanted to know since the day I understood Gunnar wasn't my father.

"Do you want me to open it?" Harek asks.

I avoid the question. "What's the title?"

"The Hunter ."

"That's it?" I ask. "Seems like a lot of letters for two words."

"It's a different alphabet. I can teach you."

"Later."

He rests his hand on mine and gives a gentle squeeze. "I know this is nerve wracking, but this is why we came here."

I take a deep breath. He's right—I didn't come all this way to hide from the truth. Without giving it another thought, I reach for the book and pull it closer. The cover feels creamy and smooth, and when I trace the lettering it glows faintly.

So does my palm.

I leap back, like it's on fire, and gasp.

Harek smirks. "If there was any doubt this is a book about your lineage, that's now extinguished."

"How can you find this amusing?"

"Because I'm happy for you, Eira. You're about to get all the answers you've always wanted. How many times over the years have you asked questions about your heritage? Now they're all at your fingertips."

I'm not sure I'm ready for this, but what other choice do I have? If I want the full story, it's right here. My readiness is irrelevant, so I scoot closer to the book. Again my palm glows faintly, matching the lettering on the cover.

"How does it do that?" I ask.

"Magic." Harek says it like that's the most obvious answer in the world. Maybe it is.

"Do you think it's good? Every other time my palm has glowed, it seems to indicate danger."

"It's probably more complex than that."

"Apparently." I draw in another deep breath before opening the book to the first page. Those words also glow, and my palm doesn't fade.

Harek leans closer. "Do you want me to read it?"

I blink a few times as I look at the faintly glowing words. “No, you don’t need to.”

“But you can’t read this.”

“Actually, I think I can.”

He stares at me like I’ve just grown another head.

“Tell me if I’m right.”

“Okay...”

I bring my palm closer to the writing. “The hunter line has existed as long as the fae to keep the balance. Without these rare fae, evil would overcome good, and the entire world would be in peril.”

Harek’s mouth falls open. “Nobody ever taught you to read fae?”

“Who would have? I barely learned to read the language of our people. Well, those of Skoro, not our people.”

“Your mother would have known how to read it.” His tone seems accusatory.

“She never taught me. Are you accusing me of lying?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “I didn’t mean for it to come out like that.”

“You’re one to talk, anyway,” I snap back. “You didn’t tell me any of us are werewolves. If I’d have known that killing would trigger a curse, I could’ve at least known what I was walking into.”

He looks like he's struggling with how to respond. "Didn't we already have this conversation? Either way, it was your mother who raised you—if anyone should've told you everything, it was her."

"You're blaming my dead mother? Again?"

"You can't deny she left you at a disadvantage by keeping everything from you. It was her decision to let you think you were only human. My parents never agreed with her but went along with it because she was your mother. It wasn't their place to say anything, and therefore it wasn't mine either."

A lump forms in my throat. He's right, but I don't want to admit it. Not when it means being mad at my recently deceased mother who put up with Gunnar all those years. "Why didn't she raise me with our pack? Why follow your parents to Skoro?"

"She had to have been terrified for your safety."

"Terrified?"

"You're the hunter's daughter—though I didn't know that. To my knowledge, she didn't tell anyone. It was a secret she took to the grave. There's no way she didn't know the lore surrounding the hunter. Speaking of that, I'd really like to read the book to find out if it's true."

"That my father or I have to kill the other one?" I fold my arms.

Harek's eyes widen. "You know about that?"

"Vivvi told me what you wouldn't."

"It isn't like that."

“No?” I stare him down. “Then how is it?”

He reaches for the book. “I wanted to find out if the rumors were true before scaring you with what could be just old fairy tales.”

“You need to stop trying to protect me and start telling me the full truth, or you’re going to need protection from me.”

Harek jolts slightly. “Understood.”

We read, taking turns and flying through the pages. Everything Vivvi told me holds true. It wouldn’t surprise me if she read from this very book back when she was obsessed with my grandfather.

According to this book, the hunters have always been male, and once a child starts coming into his—or her, in my case—powers, the mature hunter begins weakening. But no hunter has ever gotten so weak they died of natural causes.

They always fight to the death. Without exception.

My stomach flip-flops at that thought, which activates the magic inside of me to start racing around. I really need to get through this book and find out how to deal with this magic. It doesn’t matter if I get rid of it or learn how to control it.

Fae come and go, passing us as the hours speed along. The tome is full of stories about my ancestors, going back many generations. Most of the hunters live more than a century, some for several and others for far less time. It all depends on how long they go without procreating. The longest was just over five hundred years, and the shortest not even twenty.

I have no idea how old my father is. Clearly younger than Vivvi who had a thing for

his father, but with fae it's impossible to tell. If Vivvi was human, I'd guess her to be in her late fifties at the oldest. However, as a fae she has to be centuries old.

"Did you hear that?" Harek's voice pulls me from my thoughts.

Crap. I wasn't listening, and this is life or death. "Sorry, no. My mind wandered."

"Your stomach aches aren't caused by magic."

That gets my attention. "What is it?"

He throws me an exasperated glance. "Next time your mind drifts, let me know."

"What's the deal with the black mist I absorbed?"

Harek points to a paragraph on the middle of the lefthand open page. "It says here that when a hunter kills an evil fae, they take the souls with them."

Everything beyond the table disappears as I process the news. It can't be. "I have evil souls in my stomach?"

"Unfortunately. That's why it feels like they're fighting each other—they probably are."

"How do I get rid of them?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out."

My skin crawls at the thought that I've been carrying around the souls of the fae I killed. "I need to get them out!"

“We’ll figure it out. Let’s keep reading.”

I shudder. “Foreign magic would be so much better. Evil souls are so gross.”

“It says?—”

“What if I can’t get rid of them? Will I have to carry them around for the rest of my life?”

“We’ll find out if you let me read.”

“Go on.”

He turns back to the book. “It says here the hunter’s sword collects the souls.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Gunnar has my sword!”

“I know.”

“What am I supposed to do now? Go all the way back to Skoro with these souls inside me and then figure out where he hid it?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“It’ll take another week to get back, and we just got here!”

“I know.”

“This is the worst news.”

He lifts a brow. “Worse than finding out you have to kill your father?”

“He’ll probably kill me. I bet every other hunter has trained for that battle for their entire life. I’ve been scooping manure.”

“Then we’ll train together. I’ll teach you everything I know about the bow and arrow.”

I sigh, feeling more defeated than ever. “He’s probably over three hundred years old. I don’t stand a chance.”

“He’s also weakening, and you’re getting stronger. That’s an advantage.”

“Did you forget the part about me having no experience?”

“This book and the rumors both confirm that he’s losing his strength.”

“What if I don’t want to kill my one remaining parent?”

Harek frowns. “You know the answer to that.”

“He’ll kill me.”

“Right, and I’m not about to let that happen. He’s going to have to get through me first. We could wait until the full moon and fight him then.”

“That’s it!”

He nods. “He won’t be able to stand against two wolves, especially if one is the hunter.”

My mind spins, putting all the pieces together. “There’s never been a werewolf hunter before. That will be my advantage.” I push the chair back, a renewed sense of

courage running through me. “Now we have to find him.”

“Not so fast.”

“What?” I turn to him.

“You need to go through a shift before even thinking about something like this. The first is always the hardest because it’s so weird.”

“Okay, I’ll shift on the night before the full moon and then fight him the next night.”

“It takes time to adjust. You might feel sick after your first time turning.”

“I already feel sick with the evil souls fighting inside of me.”

“How about we finish reading this book before we make any decisions? There’s a lot to consider, and you aren’t even sure you want to fight him.”

“I am. He’s had his chance at life, and now it’s mine.”

“What happened to you not wanting to be an orphan?”

“If the choice is between him and me, I choose me. He clearly didn’t want anything to do with me, so why should I care about him?”

“Are you sure?”

I square my shoulders. “Yes, but first I need to find out more about my sword. Once I get it back, I need to know how to get these souls out of me. I also have to find out how to keep from absorbing anymore.”

“Okay, then. Let’s do this.”

We start flipping through more pages. I can’t wait to be able to manage my true nature on my own.

Then I can think about how to beat my father at his own game.

Chapter

Twenty-Nine

By the time Harek and I finally read through the entire book, my mind feels like mush. At this point, I'm not sure I've absorbed anything. I've also long passed the point where I'm impressed about reading an alphabet I was never taught.

Harek closes the book. "We should eat."

"And sleep." I yawn. "I'm not capable of conversation at this point."

"Food will help."

"Hopefully."

"It will." He gives me an encouraging smile. "Doesn't it feel good to know more about yourself? I still can't get over the fact that you're the hunter. I didn't even know it was real, and here I've been looking at one every day!"

I groan. "Where are we going to eat? Back at Vivvi's?"

"That's the only thing I can think of, since neither of us have any fae money. Unless you found a way to make some with magic?"

"Not when I haven't left your sight." I rub my temples. "Let's go there. All I want to do is eat and then sleep for a day. Let my mind process all of that information."

Harek rises from the table and returns the book to the shelf. I'm too mentally fatigued to join him. Every time I blink, all I see is the strange lettering I've been reading for hours.

"You ready?" He holds out a hand.

I let him help me up. Not only am I famished, but the souls are ramming around in me. The thought sends a shiver down my spine.

"Are you okay?" Harek asks.

"I can't believe those things I absorbed are souls . Though it does make more sense than magic. It's been feeling like they're fighting, and now I bet that's exactly what's going on."

He pulls me into an embrace. "I'm so sorry you have to deal with that. We'll figure out a way to get your sword back so you can get them out of you."

Suddenly that thought seems worse. " How is the sword supposed to help? I don't want to have to cut into my stomach to get them out!"

"With any luck, it'll absorb the souls from you."

"I'm not sure I have that much luck."

He pats my back before stepping away. "If the sword absorbs them when killing the fae, then it must have the ability to take them from you too. But that's a problem for another day. Just make sure you don't kill any more fae in the meantime."

"Don't say that so loud." I look around to make sure nobody heard him, but we appear to be alone.

“You worry too much.”

“And you don’t worry enough.”

He looks amused. “It’s like we’ve swapped roles.”

“This whole world is new to me,” I snap. “I don’t know what you expect from me. It isn’t like I had a lifetime to prepare for this, like some people.”

He sighs dramatically.

“You know I’m right.”

“I’m sorry.” As we start toward the stairs, he slides his fingers through mine, and I find myself relaxing.

“It’ll all work out,” he assures me.

“Easy for you to say.”

“It isn’t. Do you think I like watching my favorite person going through so much? So much should have been different, but here we are. I’m just glad I can be here for you. We’ll get through it together.”

I throw my arms around him, too overcome by emotions to voice any of them. He returns the squeeze, then we make our way down the staircase.

The library is so fascinating, it manages to somewhat distract me from everything else, including the bright colors, interesting smells, and truly unique fae in every direction. One is even hovering over the ground reading a book that’s also hovering.

Everyone acts as if all of this is completely normal—boring, even. To them, it must be, yet I can't imagine any of it ever being anything other than mind blowing. How can I actually be part of this world? Why did my mother think hiding among humans was the best idea?

Maybe because my father is going to want me dead. She may not have even ever told him that she was pregnant. I always assumed he abandoned us, but the truth could be much darker. And probably is, considering the hunter legacy. Father and child fighting to the death? I can hardly fathom it.

Knowing how protective my mother was of me and my siblings, that actually makes the most sense.

When Harek and I reach the main level, we zig and zag our way around busy fae rushing to and fro. He holds open the door, then I step outside. The sun is just starting to go down. It's still light out but won't be for long, as evidenced by the colorful edges of the skyline.

Suddenly I realize I can't remember how to get back to Vivvi's. "Do you remember how to get back?"

"Through the park, remember? You wanted to listen to every conversation."

That sounds familiar. "Right."

"Are you okay?"

"Just tired and hungry."

He gives my arm a gentle squeeze. "We'll figure all of this out. Don't worry."

“I only have to kill my father.” I sigh deeply.

“Try not to think about that. We still have a lot to do before that’s even a concern.”

“Like what?”

“Get your sword back, get those souls out of you, and see if we can find more books about the hunter line. I’d feel better about all of this myself if we had more than one book as our source.”

“It seems pretty legit with the way it was glowing and the fact that I could read it.”

“I would still like to find at least one more book, and we will.”

My head throbs at the thought of another day of this.

“Come on. A good meal will do both of us a lot of good.”

I can’t deny that, even though everything is so overwhelming. Going back to Skoro will be another week’s trek, and even when we come back here, I can’t expect Vivvi will let us live off her forever. We’re going to have to get jobs or something. Would we be able to sell meat at the market, like Harek’s family has done all these years? Or did they go to Skoro because that kind of lifestyle wasn’t available here?

It takes me a moment to realize Harek has begun walking.

I quickly catch up to him. “What do you know about our pack?” The words feel foreign on my tongue. Our pack—how weird of a thought. I don’t want to think about shifting, but now that’s inevitable since nobody told me anything about my true nature. When I get back to Skoro, I need to tell my siblings. My sisters, at the very least. They’ll listen to me. I can’t say they’ll believe me, but they’ll at least hear me

out and then can decide for themselves what to do. I feel bad for Runa, because she's too young to take care of herself. The others are at least old enough to fend for themselves. "Harek?"

He draws a long breath. "We're better off without them."

"How? I thought packs took care of each other."

"Ours isn't typical—as evidenced by our ability to choose when we shift."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"It's complicated."

"Of course it is. Are you going to tell me about it?"

"Right now?" He throws me an exasperated glance.

"Why not?"

"Because it's a lot, and we're both tired and hungry."

"Then tell me after we eat."

"Okay."

I give him a double-take. "Wait, really?"

"Yeah."

A little energy returns to me with that bit of news. "I appreciate it."

“It isn’t like I’m trying to keep anything from you. I hope you believe me. I’m having a really hard time navigating between having spent so much time being forced to keep all this supernatural stuff from you and now being able to tell you everything. I don’t know when to tell you what, and obviously I haven’t made good decisions on that front.”

I take his hand and squeeze it. “Don’t blame yourself. Our parents did this to us—my mother mostly, as much as it pains me to say it.”

“She thought it was for your best and wanted to protect you. The?—”

“I don’t want to think about it. Let’s just focus on getting some food then decide on our next move from there.”

“Okay, sure.”

Silence settles between us, which is just as well because once we leave the educational district, loud music sounds from somewhere. There must be a concert every night around here. We pass through an area with games and little fae kids running around, shrieking and having fun.

That probably could’ve been my childhood if I hadn’t been raised on a farm with a tyrant who hated me. Why did my mother choose him of all people? Because of his wealth? What I wouldn’t give to ask her that and a million other questions.

When we reach Vivvi’s district, things are quieter but still active. A lot of people fill the streets, all carrying shopping bags.

Harek’s stomach rumbles when the apartment building comes into sight.

I nudge him. “Clearly I’m not the only hungry one.”

He gives me a crooked smile, which makes my heart flutter. “I never said you were.”

“Hopefully she has a table full of food because we’ll both—” I stop short, unable to believe my eyes.

A man with massive dreadlocks and a large sword strapped around him just crossed our path, but it isn’t his hair that makes me forget what I was saying to Harek. This man has my eyes, my nose, and even my mouth nestled in his full beard. Every feature that made me stand out from the people in Skoro is on his face.

The same jolt of recognition crosses his face. He skids to a stop and stares at me with the same bewilderment I feel. It’s only then I realize it isn’t just his hair that is massive—everything about him is. He’s tall, broad, and muscular.

I’m aware of Harek speaking, but it sounds like he’s talking into water. All my focus is on this man. He has scars all over, like he’s fought for his life hundreds of times. His dreads are the same color black as my hair, but his are streaked with white. His skin is darker, more worn, but otherwise I could be looking into a portal at a future, masculine version of myself.

This man is my father.

Chapter

Thirty

“Eira!” Harek tugs at my arm. “Let’s go .”

My feet are cemented to the ground. I can’t stop looking at my father, can’t help but drink in his sight. Literally everything that has made me different from everyone else in my life is on this man. He’s my father—there’s no other explanation.

No doubt in my mind.

He steps forward, and immediately Harek stands in front of me.

I push my friend to the side with a strength I never knew I had. He stumbles and gives me a dumbfounded look. I don’t apologize. Wouldn’t even if I could find my voice.

The man pushes some thick dreadlocks behind his shoulder and takes another step toward me.

Harek growls.

My father blinks a few times. “Tyra?”

I struggle to find my voice. “She’s my mother.”

His shoulders drop. “You look just like her.”

“I look just like you .”

He doesn’t deny it.

“Are you my father?” The question slips out, and it’s stupid. Obviously I’m his daughter—an imp without eyes could see that much.

“How old are you?” He rubs his palms together, dust falling from his fingerless gloves.

“Twenty-three.”

Harek puts a hand on my shoulder and shakes his head. He thinks I’m giving too much information.

What does it matter? If my father wants to kill me right here, he could easily overpower both of us. And I need answers.

My father glances up, like he’s doing the math. “That tracks, but how’s it possible? Where’s Tyra?”

“Dead.” My voice cracks.

His mouth falls open. “No.”

“Like you care,” I snap.

“What?”

“You haven’t been in our lives at all.”

He leans against a light post. “She disappeared one night, and I couldn’t find her.”

“Aren’t you a tracker?”

“Only of evil fae. There wasn’t a drop of badness in her. I can’t believe she’s gone.”

That reminds me to check my palm. No glow, no warmth. My father isn’t a threat to me.

Not yet.

“You’re really her daughter?” Disbelief drips from his tone.

“I look just like her, according to you. Yet all I see is you—that’s all I’ve ever seen. You can’t deny I’m both of yours.”

He swallows. “But it’s impossible.”

“You didn’t have a relationship with her?”

“I certainly did. She was the first, and only, fae I gave my heart to. Nobody else had been worth the risk.”

“Is your heart that valuable?”

He rolls his eyes. “The risk of a hunter is having a son.”

“What about a daughter?”

“No hunter has ever had a daughter.”

“Congratulations, you’re the first.” Though the words fly out quickly, I can’t help feeling conflicted. What does this mean? Could we get around having to attempt to kill each other to protect our own skins?

More importantly, could we have a chance at getting to know each other? He might be able to tell me things about my mother that I don’t know. Chances are, he saw a side of her that nobody else did. His eyes light up when he talks about her, and that’s not something Gunnar has ever done. We’re all his property, and nothing more.

But this man in front of me? He appears to be exactly the opposite of my stepfather. Maybe he could even care about me—not that I’m going to get my hopes up about that yet. I need to see if he’s genuine. He could be faking everything for all I know.

“Do you have the powers?” My father asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

Harek grabs my arm and shakes his head vehemently.

I keep my focus on my father. “You mean the glowing palm? The awesome ability to absorb the souls of evil fae? Check and check.”

He releases a string of swears.

“I’m not excited about any of this either, believe me.” The foreign magic in me roils around, reminding me of exactly why I hate these powers. All I want is to get it out, and all he can do is swear because I’m draining his power.

“You don’t have the sword?” he asks.

“Not anymore.”

His eyes widen. “You lost it?”

I can’t tell if he’s concerned or annoyed. Part of me feels bad for disappointing him, but then again why should I care if he’s annoyed with me? I have bigger problems to worry about, like getting rid of the foreign souls.

“What happened to it?” He looks around, as if it could be just lying around on the street.

“Long story.”

He mumbles something I can’t make out.

“What was that?”

Harek pulls on my arm. “Let’s go .”

“No.” I turn to my father. “What did you say?”

“You need the sword to get those souls out of you.”

“I know.”

“They’ll fight until it wears you down. We’re not meant to hold onto them forever. It’s just a method of travel.”

“A method of travel?” I ask.

“Carrying the souls until the sword can store them.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “It stores the souls?”

“Yes. That’s why I said you need it.”

Harek steps in front of me again. “Why do you care? You’re just going to try to kill her.”

“I have no such plan.” My father moves so Harek isn’t blocking us. “Who are you, anyway?”

“Her best friend. The one person she’s been able to depend on her whole life—unlike some people who abandoned her.”

“I’d have had to know about her existence to abandon her.”

They stare each other down.

I turn to Harek. “Stop, please.”

“You’re siding with him?”

“I’m not siding with anyone. I just want answers, and he has them.”

“He also has every reason to kill you! What’s stopping him?”

My father smirks, though it’s more playful than menacing. “I just found out I fathered the first ever female hunter. She’s my daughter, and she looks just like the love of my life. The last thing I want is to hurt her.”

“Right.”

“I appreciate your concern for her, but it seems she wants to talk with me. You should honor her choice.”

Harek steps back. “Just know I’m not trusting you farther than I can throw you.”

“Which wouldn’t be very far.” My father chuckles.

“Exactly.”

It’s my turn to roll my eyes. “The testosterone is too much. I’ll catch you two later.”

“Wait!” My father pleads with his eyes. “Don’t go. I easily have as many questions as you do. Where have you been living all this time? I’ve never sensed your presence.”

“You can sense me?”

He nods. “You arrived last night, am I correct?”

Blood drains from my body. “How did you know?”

“You’ll learn to fine tune your senses. I’m assuming you haven’t come into your powers until just recently?”

“Let me guess,” Harek says. “That’s when yours started weakening? We’ve heard the rumors.”

“It’s been about a week, and unfortunately, that’s long enough for things to start going awry. Look, why don’t you two come to my place? We can talk and get to know each other. I don’t even know my daughter’s name.”

“Eira.” I square my shoulders. “And yours?”

He hesitates. “She named you Eira?”

“That’s what she said,” Harek mutters.

“What’s your name?” I ask my father.

He holds my gaze for a moment before responding. “Einar.”

Now I’m thrown off balance. “That’s so close.”

“I don’t think she wanted any question about your parentage. Your name is clearly a combination of our names—Einar and Tyra.”

He’s right, not that I had any doubts. But if I did have any, they’d be shot down by now. I’d always thought my name was a shortened version of my mother’s, but it’s clearly a mixture of both of theirs.

The silence is deafening as I take it all in.

Harek puts his arm around me. “We’re not going to your place. It would be far too easy for you to kill her.”

I start to object, but he has a point. Even though Einar is my father, we don’t know anything about him except that we will have to fight to the death. And given that he’s a beast of a man, it’s clear who has the advantage.

He must see the hesitation in my expression because he nods. “Fair point. The last thing I want is any harm coming to her, but you have no reason to believe me. How about we go to a restaurant and talk over dinner? My treat.”

Harek and I exchange glances. That’s an offer we can’t refuse.

I turn him. “That sounds good.”

“Great. I know the perfect place. It was your mother’s favorite.”

How can I turn that down? We follow Einar down the road. If nothing else, hopefully I’ll learn more about my parents before I die at the hands of my own father.

Chapter

Thirty-One

Since we sat down, I haven't stopped stealing glances of my father. He seems genuine—the easy way he smiles as he talks about my mother makes me think he loved her as much as I did. It almost seems too good to be true. I want to trust him, but I have to be careful.

The aromas are too much, and unfortunately now I can't read the fae lettering so I have no idea what to order as both Harek and my father read from the menus.

Einar sets his down and glances at me. "What do you want to eat?"

I shrug. "What was my mother's favorite?"

A smile tugs at his mouth. "I'm not sure she had one. She loved trying new things, and anywhere we went she wanted to taste everything at least once."

"That does sound like her."

"But not you?"

"I'm adventurous," I say a little too quickly. "I just, uh, can't read the menu."

"You don't read?" His eyebrows wrinkle with surprise.

“Not fae writing. I was raised believing I was nothing more than a human.”

He jolts. “You were raised as a human ? When you’re one of the rarest fae alive?”

The words surprise me, though I suppose they shouldn’t after hearing him say there’s never been a female hunter before.

Harek glances up from his menu. “Maybe that’s why she raised you as a human. Nobody ever suspected anything.”

My father tilts his head toward him. “You never knew?”

“Of course I did, but I was sworn to silence.”

Einar studies Harek. “You’re part of Tyra’s pack.”

“Yes.” He returns his attention to the menu.

That catches my attention. “You knew she was a shifter?”

“I can tell what any fae is. That’s another thing you’ll pick up on before long, though it might take a while if you’re completely new to fae life.”

“I am.” I sigh. “If performers hadn’t come to Skoro from time to time, I might not even know they exist for real. Kids whispered about fae like they were myths.”

“Hold on. You’re saying you were in Skoro all this time?”

“Right.”

My father’s eyes widen. “That’s so close. I traveled past there easily hundreds of

times over the years. How did I never sense you? Or her?"

"Our pack has always had access to magic," Harek said. "Maybe that's how she kept everyone from being noticed."

"The boy does talk."

"I'm not a boy."

A smile tugs on my father's lips. "I'm a hundred and fifty years old. Everyone under a hundred is a kid to me."

I stare at him. "You're a hundred and fifty?"

He gives me a mock offended look. "You make it sound like I have one foot in the grave. I'm considered young by many around here, though I suppose you're used to much smaller numbers. Is it true humans only live to be about eighty?"

"If they're lucky," Harek says. "Can we order the food now?"

I kick him under the table.

He pretends not to notice.

My father waves over a server, and she flirts with him. He speaks easily with her, as if he's used to that kind of attention. Then he and Harek order, but I'm stuck. Apparently, I can only read fae when it's about hunters.

I glance at Einar. "What was something you remember my mother ordering?"

He turns back to the server and says a food dish I've never heard of, and she manages

to flirt back at him with just that.

Harek leans over to me. “He seems to enjoy the attention.”

“What guy wouldn’t? She’s pretty.”

“I only care if you notice me.”

Heat floods my face. I don’t think I’m ever going to adjust to him saying things like that, but at the same time I like it.

The server promises to be back with appetizers and she takes off.

“Do you come here often?” Harek asks.

My father nods. “Been coming here for decades.”

“You must travel a lot, given your skills.”

“I do. In fact, I have to head out again tonight. I’ve been hearing about more and more evil fae ravaging cities. My work is never done, and as usual, the nefarious activities always pick up when there are two mature hunters.”

“You aren’t weakening?”

“Those are only rumors.”

“We read it in the hunter book at the library.”

“Despite what you’ve read, I assure you I’m no weaker than I was before.”

They stare each other down.

I sigh.

Luckily the server arrives with three drinks and a large plate of colorful finger foods.

My mouth waters, and I dig in first. Harek jumps in after me, and my father jokes with the server. The food melts on my tongue, and I scarf down close to half of it before I know it.

The server glances at my father. “Should I bring out another platter?”

“Might be a good idea.” He looks amused. “Perhaps bring out two, Jeje.”

Einar is a far cry from what I expected after everything I’d heard and read about hunters.

“Two. Got it.” She walks slowly away, her gaze lingering on his.

I wipe my mouth. “We haven’t eaten since this morning.”

“No need to explain. If you’re hungry, eat. I owe you a lifetime of meals.”

“You do?”

“Of course. That’s how many I’ve missed out on. I never had any idea you existed—that thought never even crossed my mind when Tyra disappeared.”

“Did you look for her?”

“All over. I put my tracking skills to the test, but I never caught even a whiff of her

whereabouts.”

I turn to Harek. “Where does our pack get access to magic?”

“There’s a line of witches we have an alliance with. I wouldn’t be surprised if your mother reached out to them.”

“So my siblings are protected?” I ask. “Assuming they don’t kill anyone.”

“That would be my guess.”

“Can we find out?”

“It would seem she kept all of that to herself. My parents never mentioned her seeking the witches to me.”

“But it doesn’t mean she didn’t.”

He frowns. “I really doubt it. They kept me in the dark about a lot as I grew up, but once I was a teenager I demanded answers. When I returned to tell them about Gunnar and the sword, I asked if there was anything else I should know. They couldn’t think of anything.”

“Then I need to talk to the witches.”

“No!” Harek and my father speak in unison.

Jeje returns with the two plates of food, but she must sense the tension because she drops them off without a single word and scurries away.

“Why not?” I demand. “The witches must know more about my mother if she went to

them. She was apparently the world's best secret keeper, and nobody other than the coven will be able to help me."

"I forbid it." Einar folds his arms, his eyebrows drawing together.

"You can't stop me." I stare him down.

"I'm your father."

"And I'm an adult."

Harek shakes his head. "Eira, the witches are dangerous. Their magic isn't like what you've seen here."

"It's black magic," my father says. "It's deadly."

"Then why would my sweet mother trust them?"

He draws a deep breath. "There was more to your 'sweet' mother than you knew."

"What does that mean?"

Einar pushes some of his dreadlocks behind his shoulder. "I'm not denying she had a sweetness to her, but that was also balanced out by a strong and sly side."

"What are you saying?"

He turns to Harek. "Do you want to tell her?"

My mouth falls open. "Have you been keeping more from me?"

“No!” He turns to my father. “What are you talking about?”

“You don’t know about Tyra’s fighter side?”

“What are you talking about?”

I stare at him in disbelief. My meek mother who always acquiesced to Gunnar had a fighter side? Either she led a double life and I didn’t know her, or Einar and I are talking about two different people. If that’s the case, he isn’t my father and I’m not a hunter.

If only I had a photograph of her, but I hadn’t been able to grab one from the house before fleeing.

Einar starts to say something, but I interrupt him. “Are you sure we’re talking about the same person? My mother was a gentle, kindhearted woman who nursed birds and mice back to health when others would’ve tossed them into the woods.”

He looks lost in thought for a moment. “That definitely sounds like her, but Tyra was a highly complex woman with many sides. Anything she did had a purpose—there wasn’t a moment she wasn’t in full control of any situation.”

“Until she got sick.” A fresh wave of grief washes through me. “Why didn’t she try to cure herself with magic?”

“Because that’s likely what did her in.” Einar scowls. “That kind of magic always comes at a price.”

I feel sick to my stomach, and for the first time in a week, it has nothing to do with the renegade souls I absorbed. “Did she get sick trying to protect me?”

“Potentially. You said she had other children?”

“Yeah.” Tears threaten, and I blink them away. That explains why all the doctors she saw were useless. Gunnar had paid top dollar for the best, even finding other medicine men and women from towns that were a week or more away.

“With a werewolf?” My father asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

“A human. My siblings are halflings and don’t know it any more than I knew about my true nature.”

“Is he trustworthy?”

Harek roars with laughter.

Einar rubs his temples. “I take that as a no.”

“Gunnar tried to marry Eira off to a cruel and disgusting old man the moment her mother died. He’s the same person who stole her sword.”

Fire flashes in my father’s eyes. “This savage lives in Skoro, you say?”

“He’s one of the most influential men there.”

“In other words, he’s rich.”

We both nod.

“But he’s only human?” Einar asks. “You’re sure?”

I shake my head. “I’m not sure of anything anymore.”

Harek sits up taller. “He is. Your palm didn’t glow at all when he and his thugs showed up. He was a danger to you, but your powers didn’t activate because he’s not fae.”

My mind spins, and I turn to my father, realizing once again that he looks like a male version of me. There’s no way we’re talking about two different Tyras. He even said I look just like her, which I don’t see how since I’m clearly a replica of him. “That’s how it works, right? My hand won’t do anything unless I’m in danger by a fae?”

“It isn’t so much about us being in danger as it is about being in proximity to an evil fae. That’s how we know who to kill in order to restore the balance of nature.”

“But what if there are several fae, and only one is evil?”

“Then we have to figure out who the evil one is. Or take them all out.”

I gasp. “Even if the others are good?”

“Sometimes it happens. But think about it, would a truly good fae be with one who is evil?”

“They might not know!”

“Your intuition will grow with time. I’m at the point of being able to tell almost immediately who the problems are in a group.”

“You don’t need the glow at all?”

“The glow can be useful when I need to throw something a long distance.”

“That is pretty cool.” I can’t help but grin.

Einar nods toward the cooling food. “We should eat. I know you two are hungry.”

“Right.” I grab one of the appetizers.

Harek doesn’t. “What about getting her sword back? You’re sure it will help her get the souls out?”

“One hundred percent.” My father pops some food into his mouth.

“Has it happened to you before?”

“Anytime I find myself without my sword and I have to kill someone.”

I glance at his weapon strapped to him. “Do you ever not have it on you?”

“Rarely. Most everyone knows who I am, so even if I go somewhere that doesn’t allow weapons, I’m typically given a pass. People appreciate what we do.”

“Kind of like being an officer,” Harek says.

“A what?” My father reaches for more food.

So do I. “You don’t have police?”

“We have jailers, but nobody patrols for lawbreakers when they have me.”

My stomach knots, and it has nothing to do with the souls trying to get out of me. If my father is so good at what he does, then I’m not necessary. If only Mother had chosen a different husband, I might have been able to live a quiet human life never knowing any better, never activating either of my fae sides.

Now they're both active, and either one could get me killed.

Chapter

Thirty-Two

I've never been so full in all my life. My father kept ordering more food until I thought I would literally explode. He wasn't kidding about making up for a lifetime of meals. I didn't think he'd try to do it all in one sitting.

I barely fit through the door as we exit the restaurant, and I'm about to swear off food for all time when he stops and turns to me. "Do you want to set off for Skoro now, or wait until morning?"

The thought of traveling for another week makes me groan. Not to mention the fact that it's dark out now.

"You don't want your sword back?" he asks.

"I don't want to hike through the woods for days on end again. Harek and I just got here yesterday."

"Who said anything about hiking?" My father's eyes sparkle with a secret only he knows.

Harek and I exchange a curious glance.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

“I have a much better form of travel.” Einar grins.

“Can we fly?” I reach for my back, curious if there are wings hiding under my skin. Pretty much anything is possible at this point.

“We can.”

I can barely believe my ears. “We have wings?”

“Not like that. Something better.”

Harek wrinkles his brows. “What, then?”

I stop looking for wing nubs. “How could something be better than sprouting wings?”

Einar waits just long enough to build the suspense. I’m about to jump out of my skin when he finally speaks. “I have a dragon.”

My mouth falls open and nearly hits the ground beneath us. “Dragons are real?”

“You have one?” Harek stares at him in disbelief.

“I do. She has a boyfriend, and if he’s there we won’t all have to crowd onto her back.”

Is he for real?

Harek voices my doubt. “Dragons can’t be tamed.”

“No?” My father cocks an eyebrow. “Are you sure about that?”

Neither of us reply. I'm still trying to come to grips with dragons really existing.

Einar turns to me. "Want to meet her? I think you two will connect—she'll love your energy."

"Uh..." I can't find more words than that.

Harek straightens his back. "I've got to see this. Let's go."

"Wait," I say, finally finding actual words. "Should we tell Vivvi what we're doing? She's probably expecting us for dinner, and all of our stuff is at her place. We can't just hop on a dragon and fly back to Skoro."

My father stiffens. "You're staying with Vivvi?"

"Yeah."

"Vivvi Chamirel?"

I shrug. "I don't know that she told us her last name."

His mouth tightens. "Her hair changes with the color of the sky."

"That's her," Harek says.

Einar draws a deep breath. "You want to talk about someone not to trust farther than you can throw them? She's at the top of the list."

"Vivvi?" I say. "What's so bad about her?"

"I didn't say she's bad, but you have to be careful around her. She's obsessed with

hunters.”

“She did mention something about my grandfather.”

He nods.

Harek squares his shoulders. “Are we in danger?”

“You trust my opinion now?” The corners of my father’s mouth twitch like he’s amused.

“I’m not sure I trust anyone .” Harek folds his arms. “But I want to hear what you have to say about her.”

“Hunters don’t tend to marry, but Vivvi Chamirel is up for the challenge. It has more to do with tapping into the power and fame than any noble desire.”

“She’s been really nice to us,” I point out. “If it weren’t for her, we would’ve had to sleep on the ground last night. Instead, she fed us and gave us luxurious beds and baths. These are her clothes.”

He glances between Harek and me. “That tracks. I’d never guess you two just spent a week in the forest.”

“And I’d never guess you have a dragon.” It’s so weird to say that, but nothing should feel unbelievable after everything I’ve seen in the last week. Though dragons seem to take all of this newness to a whole new level.

“Most don’t. In general, they avoid cities.”

Harek’s expression sours. “But not for you.”

“At least not these two.” If Einar notices Harek’s disdain, he isn’t bothered by it. Maybe he appreciates my friend being protective of me—something he wasn’t given the chance to do himself.

I feel a little bad that my mother never even gave him the option, but at the same time I get why she did it. If she knew we would have to fight to death one day, it’s no wonder she kept my existence from him. I’m sure it killed her to go from having a relationship with Einar to Gunnar.

The thought makes me shudder.

“Are you okay?” Concern fills my father’s eyes.

“I’m fine. Let’s see your dragon.”

Harek throws me a wild-eyed look. “We need to talk.”

“We do? I thought you wanted to see a tamed dragon.”

“There are more important things to consider.” He pulls me down the street. “It could be a trap. I’ve never heard of someone taming a dragon—much less in a city. This is a bad idea.”

“Worse than going with Vivvi, who sounds like she has ulterior motives?”

“Clearly.”

“He’s my father. You can’t deny that—we’re practically twins.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but yeah, there’s no doubt about the resemblance. Doesn’t mean we can trust him.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

“We should sleep on it and make a decision when we’ve had some time to think it through.”

“I’ve already thought it through.” I stand taller. “All my life I’ve wanted to know about my father. Now I have the chance.”

“And he may kill you one day!”

“He seems glad to have found me.”

Harek frowns and taps his foot. “We don’t know anything about him. He could be leading us to his house for the express purpose of feeding us to his dragon.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because you’re making his powers weaken!”

“He said they aren’t.”

“So? He could be lying. Why else would there be rumors about him weakening? About a city getting ravaged because of evil fae? Even if he isn’t weakening, something is going on. He’s not doing his job. Maybe he’s been tracking you. What if that’s why the evil fae are running wild?”

I glance over at my father, who is checking his teeth in his reflection in a store window. “He’s not intent on killing either one of us. Look at him. If he wanted us dead, he wouldn’t take his eyes off us.”

Harek runs his hands through his hair. “You know, it is like we’re a threat to him

right here. He probably expects you to try and kill him—and he's ready for it. He just doesn't want us to know."

"I think it's pretty obvious I couldn't kill him even if I wanted to, which I don't."

"Doesn't change the fact that one of you is going to have to kill the other one at some point. Why bother getting attached to him? It'll only make it harder for you to protect yourself."

I stare at him in disbelief. "Because he's my father."

He doesn't argue.

Einar glances our way, clearly ready to get going.

I turn back to Harek. "I'm going with him. You can come with me or not."

"I'm not leaving you!"

"Great. Let's go."

"But know that I think this is a terrible idea."

"Noted."

He frowns, but I march toward my father.

"Are you two ready to come with me?"

"Yes," I say.

Harek stands next to me. “Are you sure going over now is a good idea? It’s almost dark.”

“All the better for sneaking in and out unnoticed.”

My friend doesn’t look convinced. “You don’t know that jerk.”

“And he doesn’t know me.”

“Fair point.”

“Good,” I say. “We’re all on the same page. Let’s see the dragon and fly to Skoro so I can get my sword back and finally get these souls out of me.”

There’s a sentence I never thought I’d say.

Harek puts an arm around me. “I won’t leave your side.”

Einar looks at us, but I can’t read his expression. “Follow me.”

He leads us through the city into a district we haven’t been to before. It seems more like farmland and makes me feel like I’m back home. Not that I have a home anymore, but I still feel more comfortable here than anywhere else in the walls.

The homes and barns are spread far apart, and we have to walk a fair distance. It’s completely dark but little rainbow-colored glowing bugs keep things light enough to see better than if it was dusk.

My father stops in the middle of nothing and grins. “We’re here.”

I look around, confused. “What do you mean?”

“My humble abode.”

“You’ve got that right,” Harek mumbles.

I nudge Harek, though I don’t exactly disagree with him. “This is your home?”

Einar points to a hillside.

“Your home is on the other side?” I ask hopefully.

“Take a closer look.”

Some dim lights turn on, and everything comes into focus. The hillside is a dwelling. It’s even bigger than the mansions owned by the rulers of Skoro.

Harek and I exchange bewildered expressions.

My father’s grin hasn’t stopped. He’s clearly amused by our reactions. “This has been the home of your ancestors going back many generations. We have relics from every previous known hunter.”

“You... you do?” I try to comprehend the idea of having gone from no family lineage to many generations, several of which are more than a hundred years each.

“Does that mean she can use one of their swords?” Harek asks. “Instead of having to find the other one?”

Einar turns to me. “The runes lit up for you?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s your sword. No other will connect with you.”

“Are you sure about that?” Harek asks. “None? Not even with magic?”

He shakes his head. “It’s like with dragons where the bond is for life.”

“What if the dragon dies?” I ask. “Or the sword is destroyed?”

“Only then can a new bond form.”

Harek stands taller. “If Gunnar destroyed her sword, then she could use another?”

“She could use any sword, but it won’t collect the souls. They’ll keep going into her and won’t leave.”

That’s a miserable thought. “I’m not taking that chance.” Then a thought strikes me. “Could the souls leave me when I shift into a wolf?”

My father looks deep in thought for a moment. “I suppose it’s possible, though unlikely. It isn’t something I’d hang my hopes on.”

“But it’s possible?”

“There’s never been a hunter-shifter before. The bloodline has always been pure.”

“How?” Harek asks. “If there’s never been a female hunter?”

Einar turns to me. “A hunter has never taken on the mother’s abilities. You’re unique in that, too.”

“Maybe I’m not actually a hunter.”

“If your palm reacts to evil fae and your sword glows at your touch, then you’re most assuredly the next hunter.”

“Then maybe I’m not also a werewolf.”

Harek shakes his head. “Your eyes turned silver.”

My father motions toward his home. “We have much to learn. Let’s start by seeing how my dragon reacts to you. Then we’ll fly to Skoro and get your sword back.”

I nod, unable to find words. As if all of this wasn’t bad enough, my siblings are going to get caught up in all of this. Will I be able to protect them and myself?

Chapter

Thirty-Three

While the outside of the mansion is so nondescript I didn't notice it at first, the inside is unbelievable. Everything is fancy and expensive, much like in Vivvi's place, but has more of an older feel like parts of the library. I can feel more magic here than anywhere else.

Almost as if reading my mind, my father turns to me. "Our ancestors have lived here since long before other fae settled around us and eventually turned it into a bustling city. Everyone is drawn to the ancient magic, which is part of the reason for the walls. Good fae are drawn to us for our protective powers, and the evil ones are drawn to us much like a glitter bug to a light that will zap them."

Harek eyes him with suspicion.

"You needn't distrust me." He holds up his right palm. "I know you're good, and more importantly, you care about my daughter. If anything, I have all the more reason to protect you."

"I don't need your protection."

"You might." He motions toward a dim corridor. "You two need to get acquainted with Sapphire."

I assume that's his dragon's name, but don't ask. It's all too much to take in, and by

the night's end we might destroy the farm I grew up on.

"Wait," I say.

"Yes?" he asks, and they both look at me expectantly.

"What exactly is going to happen when we get to Skoro? Are the dragons going to breathe fire and burn everything to the ground? My brothers and sisters are there, and I don't want them getting hurt."

He nods. "Ideally, we'll sneak in and find your sword without anyone noticing us."

Harek frowns. "And if that isn't possible?"

"Then we fight."

My stomach churns acid. "Will the dragons breathe fire? Is that something they actually do?"

"They do, but it takes a lot out of them. It'll be a last-ditch effort. I'd prefer to keep them out of it and just let them fly us to and back."

Relief washes through me. "That's good to hear."

"Come on." He hurries into the corridor.

We catch up, and Harek has more questions for my father. "How did her sword bond to her? I don't understand that."

"I'm assuming Tyra walked through the sword collection here after finding out about her pregnancy. One of the ancestral swords must've lit up when she got near, and she

took it with her. Not long after she left, I found one of them missing.”

“Who did it belong to?” I ask.

“My great-great-grandfather.”

“It’s an heirloom as well as my sword.”

He nods. “All the more reason to get it from that foul human.”

The farther we go down the corridor, the darker it gets. Einar lights torches that are spaced along the wall. It makes me think of drawings I’ve seen depicting ancient times.

After a while, Harek stops. “You keep your dragon all the way back here?”

“She isn’t captive. You’ll see. We’re almost there.”

We carry on down the path.

A chill comes over me, clinging like wet clothing. It makes me think of the cave Harek and I stayed in one night.

I’m about ready to turn back when a faint green glow shines up ahead. We come to a large open area with grass, a pond, and countless glitter bugs of every color flitting about. The light comes from them. But that isn’t the most amazing thing in the large area.

A large, dark orange dragon is curled up, sleeping next to the pond. Her wings slide up and down with each breath the creature takes. I’m not sure why my father was worried about all three of us fitting on her—she could easily fit twice as many people

on her back and have room to spare.

My father marches over to her and rubs the side of her head. She opens one eye, then the other. He beams. “Meet Sapphire.”

The dragon lazily rises and yawns before nuzzling against Einar, practically knocking him over. She glances our way and releases a loud snort.

I press myself against Harek. Some mighty hunter I am.

“Come meet her,” my father says.

Neither of us move.

“Just hold your hand out and let her sniff you.”

“Like a cat?” I ask, my voice betraying my hesitancy.

“Exactly, and I’m right here. She’ll know you aren’t a threat.”

“I’m more worried about her.”

“She’s a love. Come on, we need to get the introductions out of the way.”

As if to prove his point, the souls ram into each other, making me nauseated again. If riding this dragon and fighting Gunnar is what it takes to remove the souls from me, then that’s what I’ll do.

I take a step forward.

Harek grabs my arm. “Are you sure?”

I turn to him. “We have no other choice. I need to get that sword back.”

“We could travel back through the woods and get it ourselves.”

“No, we need to do it this way.”

“Okay.” He steps forward with me.

My heart hammers louder with each step I take, and the souls whip back and forth, making me regret having eaten so much for dinner. It’s as if they know what’s coming. Maybe they do.

Once I have my sword, there will be no stopping me.

Sapphire wiggles and snorts more as I get closer.

Einar grins. “She’s eager to meet you.”

“Or eat me,” I mumble.

Harek nudges me.

My father puts his hand in front of the dragon’s huge nose. “Just like this.”

I glance between them before putting my hand in front of the beast.

The blast of air as she sniffs in and out nearly throws me to the ground. She wiggles even more and nudges her head against me, knocking me against Harek.

My father instructs him to offer his hand to her, too.

He does, and receives the same welcome I did.

“Great. Now that we’ve all met, it’s time to fly.”

My breath hitches. “Already?”

“What are we waiting for? We’ll lose the benefit of nightfall before long.”

“How safe is it?”

“Flying?” he asks.

I nod.

“A lot safer than facing that man who has your sword. Let’s do this.” He places a large blanket on her back and helps us climb on.

Harek goes first, and then helps me up. I end up between Harek and my father, who is in the front.

Suddenly, I’m glad Sapphire’s boyfriend isn’t here. Though my father’s likely right. Facing Gunnar is going to be the more dangerous feat.

Chapter

Thirty-Four

Einar's long dreadlocks keep whipping me in the face, but it's actually a good distraction from being so far above the ground. Sapphire's enormous wings create a different wind from the one of us moving forward through the air. A few times we've gone directly through a cloud, which is colder than I'd have thought.

Harek clings to me as I grip my father with everything in me. He keeps laughing, as if this is the most magnificent thing in the world. Maybe I'll feel the same way about it once my feet are back on land. For now, all I can picture is losing my grip and plummeting to my death.

I have to admit the view of the forest down below is breathtaking. It seems small from up here, yet when Harek and I traveled through, the trees made me feel small. Apparently it's all a matter of perspective. I'll have to keep that in mind when I have to face Gunnar.

My stomach knots at the thought of having to see him again. All my life, he's forced me into compliance by any means necessary. I had to give into him for survival—not that it got me anywhere, considering the moment my mother died he was ready to hand me over to Vog.

I shudder at the thought of that having gone through. If Gunnar hadn't warned me of his plans, if I hadn't been able to get away in time, if Harek and his family weren't so good to me... Would my fae abilities have come through at some point? Perhaps I

would've killed Vog and then within a month turned into a wolf in the middle of the city.

But none of that happened. I'm here with my hunter father and a member of my werewolf pack. One half of my legacy in front of me, and the other behind. While we're riding a dragon over the forest that took Harek and me a week to hike through.

I'm not sure what to expect once we get to Skoro. Will I be able to find the sword and leave unnoticed? Or will Gunnar figure out what's going on and confront us? What will come of my siblings if we have to kill my wicked stepfather?

Those are questions for later. With so much on the line, I can't worry about what-ifs. We can figure out solutions to problems as they arrive.

Harek's grip around me tightens, and I glance down.

Skoro. We're here. It's mind blowing to consider, given how long it took us to get from here to the fae city.

Einar turns back to me. "Where's the farm?"

My stomach lurches. This is really happening.

He repeats his question, and I pull myself together.

At first the wind steals my words, so I speak louder. "It's near the back! Where all the open land is." I lean over for a better look. "It's over there." I point, though I'm not sure he can see my gesture.

Einar shouts something, and a moment later, Sapphire turns toward my childhood home. She dips and twists, making my stomach drop. The souls bang around against

each other, perhaps sensing we're close to my sword which will free me of them.

The dragon aims for the horse's field. She lands in the middle, skidding to a stop a few feet from the barn. The force throws me against Harek, then we both lunge forward against my father.

He's the first one off, and he helps me down first and then Harek. "Where do you think the sword is?"

"I don't know."

"You don't have any idea where it might be?"

"It could be in the house, or in the storage shed. Maybe he buried it somewhere. Or he could've tossed it in the woods. Anything is possible."

Einar grumbles. "You really don't know where he would put something worth so much?"

"He always hides valuables from me. I don't know where."

"We better get moving before daylight." My father pats Sapphire, who plops on the ground.

My siblings would lose their minds if they knew a dragon was on the farm right now. Under different circumstances, I'd run to my room—my former room—and wake Runa so she could see. I'd love to see her eyes light up with delight, but unfortunately it's best if she sleeps through all of this.

Einar glances at my hand. "Hold it out and walk toward the place you think he most likely put it."

I do as he says and head for the storage shed because it's the closest of the possible places. I'm not sure if he would put my sword there or not. Hopefully my hand really will let me know. Never once did it light up when I was over at Harek's house before my mother's death.

"You're sure this will work?" I ask him. "It was hidden at Harek's house, and my hand never did anything."

"It probably did, but you weren't looking for signs. You're connected to the sword, so it will make itself known."

"If you say so."

He nods and looks around before his gaze lands on Harek. "Do you have any ideas where the man would hide a fae sword?"

"I'm not sure he knows it's fae, but regardless, I have less of an idea than Eira has."

"Then we'll hope it shows itself quickly." He gives me a nod.

Here goes nothing. I walk toward the barn, but my palm does nothing. No warmth, no glow. "How close do I have to get to it?"

"Fairly close," Einar says. "However, you should feel it first if you're paying attention. Otherwise, you won't notice. It isn't a homing beacon."

I groan, but keep going until I'm inside the barn. Some of the animals snort and snuffle when they see me. I offer quick pats but don't have time to give them the warm greeting I'd like after being gone so long.

My palm doesn't do anything as I make my way around, nor do I feel any kind of

inkling—not that I know what feeling to expect. All I sense is my rushing pulse and the aggravating souls.

When I step out of the barn, both Harek and my father throw me expectant glances.

“Nothing,” I say, although the fact that I’m not holding a sword should answer their silent questions.

We make our way toward the storage shed, which is about halfway between the barn and the house. The shed seems too obvious, making it seem like the last place Gunnar would put it.

Snap!

A branch. I spin around.

Harek waves. “It was just me.”

I breathe a sigh of relief and keep moving toward the storage. It isn’t a huge structure, so I creep around it with my hand held toward it.

Nothing.

“To the house?” Harek asks.

Acid churns in my stomach but I nod. I’ve always dreaded seeing Gunnar, but now my anxiety is even worse after our encounter in the woods. He would rather see me dead than alive, unless he benefits somehow. At least I’m not alone.

Now the dragon is out of our line of sight. I should’ve suggested she follow us. Too late now. Hopefully, we can find my weapon and get out of here before anyone sees

us.

As we approach the house, my right palm warms slightly. I can see how I never noticed before I knew about being fae.

It also has a faint, almost imperceptible glow.

My sword is close.

The front door of the house flings open. Gunnar stands in the doorway.

He aims a gun directly at me.

Chapter

Thirty-Five

My palm heats and begins to glow. I can feel the sword, though I can't explain how.

Gunnar steps out onto the porch, his weapon still pointing at me. "You dare to come back?" He turns his glare to Harek. "And you! The entire town knows what you are. How dare you show your face again? The whole lot of you aren't welcome."

I'm tempted to tell him his own children are part of Harek's pack, but I can't risk saying anything. He could turn on them. I wouldn't put it past him.

My stepfather glares at my father. "And who are y..." His voice trails off and recognition flickers in his expression. "You're her father."

"That I am." Einar squares his shoulders. "I heard you haven't treated my daughter very well."

I swear I catch a flicker of fear in Gunnar's stance, but it's gone as quickly as it appeared. "You have no authority here. I was the one who stepped up and took in the unwanted orphan and her whore of a mother."

My mouth falls open at the insult. As much as he's always hated me, I've never heard him speak ill of her. Either he didn't think as highly of her as I thought, or he's upset seeing her previous lover. That's probably it.

Einar steps closer to the porch. “Say that again. I dare you.”

I exchange a worried glance with Harek. Things are about to get real before I even have a chance to find my sword. My palm is still warm, so that’s a good sign. Hopefully I’ll be ready with just that, considering my powers don’t seem to work against humans.

Gunnar laughs cruelly and steps toward Einar. “Don’t tell me you have feelings for the dead wretch. Why did you ever let her go if you cared so much?”

“I don’t owe you an explanation. Give us the sword, and we’ll be on our way.”

“What’s so special about it?” Gunnar turns the gun toward my father.

“No!” I run in front of him.

Both Einar and Harek pull me out of the way. I stumble to the ground. “Don’t hurt him!”

Gunnar sneers at me. “This loser means something to you?”

I scramble to my feet. Before I have a chance to respond, my father rushes toward Gunnar. They’re a similar height and build, but Einar is both taller and more muscular. He’s also probably killed many more times. Plus, his sword, while meant for fae, will be equally effective against a human.

Harek turns toward me, fear in his eyes. “We have to find your sword! Let him handle Gunnar.”

“No! You help him, I’m going to find my sword alone.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am. You’re both skilled hunters in your own ways. The faster I can find my sword, the better.” I step away from him.

“All the more reason for me to help you.” Harek steps toward me.

“My palm will lead the way. Please help my father.” I give him my most pleading look.

Harek’s shoulders slump. “Fine. But shout if you need any help at all.”

“I will.”

He hesitates, like he’s thinking of going with me despite his promise.

“Help my father.” I run around the side of the house before he can change his mind, though there’s nothing stopping him from chasing after me. He can be stubborn like that.

Thankfully I don’t hear any footsteps behind me. My hand feels a little warmer as I near the back of the house.

I’m getting closer.

Crash!

That came from the front of the house. I resist the urge to race back and see what’s going on. If I’m going to help anyone, I need my sword.

The orange mist grows almost blindingly bright, increasing so much in its intensity.

I'm either on top of the sword, or there's an evil fae very close. The souls race around in my stomach worse than before. Do they sense something, too?

Acid churns, threatening to rise to my throat. I ignore it, looking around. Hold out my palm, spin slowly. The mist doesn't grow bright or dimmer.

Shouting sounds from the other side of the house, followed by more crashing noises.

I need to hurry. Using my mist as a light, I study my surroundings. The ground appears undisturbed, meaning Gunnar didn't bury my sword here. But there are bushes next to the house. I step near them.

The orange mist intensifies, forms into a ball. This has to be it.

Someone cries out in pain. From this distance, I can't tell who. Hopefully Gunnar.

I kneel down and check under the bushes. No sword, but the dirt appears to have been moved around recently. Given how bright my mist is, my weapon could very well be buried here.

As I begin digging, the souls rage against each other. My stomach lurches, but I manage to keep from throwing up. The mist ball seems to soften the soil, making it easier for me to pull up dirt.

My fingernails scrape something metallic.

I stop, my breath hitching. Could that be my sword? It has to be. I dig faster, The souls thrash around.

Around the house, fighting noises grow louder. More intense.

Faint light shines from the ground. I reach down. Feel around.

A blade.

Heart pounding against my ribcage, I find the handle, pull it free of the mud. Yank the weapon out of the ground. Stumble back. Dirt falls from the sword, and the etchings glow the same color as my palm.

The blade points upright and shakes slightly in my grip, the runes changing from orange to black—yet somehow still lit. The souls slam around inside of me. It feels like they're going to explode out of me.

Like I might explode.

I open my mouth to cry out, but they reach my throat before the sound. Pressure builds as they all fight to move through my windpipe. I choke, struggle to breathe. Try again to call out. Can't.

My sinuses burn. A force gathers, so strong I cover my nose in attempt to keep it from breaking to pieces. Cold, black mist bursts out, swirling in the same way it did before. Only this time, it's leaving me instead of entering. It darts away from my weapon then suddenly turns toward it.

The blade shakes, and so does the mist, as if they're struggling against each other. My head jerks back as the mists pull completely away from me.

Finally I can breathe. I gasp in air, desperate for as much as I can inhale.

Meanwhile, the mist and my sword struggle against each other. Once my breathing returns to normal, I hold a steadier grip on the handle. Both my palm and the etchings glow bright orange. With a hard thrust, the mists all slam against the blade, and the

weapon absorbs them.

It remains upright seemingly on its own. I stare in disbelief, my grip unsteady but not affecting the sword.

Once I regain my composure, I hurry around the house.

A cloud of dust rises from where Gunnar, Harek, and Einar are rolling around on the ground. Grunts and thuds sound from their direction. My father's sword lies off to the side.

I hurry over. They're moving around too fast to see who is where.

This leaves me with only one option. I reach for the nearest arm and yank, not even sure who I've grabbed. If it's my stepfather, then I have to fight him. If it's one of the other two, they can take a moment to recover before we jump in.

Dreadlocks appear from the dust cloud. My father steadies himself and brushes dirt from his face. "Thanks!"

I start to respond, but he grabs his sword, and jumps back in before I can say anything.

Harek cries out—I'd recognize his voice anywhere

The stench of blood fills my nostrils. I'm not even sure how I can smell it, but I do. Must have something to do with my new werewolf capabilities. A fierce anger rips through me at an intensity I've never experienced. If Gunnar has hurt Harek, I will kill him. The thought of something happening to my friend turns my anger into rage, and it pulsates through me in uncontrollable waves.

My sword's etchings glow brighter than before, but that barely registers. My bones ache as if set on fire. The pain tears through me as if it's eating me alive from the inside out. Everything turns into a blur as it feels like every single one of my bones are snapping. As something like tiny blades slices through every inch of my skin. Fur.

I'm transforming into a werewolf—even though it's nowhere near the full moon. Shreds of the fancy clothes Vivvi gave me fly in all directions.

A howl sounds from somewhere.

Me. It's from me.

All my senses are sharper than ever. Everything lights up as if it's suddenly not dark. I can smell everything . Including Gunnar's fear.

I turn to him, sniffing with my elongated nose. His eyes widen, and he tries to scramble away, but he's not only outnumbered—he's now facing a predator.

A growl escapes me, the noise vibrating through my mouth. My fur bristles and I take measured steps toward him with all four legs. This is simultaneously unreal and at the same time the most natural thing I've ever experienced.

The scent of Gunnar's fear grows stronger, and it makes me salivate. He shoves Harek and my father. Stumbles as he tries to run.

I lunge for him. Flesh, blood, and muscle fill my mouth. Gunnar's screams fill the air. He hits and kicks me, but it all bounces off me. I barely notice, my focus on keeping my loved ones safe.

Shots ring out. Voices sound in the distance, footsteps thunder as people approach. I pull my attention from Gunnar to the commotion. It appears half the town is headed

our way.

A wind picks up and a shriek blasts through the air.

Sapphire.

My stepfather pulls from my grip then limps away toward the mob.

More shots ring out. A bullet whirs past me, barely missing.

Einar calls my name. He's mounted the dragon and is waving me toward them.

Harek, also on Sapphire, has my sword. "Hurry, Eira!"

The townsfolk outnumber us by at least five to one, and they have guns.

In one swift movement, I leap onto Sapphire's back. She flaps her wings, roars, and then flies into the air. I somehow manage to stay on by gripping the dragon's sides and using my leg muscles to stay in place. It would be easier to shift back into my human form, but then I wouldn't have any clothes.

Harek clings to me, helping me to remain steady.

More shots ring out, bullets shoot past us. Sapphire darts to avoid them.

I whine and fight my heavy eyelids.

Harek gives me a sympathetic look and rubs one of my ears.

This night truly couldn't get any weirder.

Chapter

Thirty-Six

When we land in Sapphire's clearing, a black dragon is sprawled out where she was earlier. He looks up toward us, his bright emerald eyes a stark contrast to the rest of him. I want to ask if that's the dragon boyfriend, but I have no way of communicating outside of growls, whines, and yaps.

My father pats Sapphire's head and laughs. "Looks like your boyfriend missed you."

Now I have my answer.

The dragon snorts before a sharp descent, which causes me to slide forward into Harek. He tightens his grip around me, holding me in place.

Sapphire lands right next to her boyfriend and nuzzles him. They both make happy noises, but the other one eyes me with suspicion. His concern pulsates out in waves I can both see and smell.

I leap onto the ground and hurry toward the entrance to the house—not that I'm even sure if my father wants a wolf in his home.

Einar pats the new dragon. "It's fine, Vash. These are friends."

Harek leaps down onto the ground with a thud, still holding my sword. "I don't suppose you have any clothes Eira can change into? I think she's hesitant to shift

back because her clothes shredded. If you don't have anything, I can return to Vivvi's place. I'm sure she's wondering where we are."

My father shakes his head. "No reason to go to her. I still have some of her mother's things, including her wardrobe." He turns to me. "Let me take you there. Does that sound good?"

Relief washes through me, and I manage a nod.

"Perfect. Follow me." Einar starts toward the entrance, but then opens another door instead. "The dragon food is in here, Harek. Do you mind feeding them? Sapphire is always famished after a long flight."

"Sure, but I'll feed them after I see where you take Eira."

My father cocks a brow. "Still don't trust me, even after all that?"

"Nope."

Einar pats him on the back. "I appreciate that. I'm glad she's had you looking after her all these years. It seems she needed it while dealing with that stepfather of hers."

"You have no idea," Harek mutters. "I hope her bite kills him slowly. He deserves it."

"Unfortunately, that didn't look like a lethal wound. But she has her sword, and that's all the really matters."

"We'll see about that."

"Yes, we shall." My father marches into the mansion, and Harek and I hurry after him.

He leads us through even more of the home than before, taking us through so many corridors I'm not sure I'll remember how to get back out. Not that I know how much I'll remember once I turn back into myself. It's possible I'll forget all of this since transforming into a wolf.

I'm going to have a talk with Harek about the whole 'we only shift within a day of the full moon' nonsense. Plus, if I'm being honest, I'm rather disappointed about having destroyed that outfit. It was far and away the nicest thing I'd ever worn. Now it's gone.

Einar stops in front of a door. "Your mother's things are all in here. This is where she kept them, and she only took a little with her when she left. I never had the heart to remove a single item, always hoping one day she'd return. Now it's all yours. Do what you think best with it."

Harek opens the door and steps inside.

I start to go in, but he motions for me to stop. If I wasn't a wolf, I'd argue with him but I do appreciate him looking out for me. Though at this point, I trust my father. Not only did he risk himself and his dragon to help me get my sword back, but he kept my mother's things all this time. If that isn't love, I don't know what is.

"Everything looks good." Harek steps back into the hall and looks into my eyes. "Are you going to be okay shifting back? I can be there with you."

I try to express through my eyes that I'll be fine. The last thing I want at this point is to shift in front of him. Maybe someday, if our relationship goes in that direction, but for now it's a big no.

My bones ache, which seems like a clue that they want to shift back into my natural form. I nudge my way past Harek into the room. Then I use my muzzle and paws to

close the door between us. If that doesn't answer his question, nothing else will.

Conversation sounds in the hall, then footsteps. Both grow quieter.

I'm alone. Now I can shift back.

The ache turns into sharp pains, similar to what I felt back at the farm. I close my eyes and whine. This is going to be as painful as before.

Agony rips through every inch of me in hot waves.

I let go, stop holding it back, and let nature take over.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:19 am

When I open my eyes, I'm back in human form, curled into a ball on the floor and naked as the day I was born. I bolt upright, covering myself, and look around quickly. I'm still alone.

It's strange to be in this unfamiliar room without anything on. Harek and my father could return at any moment, so I need to find clothes now.

This is a bedroom, and the closet is in front of me. I leap up and fling open the door. I've never seen so many clothes—not even in the room at Vivvi's. The mother I knew only ever wore simple clothing, and she had only a few outfits. It's hard to believe all these brightly colored shirts, pants, and dresses belonged to her.

Who was my mother before she met Gunnar? And why did she let him change her so much? Those are questions for another time. I need to get dressed before anyone returns for me. They're bound to be concerned since I just shifted for the first time, and not even near the full moon.

I flip through the items, ultimately picking a shirt and pants that look comfortable and are in more muted tones than the rest of them. They're a perfect fit, just like Einar predicted, and the fabric is as soft as the clothes Vivvi provided me.

Once dressed, I finally relax. If Harek and my father return, everything will be fine. But now I can indulge my curiosity. This was my mother's room—or at least where she stored her things. If I want to find out about her life before Skoro and Gunnar's iron fist, this is the place to look.

I take in a deep breath and catch the slightest whiff of a floral perfume. But that's

impossible. If she left here more than twenty years ago, no scent could linger that long. Though everything I thought was true about life has been proven wrong in the last week, so perhaps traces of her are still here after all this time.

Sniffing, I follow the trail. The floral scent grows stronger until I come to another closet at the other end of the spacious room. Without thinking, I open the door. A strong whiff of the flowers hits me.

A large chest takes up most of the space. It has a wolf print etched into the rounded top.

My heart races. Will the contents answer my questions? Tell me everything I need to know about my mother's past?

I reach for the latch, pull it up. Hesitate for only a moment before opening the lid. The floral perfume is even stronger, and suddenly I see why.

Dried teal roses cover the top of the wooden chest. Carefully, I remove them one by one. They aren't fragile, like I'd expect. Something round and black appears underneath, more revealing with each flower pulled away.

A shield. It has an intricate wolf head carved into the middle, taking up most of the space, and the edges have fancy designs. My pulse drums in my ears as I pull the shield out of the box. It hums in my grasp, vibrating slightly.

That isn't even the strangest part. The dried roses come back to life, slowly transforming into silky petals and sharp thorns.

My breath hitches, and once all of the flowers have fully returned to normal, the back of the shield calls to me. I find it hard to pull my gaze from the carved wolf on the front but force myself to turn it around. The words on the back take my breath away.

For some reason, I feel compelled to read them aloud.

The Secret Keeper's Shield.

It protects the bearer of the secrets.

The bearer protects those entrusted to her.

If you can read these words,

You are her.

A bright light shines from the etchings, and a warmth runs through me. Then new words appear underneath the original ones. I voice those as I read them, too.

You have been entrusted with much.

Your blood carries the necessary magic.

Follow it, protect those in your care.

Be brave, be strong.

You have no other choice.

Everyone depends on it.

My hands shake, and I set the shield back in the chest. A lump forms in my throat, and I can hardly breathe. What is the Secret Keeper, and what does this mean for my future?

Did my mother keep the secret she was meant to? Or did she run from what the shield

expected from her? Is that why she didn't tell me about any of this?

It has to be. She kept everything important from me. Who my father was. What legend says our destiny is. That we're werewolves. And that she was the Secret Keeper... and so am I.

This might have been what she was running from, and not my father. Or it could have been a combination of both. It sounds like there is only one Secret Keeper—just like there's supposed to only be one hunter.

I can't possibly be the only one of two different types of fae.

Knock, knock.

"Are you ready?" Harek asks from the other side of the door.

I gasp for air. How am I going to explain this to him?

"Hold on!" I call.

If I'm the new Secret Keeper, does that mean I have to hide this from Harek? The last thing I want is to keep anything from him, especially after everything we've been through.

What if this could put him in danger? If that's the case, there's no way I can tell him about this. Not yet. I have to find out more. I have to keep him safe.

But first, I need to put everything back in the chest. I turn toward the flowers and shield.

The chest is closed, and neither the shield nor the flowers are out. I open the lid. Everything appears as it did when I first opened it.

This is my secret. It only wants me to know.

My mother was also sworn to secrecy. That's why she didn't tell me anything.

All secret keepers are meant to discover what that means on their own, without the help of their predecessors. I don't know how I know this, but I do.

"Eira?" Harek calls.

I slam the closet door shut.

What am I supposed to tell my best friend, the person I love the most?

Nothing , a voice whispers in my mind that sounds eerily like my mother. Tell no one .

It looks like I'm keeping this to myself.

I take a few deep breaths before opening the door.

Harek's eyes are wild. "Are you okay? You've been in here so long. The first shift is always the worst."

"I'm fine. Really, it wasn't that bad."

"How is that possible?"

I shrug. "How did I shift this far from the full moon?"

He frowns. "That's what worries me."

"I'm also a hunter. That must be it." Or the fact that I'm not only a werewolf and a

hunter, but also a Secret Keeper—whatever that entails.

Harek wraps his arms around me. “I always knew you were special, but there’s never been anyone like you.”

“You have no idea,” I mumble.

“What?” He steps back and gives me a puzzled expression.

Guilt stings for keeping this from him, but what other choice do I have? It seems clear my mother sent me on a mission to finish what she, or possibly another of our predecessors, began.

Harek brushes some hair from my face and leans closer. “Are you okay?”

“I’m just trying to make sense of everything. Do you know why I shifted?”

“Honestly, that’s the first time I’ve seen a non-moon shift happen. I can’t blame you if you don’t believe me.” He frowns and looks away. “But it’s the truth.”

I cup his chin and guide his head until our gazes meet, then I lean closer. “I believe you, and I think you’re right. One of my parents’ abilities must have something to do with it.”

His brows draw together. “One of them? Your ability to shift must have something to do with your hunter line.”

My pulse drums in my ears. After being so upset with him for hiding things from me, I can’t keep this from him. My mother would understand.

Unless of course that wasn’t her voice I heard.