

# The Queen's Alpha Box Set

**The Queen's Alpha Series**

W.J. May

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## THE QUEEN'S ALPHA BOX SET

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Written by W.J. May.

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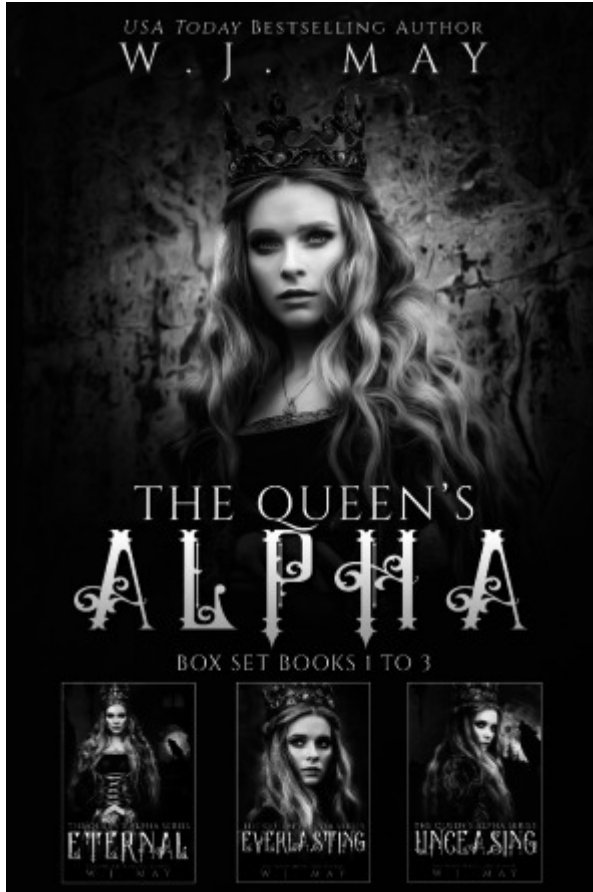
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The Queen's Alpha  
Box Set Books #1-3

By W.J. May

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Queen's Alpha Box Set Books #1-4

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## The Queen's Alpha Series



Eternal  
Everlasting  
Unceasing  
Evermore  
Forever  
Boundless  
Prophecy  
Protected  
Foretelling  
Revelation  
Betrayal  
Resolved



## The Omega Queen Series



Discipline

Bravery

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Strength

Validation

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Blessing

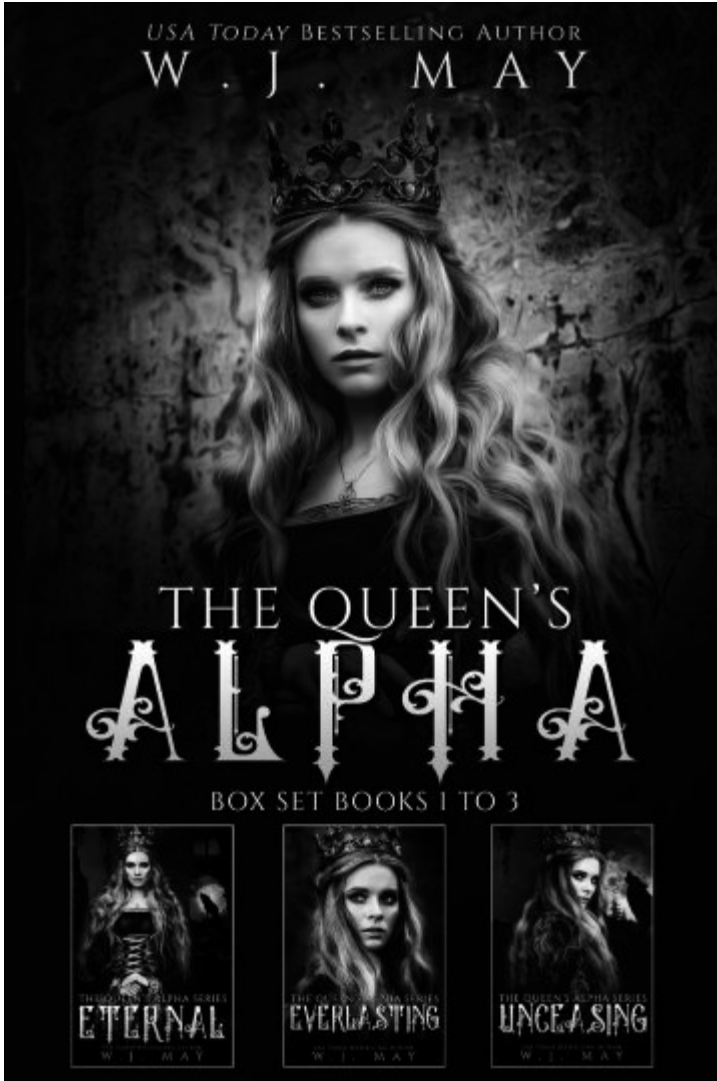
Balance

Grievance

Enchanted

Gratified





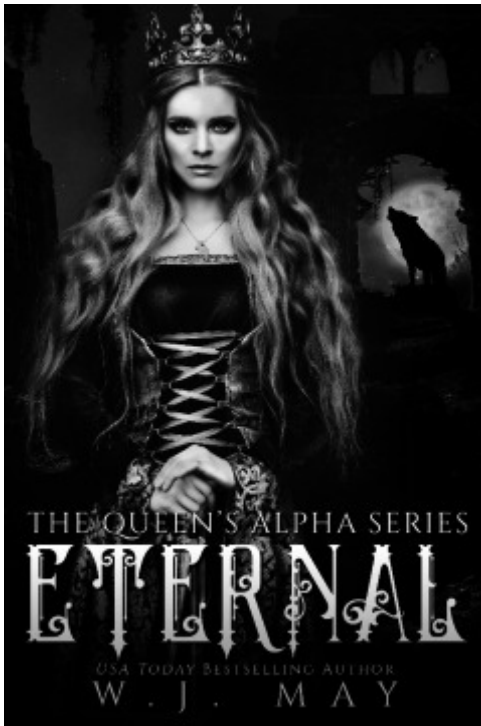


## Book 1 Eternal

THE QUEEN'S ALPHA SERIES

# ETERNAL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
W . J . M A Y





## ETERNAL Blurb:



When the king is murdered, his only daughter, Katerina, must flee for her life. She finds herself on a strange and dangerous path. Alone for the first time she's forced to rely on her wits and the kindness of strangers, while protecting her secret at the same time.

Because she alone knows the truth. It was her brother who killed the king. And he's coming for her next.

Alone and struggling she finds herself an instant target, until a mysterious protector comes to her aid. Together, and with a collection of the most unlikely friends, the group must navigate through an enchanted world just as fantastical as it can be deadly. But time is not on their side.

With her brother's hired assassins closing in at every turn, Katerina must unlock a secret that's hidden deep inside her. It's the only thing strong enough to keep the darkness at bay.

Can she find the answers she needs? Will she ever take her rightful place on the throne?

Only one thing is certain...she's running out of time.



## Chapter 1

The girl stood at the window, staring bleakly into the world beyond. There was nothing but darkness as far as the eye could see. A land blanketed in shadow, a night without stars.

Only a single light penetrated the endless gloom. A flaming beacon shining on a distant hill.

Even from miles away, she could see its brightness. The wild flames stretched up into the heavens, lighting the countryside around them and flickering in her eyes. Even so far away it was impossible to miss, and even without anyone saying a word the girl knew exactly what it meant.

*My father's dead. The king is dead.*

The flames whipped even higher in the midnight breeze, and she took a sudden step away from the window. Her crimson hair spilled in rivulets down her chest, and despite the shadows all around her eyes shone bright in the darkness. Shimmering with the weight of a thousand tears. Gazing out the frosty pane of glass with a sadness that knew no words.

He was a hard man, her father. But he was her father nonetheless. And over the years, time had softened him. His children had softened him. He wasn't as hard as he once was. There was a lightness beneath the weight of the crown. At times, he seemed almost ready to smile.

"We've got to go, milady!" A sharp whisper cut through the silence, breaking the girl out of her spell. "We can't stay here anymore!"

The girl blinked several times, forcing herself back to the present, then turned to look at the cluster of frightened women standing at the foot of her bed. Despite the late hour, they were all fully dressed. It was an ingrained instinct, one that had travelled to even the highest levels of the land. If you wake up to a scream in the night, the first thing you do is put on your shoes.

"You're right..." She swept through the center of them, moving strangely, as if she was in some sort of dream. "I need to pay my respects to my father..."

The women exchanged a frantic, helpless look as she groped around in the darkness, reaching for her coat. Less than a second later an ominous rumbling shook the very ground they were standing on, followed by a series of distant screams.

“Milady, you don’t understand.” The bravest of the women stepped forward, reaching tentatively to catch her hand. “There isn’t time—”

At that moment the door burst open, and the women fell back with a shriek. The girl looked up in a daze as a tall man strode into her bedchamber. A man who had weathered a hundred battles and had lived to see nights like this before. A man she had known all her life.

“The king is dead,” he announced with no preamble.

Although the beacon had told them as much, the women gasped and clustered together. The girl merely glanced at the beacon outside. Her thoughts were jumbled and made no sense. A chaotic parade of random memories, nonsensical and ill-timed. Each one hurrying to replace the last.

*This is the man who taught my brother and me to ride when we were just children. My father is dead. I wonder what kind of magic sets the beacon on fire. My father’s dead. I must remember to tell the groom to have my horse saddled in the morning. My father is dead.*

When he received no response, the man glanced nervously at the women gathered behind her. They shook their heads, at a similar loss, and he tried again.

“Your Highness...your father is dead.”

Her eyes flickered up to his rain-soaked hair, wondering vaguely at the smear of blood on his face, before she nodded robotically, pointing back to the window. “Yes, I saw the beacon. I was just gathering my things to go pay my respects—”

“You don’t understand!” A wave of panic tightened his voice, as if they were running out of time. “He didn’t just die, milady, he was killed. Killed by a dagger to the heart. This dagger.”

He reached inside his coat and pulled out a shining blade, pressing it firmly into her hands. A tiny jewel was missing from the left hilt, and a steady stream of crimson was dripping onto the floor.

For a moment, she simply stared. Then a jolt of delayed shock rocketed through her body.

...*Kailas?*

“No.” She held the blade away from her body, as if proximity alone could fight back the dark truth that was settling upon her. “No, this isn’t... it isn’t true. I know what you all must be thinking, but it isn’t true. It can’t be.”

The man bowed his head, staring down at her with unspeakable sympathy.

“It’s the prince’s blade, milady. And he used it himself. I was there.”

She shook her head back and forth, letting the knife fall from her hands as she backed all the way to the window. “There has to be some kind of mistake. *Kailas*...*Kailas* wouldn’t do this. He would never hurt our father—”

“He *killed* your father,” the man interrupted urgently. “And he’s coming for you next.”

The room seemed to get smaller and smaller as her eyes zeroed in on the blade. She was there the day their father gave it to him for Christmas. He’d broken it the very same night. Smacked it so hard against a suit of armor that one of the jewels had fallen out of the hilt.

“You need to leave the castle, milady. You need to—”

*“I’m not going to run!”*

The words echoed in the room, strong and fierce, freezing everyone inside to sudden stone. They came from a place deep inside her. A place she was only just beginning to understand herself. But as the beacon flickered in the glass behind her, it was as if the flames had jumped inside her body as well. Shock and fear gave way to anger. Anger and a fiery resolve. A demand for justice.

“I will not run,” she repeated, her eyes locking on her brother’s bloodied blade. “The castle is my home. The throne is mine by right. I will fight for what is mine.”

It was a rousing speech. But one that was ended by just a few simple words.

“Then you will surely die.”

All the women in the room turned to look at the man for the first time. He was tall and strong—even for a knight. But tired. Tired in a way the girl had never seen before.

“Everything that’s happened tonight, your brother has been planning for months.” His eyes flickered to the door as the chaos and clamor engulfing the castle began to get closer. “The guards are dead. The nobles loyal to you and your father are away from court. You have no allies.”

The girl shook her head, her crimson curls ablaze in the fiery torchlight. “But the answer can’t be to steal away in the middle of the night! There has to be a way—”

“*Katerina.*”

The name stunned her senseless, stealing the words right off her tongue.

Growing up as a member of the royal family, the rules of the court were clear: First names were reserved for family. *Only*. If anyone else dared to speak them, they would be put to death.

But death was exactly the game they were playing here. That’s what he was trying to say.

“You *need* to run.”

Their eyes met for a second more. Just a second, but it was enough to change everything. A wave of sudden resolve rushed over her as she dropped the fancy coat she was carrying and reached for a travelling cloak instead. The man nodded and rushed back down the hall—assumedly to buy her as much time as he could—while she turned to her ladies.

“You will not be coming with me.”

A small outcry followed the words. As frightened as the women were, they were fiercely loyal at the same time. Proud to stand next to their mistress to the bitter end.

“What are you talking about?” The woman who’d grabbed her before made to do so again, unwilling to let her go. “Of course we’re coming—”

“You all have husbands here at court. You have family in the village.” Katerina shook her head, wrenching her arm away. “They’ll use those people against you, and I won’t have the blood of your families on my hands. You’ll stay here and accept my brother’s rule. I command it.”

“But milady—”

“I *command* it.”

The two women locked eyes for the briefest of moments. A silent, heartbroken exchange passed between them as they reached out and

squeezed each other's hands. Then another explosion shook the foundations of the castle, and everyone sprinted out of the room.

The women ran one way. Katerina ran another.

Now that she was out in the open, away from the sanctuary of her private chambers, it was easy to see that things were not as they should be. The halls were lit with torches, not tapers, and hardly three seconds could pass before the stones would echo with a chilling scream.

Katerina raced along in the shadows, moving as quickly as she could. Since she couldn't be certain of who her brother had rallied to his side, she would be forced to trust no one. Forced to steal away from the castle and out into the darkened world beyond all by herself.

*Just a few months after the most recent rebellion. When the people living in the countryside and villages would just as soon kill me as call me their queen. Perfect timing.*

The sudden sound of footsteps made her freeze in her tracks, and her eyes widened with terror when she saw the tall shadows of armored men stretching up the wall. A silent gasp tore from her lips as she whirled around in a circle, searching desperately for a place to hide. All the doors were locked, and the hallway she'd been fleeing down stretched back for at least fifty feet.

*I'll never make it! I'll never get back the way I came before they round the corner—*

A sudden hand clamped over her mouth, and she choked back a scream. The torches blurred in front of her eyes, and the next thing she knew she was being yanked backwards into a hole in the wall. A hole that hadn't been there just a second before.

"Alwyn?"

She hardly dared to whisper the name, and sure enough, the hand tightened upon her mouth in fierce reproach. Another hand came up in front of them, waving quickly over the gap in the wall, and no sooner had the stones stitched themselves together than a contingent of guards rushed past.

*They're going to my room. They're going to kill me.*

Strangely enough, the sight didn't solicit any emotional response. Perhaps she was in a place beyond emotions now. Perhaps her body had gone into some kind of shock.



"She's not here!" a male voice shouted to the rest. "You, head to the tower. You, go and check the stables. Kailas says we're to bring her back alive."

There it was. Straight from the guard's own lips. Her brother was behind this. Her beloved twin had given in to darkness once and for all.

The hand restraining her disappeared and a flood of feeling rushed back to her face. She reached out a hand to steady herself, but just as she did the stones in the wall disappeared once again and she found herself stumbling out into the hall.

This time, she wasn't alone. A small white-haired man tumbled out beside her.

"Alwyn." She lifted her arms for an automatic embrace, like a child reaching for a security blanket. "I knew it was you—"

"There isn't time." The wizard's brow was knit with fear as he looked up and down the endless hall. "We must go back the way you came. There's a tunnel hidden behind one of the portraits near your room that leads out of the castle. It's your only chance at escape."

*Escape. So even the castle sorcerer sees no alternative. I'm to live in exile.*

She might as well have been speaking out loud. Ever since she was a young girl, the wizard had always been able to read her thoughts. It's what would make her such a good queen, he always said. The fact that she had nothing to hide. That she wore her emotions on her sleeve.

"Yes, dear one, I'm afraid escape is your only option at this time."

He was about to say more, when the sound of footsteps echoed suddenly from up the stairs, freezing them both in their tracks. They stood there a moment, hardly daring to breathe, before he gestured urgently up the hall.

"Come on, quickly now."

With the greatest of haste, they raced back down the stone corridor towards Katerina's bedroom, the hems of their cloaks swishing frantically over the floor. As the guards had already checked her chambers, they didn't run into any trouble. But just as they were racing past her door Katerina skidded to a sudden stop, compelled with an instinct she couldn't control.

"My mother's necklace," she panted, her eyes wide with terror. "I can't leave it!"

Anyone else might have just thrown her over their shoulder but, as usual, Alwyn seemed to understand. His magical eyes flickered towards her room before he nodded sharply.

“Be quick.”

Like the floor itself was on fire, Katerina raced into her room. Only to come to another sudden stop. It had been empty when she left it, but it certainly wasn't empty now. All those women she'd told to flee and submit to her brother's rule, all those women who had grown up with her and Kailas since they were all just children... those women were lying dead on the floor.

It was as if her brother had thrust the blade right into her belly.

She doubled over at the waist, breathing hard through her nose, hands on her knees. They were stacked in a pile on the rug. Her mother's old rug was stained through and through with blood. Little trickles of it were stretching towards her across the floor, and she took a sudden step back. Convinced that if it touched her, she'd give up and join them all willingly.

*“Milady!”*

Alwyn's voice hissed from the corridor. Reminding her of her purpose. Reminding her of the need for haste. A hundred tears streamed down her cheeks but she forced herself to turn away, leaving the mangled bodies behind as she raced towards her bureau. She would grieve for them all in time. But to stop now would be tantamount to death.

Her mother's pendant was hanging where it always was. Shimmering innocently in the moonlight. Oblivious to the fact that the world was crumbling around it.

Katerina froze a moment, her eyes dazzled by the otherworldly glow. Then she snatched it off its hook and looped it over her head, stuffing it deep down under her nightdress.

The familiar weight of it was an odd comfort as she left the chamber of corpses behind and sprinted out into the hall to meet Alwyn. As was the heat. For no explicable reason, the necklace had always seemed to create its own heat. It burned comfortingly against her chest as she and the wizard took back off down the hall, coming to a sudden stop in front of a portrait hanging at the end.

“This?” Katerina asked incredulously, staring up in disbelief. “This is my escape?”

It was an old painting, one that had been commissioned when she was just three or four years old and had hung in the hallway ever since. A painting of the prince and princess posing together in front of the royal throne. Each child was holding onto a different armrest.

Alwyn gazed up at the painting for a moment, then shook his head with a sigh. "My dear, the universe is nothing if not ironic."

Another explosion shook the very foundations of the castle as he grabbed one side of the frame and pulled it with all his might. There was a quiet groan then the painting creaked open like a door, revealing the dark passageway just beyond. Both he and Katerina stared into the shadows with wide eyes before she took a step forward, and he took a step back.

"You're not coming with me?!" she asked in alarm, clutching the necklace.

He tried to take a step forward, then suddenly stopped—like a dog that had reached the end of its leash. "This is as far as I go, Katy. I am bound to the castle by the same magic that runs in my veins. I can take you no further."

*...then I am going to die.* Katerina shrank back in terror, but he grabbed her by the hand. A rush of heat sprang up between them before the princess jerked away, rubbing her palm as though she'd been burned.

"A simple spell," Alwyn panted, "and my parting gift. As long as the magic holds, no one will be able to track you. Head east. Put some distance between yourself and the castle. With any luck, the incantation will last until then."

Katerina paled, glancing over her shoulder at the shadows beyond. "And if it doesn't?"

He didn't answer, he simply took her hand. "Keep to yourself, and don't stop moving. You'll be a thousand times easier to find if you try to settle down. And whatever you do, never trust a shifter. They are loyal to the crown."

*But I am the crown. At least... I'm supposed to be.*

His arms opened wide, ready for the final embrace, but just as the two were leaning towards each other a sudden chorus of shouts exploded at the far end of the hall. Instead of embracing her Alwyn pulled away instead, shoving her roughly into the tunnel.

“Run, Katerina! Run until you can’t run any more... then keep running!”

Just like that, the painting swung shut. Leaving her alone in the dark.



WHEN YOU LIVE IN A place all your life, there ceases to be any mystery to it. Over time you come to know every crack, every shadow. With a bit more artistic talent, Katerina was sure she could draw the castle by hand.

But she would never have known to draw the massive series of tunnels beneath it.

*How can this all be here? And why did no one ever tell me? Do they all just not know?*

She couldn’t believe that Alwyn would send her down into the earth if there was a chance her brother could follow. And she couldn’t believe that her father had known anything about the subterranean labyrinth either. Their castle had come under siege many times before. Never once did he send people down to guard the entrances to the tunnels. The entire castle must not have known.

*Ignorance is bliss. This place feels like death.*

After stumbling a while over the jagged ground Katerina slowed her pace down to a walk, wrapping her arms tightly across her chest. How it could possibly be summertime in the world above, she would never know. The tunnel was absolutely freezing, but not in a way that she recognized. Not in a way one could simply shrug off and soldier on. The cold seemed to have a life of its own. Creeping down off the walls and reaching through her skin. Entering her body with every shivering breath as it burrowed its way down into her very bones.

She wished she was wearing more than just her nightgown under her thick cloak. She wished that she had enough courage to light a torch, to fight the cold and guide the way. But the image of her murdered ladies flashed before her eyes, and all those thoughts were put to rest. Instead, she simply gritted her teeth and continued walking. She would come back out into the real world soon enough. And when she did, chances were she’d be longing for the tunnel.

Time ceased to matter. The outside world couldn't manage to touch her so far beneath the ground. Each breath was memorialized with a frosty cloud, and each step pounded to the rhythm of the silent mantra, looping over and over in her head.

*My father is dead. My father is dead. My father is dead.*

The only comfort she had was her mother's pendant, but even that seemed to diminish so far beneath the castle walls. What had once been a strong, pulsing light had faded to the burn of an ember, and the heat that had once kept her so warm had turned to bitter ice.

She shivered again and pulled the hood of her cloak up over her crimson hair. Any moment now, she would be coming up on the moon-drenched lawns that surrounded the castle. The cloak was a good start, but her bright hair would be a dead giveaway. No one else in the kingdom had hair of such an unusual hue. She was known for it far and wide. Like her mother before her.

Sure enough, no sooner had she thought the words than the ground suddenly rose in a sharp incline. She crept up the rough stone, careful not to make a sound, and came to a stop in front of a thick wall of holly.

*Holly? There is no holly on the castle grounds.*

Her outstretched hand froze just inches away from the pointed leaves.

*No...but there is holly in the forest.*

For the first time since awakening to the beacon, her face lit with the hint of a smile.

*Alwyn, you're a genius.*

Like a person emerging from a grave Katerina clawed her way through the thick underbrush, fighting back tears as the serrated leaves tore at her skin and tangled themselves in her hair. Her fingernails ripped to shreds as she battled for every inch of ground, staining the path behind her with smears of royal blood. It was exhausting work—and still, she was in darkness.

But then, just as she was on the verge of giving up, a sudden ray of light pierced through the branches, into the tunnel. Her eyes locked onto it hungrily, starved of its comfort for too long, and she redoubled her efforts. Just a few minutes later, she was standing on dry ground.

Shaken. Exposed. But free, nonetheless.

And that's when she heard them. Her brother's hell hounds. Racing through the woods.

"No!" Her hands clapped over the mouth, but the damage was done. Her gasp was barely louder than a whisper, but the dogs were meant to hunt and kill. They would surely have heard it.

Without a second thought, she took off at a dead sprint. Flying over the forest floor as fast as her feet would carry her. Running in a straight line, away from the sounds of the massive beasts.

She ran past the brook where Alwyn had taught her to fish as a child. She ran past the giant maple tree that she and Kailas had played under as children. One by one, her childhood haunts flew past in a moonlit blur. Each more fleeting than the last. Each one staying in her mind for just a fleeting moment before getting lost in the darkness beyond.

Would she ever see them again? Was this goodbye?

A bloodcurdling howl echoed through the trees and she picked up the pace. Leaping over a shallow ravine. Tearing her way through the blackberry brambles beyond. Her feet hardly made a noise as they skimmed over the mossy forest floor; fast as she was, she knew it was no use.

There was no escaping a hell hound once it was on your trail. The only solution was to hide.

Hide, and pray that it would never find you.

There was another howl as she scrambled up the side of a hill, and then promptly tumbled down the slope just beyond. She cracked her head against a giant hollowed-out log on the canyon floor then promptly crawled inside, staring through a crack in the wood with wide, terrified eyes.

Not two seconds later, a hound emerged. Bigger than a wolf. And far deadlier. It sniffed the wind, then let out a fearsome cry. A moment later, it was joined by its brother.

Romulus and Remus. Mythological siblings who turned on each other. How appropriate.

Together, the giant beasts searched the little canyon. The thick fur on their shoulders standing up. Their savage yellow eyes piercing the starless night.

A dark abomination of the animal world, hell hounds were bred in the shadows beneath the mountains on the outer rim of the kingdom. Nothing but bloodlust and destruction in their veins.

Her father had banned them outright. Anything that was born so far within the badlands wasn't allowed entry into the kingdom. But he could never manage to say that to Kailas, especially near the end. When the puppies had first come to the castle, their tiny fangs dripping with the blood of a freshly killed rabbit, her brother had been delighted. Since then, the trio had been inseparable. The beasts followed the prince wherever he went, dogging his every step.

The wind picked up through the trees and the dogs sat back on their haunches, noses pointed towards the moon. A feral snarl rumbled out of Remus' chest, curling his lips back from his teeth as he rotated slowly around and zeroed in on the fallen tree.

Katerina cringed away from the light, clutching her mother's necklace as she leaned as far away as she could into the log. One wrong move and the dogs would tear apart the tree like it was an unfortunate plaything. Her body would not be far behind.

As Romulus picked up another trail leading out of the canyon, Remus made his way over to the tree. Katerina covered her mouth with her hands, freezing in breathless terror as he lowered his nose to the peep-hole, his foul breath blasting into the hollow log. Another growl rumbled through him, making her heart stutter and skip, and as he opened his mouth—his monstrous fangs gleaming in the light—she found herself offering up a silent prayer.

*If anyone out there is listening...please protect me.*

He lowered his eye to the peep-hole and stared straight at her. Then he walked away.

Katerina's arms dropped to her sides in shock as both hounds took up the fresh scent and disappeared over the ridge of the mountain, vanishing with a final howl at the moon. She was shaking so hard she had to hold onto the tree for balance. And when she finally dared to emerge, the beasts were long gone and she found herself quite alone.

*What? What the... What just happened? I could've sworn that...*

The pendant glowed warm against her skin as she turned her eyes back to the castle.

“Alwyn.”

It seemed his tracking spell had worked after all. Still, she wasn’t taking any chances.

The second she was sure the dogs could no longer hear her, she took off running again in the opposite direction. The wizard had told her to head east, but at this point any direction would do. As long as it was away from the castle, it was fine by her.

So for the rest of the night, Katerina did exactly what Alwyn had told her to do. She ran until she couldn’t run any more... and then she kept running.

It came in bursts—tapering off with exhaustion—then exploding out of her once more. Up one mountain, and down another. Winding through an endless series of trees. Wading her way across river after freezing river, dragging her body back up onto dry land.

By the time the sun peeked out over the tops of the trees, she was lost and disoriented. More tired than she could ever imagine. More shaken than she could possibly withstand. Cold and hungry, stumbling one foot after the other in a sort of bloodshot daze.

It wasn’t long after that she came to the top of a grassy hill. Since she’d been trekking through mostly forested mountains thus far, she could only imagine that she had left the boundaries of the kingdom behind and was in one of the rural provinces that bordered their lands. She had never been so far from home before, and even in the state that she was in she couldn’t help but stare at the picturesque beauty of it all.

Then she twisted her ankle on a loose stone, and went tumbling down the hill.

A thousand cracks and bruises later, she finally hit the bottom. But this time, when she rolled to a stop she didn’t try to get up. The world around flickered and dimmed before she finally gave up the ghost and closed her eyes. Slumping lifelessly into the tall grass. Waiting for death.





"I REALLY DON'T THINK you should be poking her like that, Nixie. It looks like the poor thing's been through enough."

"Oh, what do you care? It's not like I'm hurting anything."

"Would the two of you just give it a rest? Now give her some space. Wait, she's waking up!"

Katerina's eyes fluttered open and shut as she slowly awakened to the world around her. A world that was drenched in sunlight and sprinkled with morning dew. Three bright lights were twinkling in the air above her, and she raised her head weakly, trying to focus.

"I'm just saying she doesn't look much like a princess."

One of the lights dive-bombed the other with a little smack. "Quiet, Beck! She can hear you!"

"Hello?" Katerina's voice trembled as she pushed onto her elbows, squinting painfully into the sun. "Are you...are you talking to me?"

A tiny voice squeaked a startled reply.

"Heavens, she can't even see us! I forgot, we're still small!"

There was a sudden burst of warmth as the three lights hovering in the air grew bigger and bigger, eventually lowering to the ground. It got to the point where they were so bright that Katerina had to look away. By the time she turned back, three little women stood in their place.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness." The woman in the middle bowed, and the other two quickly followed suit. "My name is Marigold. This is Nixie and Beck."

Katerina scrambled back to her feet, staring with open-mouthed shock. "You're...you're fairies!" She had heard of them, of course, but such creatures weren't allowed anywhere near the castle walls. Truth be told, there were rumors that they had died out decades before.

"See?" Nixie's mouth curved up with a little smirk. "I *told* you we're famous."

Beck reached around and smacked her again. "Shut up!"

"Yes," Marigold replied, stepping forward, ignoring the childish scuffle, "we're fairies. And I'm very glad that it's we who found you this fine morning."

"Oh, yes?" Katerina took a step back, nervously pulling her cloak tighter. "And why is that?"

The fairy's eyes warmed to such a degree that her tiny feet seemed to leave the ground. "Because, dear princess...we're going to help you live."



## Chapter 2

Growing up in the castle, things rarely changed from day to day. Royal life was run by routine to such a degree that Katerina honestly couldn't remember the last time anything spontaneous had happened. It was a fact of life, one she'd never really minded before. But one that left her completely unprepared for the events of the last twenty-four hours.

"...which is when I said, of course we have to go! It's the summer solstice! Only happens once a year! But you know kelpies. Once they get an idea in their heads, they're impossible!"

Katerina nodded quickly, trying her best to keep up. Even though the trio of fairies had shrunk down to stand at about three feet tall, they were still making their way over the forest floor without the slightest bit of trouble. The princess, on the other hand, was struggling every other step with her dainty shoes and billowing cloak.

"Of course...impossible," she echoed faintly, wondering why exactly she was following the strange women into the woods in the first place. "And what exactly is a kelpie?"

"What's a kelpie?!" Nixie erupted into a high-pitched explosion of laughter. A sound that chattered her own teeth and made the flowering buds around them open into full bloom. "What's a kelpie, she says! And here I could have sworn that no one who grew up in that castle had a sense of humor..."

"That's *enough*, Nix!" Beck, the darker-haired fairy, sprouted little wings just to circle back around and kick her friend in the back of the legs. "Honestly, with you babbling on like that what's she going to think of us?!"

"Both of you, be quiet!" Marigold never even broke pace, keeping her eyes always on the path ahead. "Don't worry, Your Highness. We're almost there."

Katerina nodded silently; oddly enough, she wasn't worried in the slightest. Yes, she was on the run from her brother's paid assassins in the middle of the forest with nowhere to go. Yes, she was tired and cold, and

hungry enough to consider trying to eat Nixie. But from the moment the fairies showed up in the meadow, a strange sense of calm had settled over her.

She turned ever so slightly to let her eyes flicker over the strange group, soaking in all the fascinating details with a curiosity she couldn't control. Back when she was just a child, there had been books in the nursery about all sorts of magical creatures. Fairies and nymphs, goblins and ghouls. She would look at the pictures for hours, her eyes dancing with wonder as she imagined the fantastical world outside the castle walls. When she got older, those books were not only removed from the nursery but were banned from the castle altogether. Along with all those creatures inside.

Alwyn was an anomaly. The only creature with magic still allowed within the kingdom. Most of the rest of the wizards had been killed off, too powerful for their own good, but the little mage had saved the life of the king while hunting in the woods. Ever since, he'd been welcome inside the castle walls. He was a protector, an advisor—later, a tutor for the royal children. But even so, there were some doors that were never open to Alwyn. And while the castle was the most beautiful gilded cage there ever was, it was a cage nonetheless. Despite his truest wishes, Alwyn could never leave.

“—you talk to me like I'm still a child!”

“—then stop acting like one!”

A little smile crept up the side of Katerina's face, and she quickly bowed her head to hide it.

These fairies were nothing like the ones in the books she'd read. The little twinkling balls of light that floated serenely over the meadows, coming to rest upon every flower. These fairies were like bickering school children. Always a second away from ripping out each other's silky hair.

“I said *enough*,” Marigold reminded sternly, oblivious to the clusters of blossoms that sprung up in her every footprint. “Don't make me come back there.”

Another secret smile. Another stolen glance.

Although they all looked about the same age, Katerina got the feeling that the other two had somehow been entrusted to Marigold. That she was responsible for them, come thick or thin. And although they resembled hu-

mans, albeit tiny humans, it was impossible to miss the whimsical differences that set the two species apart.

To start, the fairies looked like an explosion of color. Nixie had fire-red hair that clashed horribly with her bright yellow dress. Her eyes were a strange amber color that seemed to change depending on the light, and every time Katerina looked at her she seemed to have more and more flowers in her hair. Beck was exactly the opposite. Jet-black hair, vibrant green eyes, and an amethyst gown that trailed behind her on the leaves. She was clearly trying to be mature, but every time the little upstart beside her said something she couldn't resist jumping down her throat.

Marigold was by far the most dignified, but even she was painted head to toe with the fairy brush. Her soft golden curls arched in an unrealistic halo around her round face. Her sparkling blue eyes, while beautiful, were a shade Katerina had never seen. And her dress, wrapped with a golden band around her bulbous body, seemed to change length depending on where she stepped.

All of them were barefoot. None of them was remotely cold.

"Ah, here we are."

Katerina looked up in surprise as Marigold came to a sudden stop in front of a dilapidated shack in the middle of a clearing. The shutters were falling off the windows, the roof was sinking in with rot and mold, and the entire thing was blanketed in a thick layer of cobwebs.

"This is where we're going?" she asked in a low undertone.

Nixie bounced up and down, wearing a wide smile.

"Home sweet home!"

With the caution of one who'd been hunted through the woods by a pack of hellish dogs, Katerina followed them slowly up the front trail. She didn't notice the way the garden came alive behind them. The way the picket fence that surrounded the perimeter sprang up from pieces on the ground and linked itself together, shining with what looked like a fresh coat of white paint. It wasn't until Marigold laid her hand on the door that the princess realized things were changing.

"What the—"

She leapt a step back as the roof popped up into place, sending a layer of dirt and moss flying into the trees. A second later, the crooked shutters

began realigning themselves, coming to frame two panes of glass that were sparkling clean. Like a little dance, everything that had been broken or foreboding about the little cottage fixed itself brand new—all under the orchestration of Marigold's guiding hand. By the time the fairy was finished there was even smoke rising from the little stone chimney, beckoning them all inside.

“There, that's better.”

Without a backward glance the jovial little woman pushed inside, leaving the door open behind her. Beck was quick to follow, and Nixie gave Katerina a friendly push as she skipped inside.

“Like I said... home sweet home.”

Katerina had to duck slightly to get through the little door but she straightened up in a hurry, gazing around the cozy cottage in wonder. It was exactly how she would have imagined it.

Overflowing cupboards stacked with dishes and pieces of china. Garlands of herbs and spices hanging from every corner of the kitchen. Three tiny beds sitting in a garden of flowers in the corner. And a stack of well-worn books piled on a stool by the crackling fire.

“It's...it's perfect.”

She spoke without thinking, then flushed with shame as she realized there were tears in her eyes. As strange as it was, something about being in the happy little home made her suddenly realize that she had lost her own, and the pain of it was almost too much to bear.

Three pairs of hands shot out to help as she sank down onto the nearest sofa, covering her face with her hands and shaking with silent sobs. Her hands were still frozen and smeared with blood, and only now that she was off her feet did she realize that her legs couldn't stand another second.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered, embarrassed to be falling apart in front of the kind women who had welcomed her into their home. “I'm so sorry. I don't know what's come over me—”

“What's come over you is that you've been trapped in a nightmare, dear one.” Marigold stroked her hair away from her eyes, rocking her soothingly back and forth all the while. “I was surprised when the tears didn't start ages ago, back when we first found you.”

"But why are you helping me?" Katerina was almost afraid to hear the answer. "I don't have any money with me. I have no way to pay you—"

"Pay us?" The fairy settled down in the chair beside her with a jolly laugh. "My dear, does it look like we have a lot of use for money? The way we live?"

Katerina's watery eyes again flickered around the little cottage before she shook her head.

"Besides," Marigold continued gently, "what kind of fairies would we be if we didn't help a frightened young girl all alone in the forest?"

"Bad ones," Nixie whispered helpfully.

Marigold closed her eyes with a grimace, then flashed the others a strained smile.

"Why don't you two make yourselves useful? Get our guest something to drink?" As they scampered off, she took Katerina's hands in her own. "At any rate, we might not live inside the kingdom proper but even we were able to see the beacon. And judging by the fact that you're out here, while your brother is in there... I'm guessing you've got quite a story to tell."

Fortunately, she didn't ask to hear it. All she did was give the princess' hands a gentle squeeze. A rush of warmth shot up between them, and Katerina looked down with a gasp.

Gone were the lacerations covering her palms. Gone were the cuts and abrasions lacing their way up her arms. It was as if she'd been wiped clean. Every scrape and bruise, from her toes to the crown of her head, had vanished without a trace, leaving only glowing porcelain skin behind. Even the fingernails she'd broken clawing her way through the holly had been magically repaired.

"How did you—"

"Drink this, my dear."

Nixie and Beck had returned, each one offering a different cup of tea. Only, it was a kind of tea Katerina had never seen before. A sweet-smelling concoction of both purple and blue.

"What is it?" she asked tentatively, taking the first mug.

"That one is for cold," Marigold explained, watching as she took a sip. "It's not something we fairies are highly aware of ourselves, so we keep some on hand for visitors."

It was like stepping into a warm bath. The second the bubbling liquid passed Katerina's lips, a wave of heat blossomed inside her. Starting in her chest and working its way out to her fingers and toes. Her fingers eagerly clutched the cup, and she would have gladly kept drinking forever if Beck had not snatched it back and replaced it after only a few heavenly sips.

"And that one is for sleep."

Marigold answered the question before Katerina could even ask it out loud, and watched as the princess stared uneasily down into the cup. The sapphire mixture sloshed back and forth, sending up a cloud of steam that made her sleepy just inhaling it.

"I'm not sure," she said quietly, nervous in spite of herself.

The fairies had treated her with nothing but absolute kindness from the moment they found her on the hill, and yet she found the idea of letting her guard down in a house full of strangers rather terrifying. Especially with the darkness hunting for her just beyond the flowering walls.

As if on cue, Nixie and Beck melted away into the kitchen as Marigold stroked back the princess' hair again with a motherly hand. She was entirely too forward, too familiar, and yet none of those boundaries seemed to exist in the cottage. Quite the contrary, Katerina found herself leaning into the hand in spite of herself, closing her eyes and savoring every touch.

"I know it's frightening, my dear, but rest assured, no harm will come to you as long as you are in this house. You can sleep easy for the night. We'll figure out what to do in the morning."

The little cup seemed to hum with anticipation, and after one last moment of deliberation the princess threw caution to the wind and swallowed it all in one gulp. In an instant, a feeling of overwhelming drowsiness came over her. Her eyelids started to droop before she'd even set down the mug, and the others were quick to rearrange the cushions as she leaned back onto the couch.

"Thank you..." she murmured, succumbing quickly to the tea's power and the night's fatigue. "All of you. I don't...I don't know what I would have done..."

Her voice trailed off as her eyes fluttered shut. Her crimson hair spilled out over the pillow, and for the first time since she entered the house a look of almost childlike tranquility settled over her lovely face.



The fairies stared for a long moment before Marigold tucked a blanket around her shoulders and waved the others away. They would let her sleep. No doubt, whatever happened tomorrow was going to be just as trying as whatever had happened last night. She might be safe for now, but the three of them couldn't keep away the shadows that chased her forever.

The poor girl was going to need all the sleep she could get...



## Chapter 3

Katerina slept the rest of the day, the rest of the night, and late into the next morning. By the time she finally opened her eyes, stretching sleepily, she had all but forgotten where she was.

“Madge,” she called, lowering her feet to the floor, “could you bring me some—”

She fell off the sofa with a little shriek, landing on the floor in an undignified heap. An inexplicable cloud of pink dust rose up beneath her, and she sneezed loudly, remembering for the first time that she had left the castle far behind.

“Well, look who finally woke up!”

Before she could even push to her feet, Nixie pranced into the house with an armful of flowers. She flashed the princess a quick smile before curling her fingers through the air in a strange cutting sort of gesture. A glass vase appeared from nowhere, rattling on the kitchen counter as the fairy dropped the flowers inside and hurried back to the living room, perching lightly upon the armrest of the sofa as she stared down at her guest.

“What are you doing on the floor?”

Katerina stared up into the fairy’s enormous, curious eyes, and before she knew it she found herself smiling as well. She didn’t understand what her father had meant when he’d told her that all magical creatures were dangerous and not to be trusted. If anything, the young fairy reminded her of girls she’d grown up with at the castle. Spirited, sweet, and entirely too curious for her own good.

“I was checking for mice,” she teased. “So far so good.”

The little fairy erupted into yet another fit of laughter, swelling the blossoms in the vase as she rocked back and forth, clinging onto the sides of the sofa for balance. Her vibrant hair danced in the air around her, then floated up in a little cloud as she hopped down to help Katerina to her feet.

“You know,” she chirped, tugging the princess into the kitchen where a plate of biscuits and milk had been set out on the table, “you’re nothing like

what I imagined a princess would be. To start, you seem to have forgotten your crown.”

Katerina grinned as she sat down at the table, realizing with the first bite that she'd never been so hungry in her entire life. “The queen gets a crown; the princess only gets a tiara.”

“A *tiara*,” Nixie repeated breathlessly, trying out the word for the first time. Her eyes drifted away as she tried to imagine it before darkening with a sudden frown. “Well, then, shouldn't you be getting a crown? Since the king died and everything?”

The princess froze with a biscuit halfway to her mouth as the little fairy clapped a hand over her mouth, as if she could drag the words back inside. Her enormous eyes swelled to an even greater size before she pushed forward with the most awkward conversational segue ever.

“...you want honey with that?”

Katerina stared at her in shock, completely blown away by the fairy's complete lack of filter, and she felt herself warming with another inexplicable smile. “Honey would be great.”

As Nixie danced off to the cupboards to get some, she took a tiny sip of milk—feeling her strength start to return to her, bite by bite. As she chewed, she tried very hard to put things into perspective. Yes, she should be in the throne room right now, kneeling on the velvet carpet as the priest placed the crown upon her head. No, she shouldn't be sitting in a woodland cottage, accepting honey from a winged girl who came up to her waistline.

But you don't get to choose your stars, and she was making the best of the hand that was dealt to her. For now, she was alive. For now, that would have to do.

“You know,” she said through a mouthful of biscuit, “you're nothing like how I imagined a fairy would be either.”

Nixie leaned forward across the table, her eyes wide with anticipation.

“Better or worse?”

Katerina laughed. “Better—much better. Just...different.” She took another bite, dousing the feathery pastry in a spoonful of honey. “To start, I didn't think you'd be able to talk.”

Nixie's little face screwed up in disbelief.

“Not able to talk?! How could people even think—”

The door pushed open and Marigold and Beck swept inside, seemingly oblivious to the handfuls of leaves and twigs that had accumulated in their hair.

“I, for one, think it might be quite a relief,” Marigold said innocently, “if *some* of us were temporarily relived of that particular ability...”

Katerina pursed her lips to hide a smile, but Nixie was confused. She stared between them all for a moment before her face lit with sudden understanding.

“Oh,” she dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “do you mean Beck?”

Before the other fairy’s inevitable retaliation, Marigold sent them both outside. Ordering them to *flower the garden*—whatever that meant—so she could speak to the princess in peace.

“I must apologize,” she said with a sigh as the door swung shut behind them. “We don’t get visitors from foreign parts very often. I’m afraid they’re a little overexcited.”

Judging by the explosion of multi-colored sparks shooting up from the garden, ‘overexcited’ was putting it mildly.

“They’re wonderful,” Katerina said earnestly. “You all are. I mean it. You’ve all been so kind...I don’t really know how to repay you.”

The fairy shook her head dismissively, her golden curls swishing back and forth. “It was our pleasure, Your Highness. There’s no payment necessary. Except...” A very peculiar expression flitted across her face as she looked the princess up and down. “...except to remember. Remember what you’ve seen here. Remember the kindness you were shown.”

Katerina set down her glass of milk, staring curiously at the little woman. “Well, of course I will. I don’t know how I could ever forget.”

The fairy brightened with a beaming smile.

“In that case, it’s time we sent you on your way. It’s already coming up on midday, and we’ll have to get a move on if we want to make it to the village before dusk.”

“Sent me on my way?” Katerina straightened up in alarm, shaken by the sudden change in conversation. “I’d hoped...I’d hoped maybe I could stay here for a few days. At least until I came up with some kind of plan—”

“My dear, I wish you could. But you’re hardly five leagues outside the castle lands. The last thing you should do is linger so close. No, we must get you as far away as we can.”

“But this place is protected,” Katerina argued, her voice rising in panic. “I saw it myself. It doesn’t look like anything to the outside world, until you work your magic on it.”

A strange emotion swept across Marigold’s face. An emotion that made the sun itself seem to dim as she reached across the table and took the princess’ hand with a sad smile.

“You really know nothing of this world, do you?” she murmured thoughtfully, more to herself than to Katerina. “You’re innocent to all this.”

Katerina’s mouth fell open in surprise, but she could think of nothing to say. It certainly hadn’t been the answer she had been expecting, and yet she felt as though all three fairies had been thinking the same thing about her since the moment she arrived.

“There are different kinds of magic,” the fairy continued kindly. “Our magic comes from the light. It’s meant only to make things brighter, do you understand? It wouldn’t do anything to shield you from the darkness that is sure to come.”

The princess’ heart fell as she glumly stared out the window. Come to think of it, she couldn’t see either Beck or Nixie putting up much of a fight against assassins.

“No,” Marigold continued thoughtfully, “you need to be with someone who can keep you safe. Someone who can protect you. Someone who’s done this sort of thing before...”

For a second, all was quiet. Then it was like a light clicked on. Marigold’s eyes lit up with sudden inspiration before settling upon Katerina, twinkling with a knowing smile.

“And I know just the man...”



THE TRIP DOWN TO THE village took the rest of the day, and considering that Katerina had recently trekked over miles of mountains in the

dark, by the time they saw the thatched roofs and stone chimneys of the town square she was dead on her feet.

“Is that it?” she panted as the four of them came to a stop on a nearby hill. “Please tell me that’s it. If it isn’t, I vote that we give up and set up camp right here—”

“That’s it,” Marigold chuckled, staring down at the twinkling lights of the little village. “And the last thing you’re going to want to do is spend another night sleeping out in the cold.”

*Fair point.*

Katerina wrapped her travelling cloak tighter around her and began walking down the grassy incline, until she suddenly realized that the fairies were no longer behind her. In a fright, she turned around to see that they were all standing exactly where they’d stopped at the top of the hill.

“What’s the matter? Aren’t you coming?”

Marigold shook her head, and the others flashed her apologetic smiles.

“I’m afraid not, my dear. Our kind never goes into the village. Not unless we have to.” She tilted her head sagely, as if she was quoting a parable. “Spend too much time in the company of humans, and there’s no telling what nonsense might rub off on you.”

Nixie and Beck made a strange movement, almost as if they were crossing themselves, and Katerina fought the impulse to roll her eyes.

*Spend too much time in the company of fairies, and it’s likely to turn your hair blue.*

“I’ll try not to take offense at that.” She glanced quickly over her shoulder, ears perking up at the distant clamor of the town, a feeling of dread stealing into her chest. “At any rate, can’t you at least walk me down to the village? I don’t...I don’t want to be alone.”

She felt stupid saying it. Like a child who burst into their parents’ room, only to flush and mumble something about having a bad dream. Still, with memories of her brother’s hell hounds still fresh in her mind, it was impossible to hold back the question.

A look of genuine sympathy stared back at her from three affectionate faces, but for the second time Marigold shook her head.

“My dear, this is where we must part ways. But fear not, you will soon be in safe hands.”

Katerina suppressed a sigh, staring down at a folded piece of paper between her fingers.

“You mean with this... Dylan Aires?”

How could they just send her off with someone she didn't know? With someone whose whereabouts they didn't know? They simply said the best place to start looking was at the local bar.

Nixie and Beck exchanged a quick look, while Marigold gestured almost sternly to the paper in her hand. “You be sure to give that to him. No matter what, make sure he reads it.”

*My entire life depends on whether a drunken stranger reads a fairy's secret note. Typical.*

“I will.” Katerina folded the note and tucked it into her cloak. “And I really can't tell you enough how grateful I am for your help. All of you.” Her eyes swept over each one in turn, misting over with an emotion she couldn't control. “It's a kindness I'll not soon forget. I promise.”

Nixie and Beck lit up with matching grins, while Marigold took a step forward. Despite their comical height difference she put her hand on the princess' shoulders, staring deep in her eyes.

“I may not know what the next chapter has in store, but I do know this: There is no such thing as chance, Katerina. You were brought here for a reason. All you must do now is have the strength and patience to find out what that reason might be.”

*...and find a way to stay alive in the meantime.*

Her fear must have shown in her eyes, because Marigold gave her an extra squeeze.

“Just find Dylan Aires. He'll keep you safe.” She took a step back as the others clustered around her on the top of the hill. “The rest is up to you.”

A sudden bout of drunken laughter echoed up from the canyon below, followed by a shower of sparks as a flagon of ale tumbled carelessly into the roaring bonfire. Katerina's eyes widened as she glanced over her shoulder, staring into the flames, before a sudden panic took hold.

“But Marigold,” she gasped, whirling back around, “what if I can't—”

It was too late. The fairies were already gone.

“—find him.”

Like a deflating balloon, Katerina felt all the hope, and warmth, and security the three little creatures brought with them fade away in the chilly breeze. One second, she had been in a party of four. Protected by magic. Fortified with biscuits. And just like that she was on her own again. Just a lost traveler standing alone in the middle of the night... hoping to find her way in from the cold.

She stared once more at where the fairies had been standing, searching the hill uselessly for even the tiniest lingering glow, before turning slowly back to the village.

By now the sun had slipped completely below the horizon, and the place was coming alive at night. The roaring bonfire was the least of it. One by one, the shops were closing and the taverns were opening their doors. Scores of people—mostly men—were pouring out into the streets. Calling out loudly to one another. Shaking off the hard day's work before heading inside to drink it off for good measure. Hunters were making their way back from the nearby woods with their daily kills, to sell the next day at market. Teams of soot-covered workers were coming back in from the mine. Farmers, burned and beaten by the sun, were finally putting their heavy gloves aside to join the rest of them as they celebrated the end of another long week.

Life had been hard for the villages since the rebellion. Katerina was ashamed to say that her father didn't help. His idea of subduing his subjects was taxing them into oblivion. A policy that had accrued no small amount of resentment from the people whose backs were breaking under its weight. Anti-monarchy sentiment was high, and the more she thought about it the more Katerina suddenly understood the real reason for the bonfire. The real reason spirits were so high.

*The king is dead. His people are celebrating.*

A wave of fear swept over her as she nervously tucked her red hair into her cloak.

*...and his daughter is coming to stay.*

She was almost on the verge of turning around. She was almost on the verge of forgetting this Dylan Aires altogether and setting out on her own. But Marigold was right. She might also have been hopelessly unrealistic, but she was right. If Katerina stood even a chance at making it to see the



next full moon, she needed protection. And in order to get that protection, she needed to go into that town.

“Come on, you little coward, one foot in front of the other...”



DESPITE HER PRESENT state of hysteria, Katerina made the greatest possible effort to compartmentalize those feelings as she marched down the hill and onto the dusty streets of the village. A hundred different dialects, and smells, and strange creatures bustled around in the night beside her, but she kept her face a perfect mask of calm, eyes locked on the road.

Marigold had been right about something else as well: She *was* innocent to the ways of the world. And if she wasn't careful, that innocence was going to get her killed.

“Watch your step!”

She gasped, and leapt out of the way as a wagon full of empty milk bottles went careening past her. The driver turned around long enough to make a very rude hand gesture before turning back to the road, on a race to get to the next village before dawn.

Her heart pounded as she stared down at the giant ruts in the mud—just inches away from where she had been standing just a moment before. Had no one else seen what had happened? The villagers were carrying on exactly as before. Did no one else think it was at all strange that a man almost killed a young woman and then screamed at her in the middle of the street?

*Apparently not.*

After another quick glance around, Katerina decided to take quick action. The longer she was on the street, the more she risked being recognized. She needed to find the tavern the fairies had told her about as fast as possible. Before any other milk wagons went careening her way.

“Excuse me?” She tugged on the sleeve of the safest-looking pedestrian, safe being on a relative sort of scale. At any rate, it was one of the few women. “Have you heard of a place called The Dancing Bear? Do you know where I might find it?”

“The Dancing Bear?” the woman repeated in an accent thick as mud. She looked the princess up and down, not even bothering to hide her judgment. “And why in the world would a young thing like you want to go to The Dancing Bear? Interested in a new line of work?”

Katerina sensed there was something not quite appropriate in what the woman was implying, but she lowered her head politely and gave nothing away. “I’m meeting a friend.”

The woman stared at her a second more, cocking her head down the street. “It’s at the end of the block. Right before you get to the butcher. But I’d be careful if I was you.” She reached out and touched the edge of Katerina’s cloak, smoothing the fine material between her fingers. “All sorts go to The Bear. But I promise, there’s not a soul there who looks like you.”

Katerina’s pulse quickened as she discreetly tugged herself away before the woman could get a better grip. “Thanks, I’ll...I’ll keep that in mind.”

Without a backwards glance, she hurried away. Keeping her head low, and her fiery hair swept carefully out of sight, she headed down the street to the bar.

What kind of place had the fairies sent her to? Did they know about its reputation? And what kind of man could this Dylan Aires be if he made a habit of frequenting such a tavern?

Katerina had the sinking feeling she was about to find out.

Just a few minutes later, she slowed down as the bright lights of the tavern twinkled into view. It looked rather picturesque and peaceful from the outside, but already she could hear the sound of half a dozen drunken brawls going on inside. She froze a moment on the frosted sidewalk, silently debating the risk versus reward, before she decided to put her trust once again in the fairies, took a deep breath, and pushed open the heavy oak door.

It was everything she could have imagined... and so much worse.

Her eyes took a second to adjust to the dim light, then widened to little saucers as she stared out over the extraordinary scene. It was as if the entire magical community had come together under some sort of uneasy truce, and had then proceeded to drink their weight in alcohol.

There were creatures there that Katerina had never seen before. Creatures she only vaguely remembered from the captions and pictures of her

childhood books. Men were laughing with shifters. Goblins were gambling with dwarves. A contingent of brightly-colored pixies was perched on a lantern hung by the stairwell, drinking from little thimbles of nectar, while a massive creature that looked suspiciously like a troll was dancing by himself in the corner.

The noise was deafening. The patrons seemed constantly on the verge of breaking into a fight. It was chaos. Absolute chaos. But no one seemed to mind in the slightest.

In fact, no one seemed to even notice.

Katerina ducked down with a gasp as a bottle of what she hoped was red wine shattered over her head. She was able to dodge the majority of it, and hurried quickly towards the bar, keeping her eyes on the floor and her hands pinned tightly to her sides.

Under any other circumstance, her entrance into such a place would have caused quite a commotion indeed. But the room was in such an uproar that people hardly noticed she'd passed by until she was safely on the other side of the table, her long cloak swishing quickly across the floor.

"What can I get for you?"

The question was fired out almost as soon as Katerina touched the counter. She'd expected the bartender to be the world's burliest man—the sort of person who could serve as an enforcer should the rowdy crowd get out of hand—but what turned around was one of the most beautiful women Katerina had ever seen. Her eyes widened for a moment as her lips parted in shock.

Never before had she seen such a blatant display of sexuality. Red lips, painted eyelids, and a deliberately torn dress that left very little to the imagination.

"Honey, you want a drink?"

On second thought, she didn't know if she'd call the woman beautiful. She was certainly striking, that much was sure. But there was something almost aggressive about the way she presented herself. Something that made the hairs on the back of Katerina's neck stand on end.

She quickly shook herself out of her trance and flashed a polite smile. "No, actually. I was hoping to book a room for the night. Is there a chance I could speak to the owner?"

The woman leaned back, her eyes sparkling with curiosity as she looked the new customer up and down. While she might have been able to hide her fiery hair, Katerina was completely unaware of the other rather obvious differences that set her miles apart.

“Bill!” the woman called over her shoulder, keeping the princess locked in her gaze all the while. “There’s a girl here who wants a room. Doesn’t look the type to rent by the hour...”

There was a tittering of laughter from those who were seated close to them at the bar, but before the flush had even died from Katerina’s cheeks a tall grey-haired man hurried out from a room in the back, wiping his hands busily on his apron as he pulled out a worn ledger.

“A single room, you said?” He hardly even glanced up as he hastened to put on his spectacles. “Just for the night?”

“Yes, I believe so.” Katerina leaned a bit closer, lowering her voice in an attempt for at least a mild degree of privacy. “I’m actually here looking for someone. A man named Dylan Aires.” She paused hesitantly, staring hopelessly across the bar. “Is there any chance you know who that is?”

It was a gamble, saying the name out loud. But by that point, Katerina didn’t know what else she could do. Was she supposed to go around table by table? Canvass the entire bar?

“Dylan Aires, huh?” The curvaceous bartender started cleaning out an empty glass with a grin. “And what could a girl like you want with Dylan Aires?”

“Get back to work, Mika.” The proprietor finished scribbling down in his ledger, then looked up at Katerina for the first time. His eyes did the slightest double-take before he raised his voice, somehow making it heard over the entire bar. “This young woman is looking for a Dylan Aires.” He paused deliberately, eyes sweeping the room. “Is there anyone here by that name?”

There was a sudden hush as the bar abruptly fell quiet. People froze with cards still in hand, with drinks halfway to their mouths. Even the troll in the corner stopped dancing long enough to turn around with the others and look towards the bar.

A second later, all those eyes landed upon Katerina.

*Oh...shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.*

She tried her best to keep steady. Tried her best to meet the horde of probing eyes. It wasn't easy. From the second the man called out the name the entire place had frozen into the world's strangest assortment of statues.

The shifters were looking at her appraisingly, the dwarves were surveying the price of her fancy cloak, a young man in the corner was staring intently over the rim of his glass. And even as she stood there, four pale men with a table full of empty glasses pushed to their feet.

"How about it, folks?" the owner called out again. He was simply teasing her now, already preoccupied with the stack of papers in his hand. "Going once... going twice..."

"I can be your Dylan Aires."

Katerina's eyes shot up in surprise to land on a drunken man standing in the middle of the bar. He was holding a flagon of ale in the air—toasting the very idea—while all around him the icy tension in the room began to thaw and crack.

People relaxed. People started openly laughing. People started calling out, one by one.

"No, let me be your Dylan."

"No one could make a better Dylan than me."

"I'm the real Dylan. Come here, sweetheart, let me prove it to you..."

Katerina's heart fell as the bar slowly came back to life. A few moments and several obscene propositions later, the patrons had all but forgotten about the interruption. Only a few eyes lingered on her curiously, but she was quick to turn back to the bar. It was obvious these people didn't exactly like outsiders. Even if the outsider happened to be a young woman, traveling by herself. If the real Dylan Aires was anywhere in the vicinity he'd no doubt already heard about the commotion down at the tavern, and would be keeping his distance. Marigold's brilliant plan had failed.

Her fingers closed around the note in her pocket as her shoulders fell with a quiet sigh.

*I might as well read it now. Since he'll never be reading it himself.*

She was right about to pull it out and open it, when a cold hand tapped lightly upon her shoulder. Her head snapped up and she turned around in surprise, only to see the four pale men she'd noticed earlier—the ones who'd been sitting around a table full of empty glasses.

“Excuse me, miss?”

Up close, they were even paler than she’d realized. And far more beautiful. Snowy white skin offset with sparkling dark eyes. They each looked somewhat alike, close enough to be brothers, yet there was something entirely different about all four of them. And something not entirely safe.

“Yes?” Katerina pulled her cloak tighter around her, careful to keep her famous crimson hair out of view. She didn’t know if news that the princess was on the run had left the castle, but if it had no young woman travelling alone would be above suspicion. Least of all, someone who looked like her. “Can I help you with something?”

“Quite the contrary.” The man flashed a row of pearly white teeth. “I was rather hoping instead to buy you a drink. Forgive my impertinence, but you seem to be here on your own.”

There was something strange about the way he said it. It was stranger still that his three friends remained silent behind him. And yet, Katerina felt herself drawn to the manner in which he spoke. Growing up in the castle, one learned to speak with a constant degree of formality. A degree that had been distinctly lacking on her journey thus far. It was nice to come across someone with manners. Especially when those manners were directed at her.

“I am,” she said gratefully, “and thank you very much. But I’m afraid I’m going to have to decline. It’s been a long day, and I’d really better get up to my room.”

The man nodded curtly, but didn’t move. Neither did his friends.

“A drink for me, then?”

Katerina glanced quickly between them, growing more confused all the while.

“I beg your pardon?”

The man’s dark eyes glittered with a cool smile as he leaned closer, close enough that she could see the flames of a nearby lantern flickering across his pale face.

“Just a taste—you’ll return to your room unharmed.” His lips curved up in a chilling smile as he made to sweep back the hood of her cloak. “You must admit, you look most inviting...”

Katerina cringed from his touch, her eyes wide with fright, but a second before the man could touch her a figure blurred in between them, knocking his hand out of the air.

“I believe the lady said no.”

The princess and the four strangers whirled around in identical surprise, gawking at the stranger in their midst. It was like he'd come out of nowhere, materializing from somewhere in the shadows. His back was towards her, so she couldn't see his face, but the other men could. And they clearly didn't like what they saw.

“Is that right?” The man who'd been reaching towards her took an instinctive step back, but was far from backing down entirely. Quite the contrary. With his three friends at his back, he seemed frightfully confident of his chances. “I heard nothing of the sort.”

The man leaned against the counter, a picture of ease. Not only did the four-to-one odds not seem to faze him in the slightest, but Katerina could have sworn she saw the hint of a smile.

“Didn't you?” he asked innocently. “It must have been too quiet, as she seems unbearably polite. I believe what she meant to say was, *back the fuck off.*”

For a split second, all pretenses dropped. For a split second, Katerina saw a glimpse of what was about to come. Then the man flashed a bright smile.

“Or something along those lines...”

There was a strange hissing sound as the four friends gathered together. Gone was the pleasant demeanor. Gone were the charming smiles. As the façade finally cracked, Katerina was able to see them for what they really were. Not beautiful—enticing. Not polite—conniving.

A little shiver whispered up her spine as she took a step back, feeling as though she'd dodged a threat she hadn't even seen coming. If only for now. As grateful as she was for his presence, for the life of her she didn't see what chance the man possibly had. Not against four others.

“This hardly seems like a fair fight.” The man who'd propositioned her stepped forward with an oily smile, looking his opponent up and down. “And I don't know if we'll be able to control ourselves once so much of your blood has spilled upon the floor.”

Katerina paled with both fear and confusion, but the man protecting her simply smiled.

“Guess I’ll have to take my chances then.”

For a split second, nobody moved. Then, all at once, the bar was a blur of action.

The princess staggered back with a stifled shriek, clapping her hands over her mouth as she tried to reconcile the impossible scene. One second, her fearless protector had been standing in front of her. The next, he was some sort of mythological warrior come to life. Dazzling her eyes with the blinding grace with which he moved. Sending devastating vibrations up through the floorboards as he felled his opponents, one by one.

The first fool to step forward had his head smashed through the bar. The second was used as an unfortunate weapon to take out the third. And the last man? The man who’d come up to her and started all the trouble to begin with? He received the fiercest treatment of all.

A piercing cry echoed through the tavern as the man broke a glass and held the shards to her attacker’s neck. Katerina watched in horror as the serrated edge trailed across his pale skin, leaving a fine line of crimson in the white. The rest of the patrons went perfectly still, and she was about to look away entirely, when the man suddenly dropped the glass, pointing to the door instead.

“I agree,” he said quietly. “It wasn’t a fair fight.”

For a split second, it looked like the broken man wasn’t going to accept the offer, that his pride would demand he cry to continue the fight. Then one of his companions groaned weakly by his feet, and he whirled around with an angry hiss—sweeping towards the door.

“We won’t forget this,” he swore as the four of them staggered out into the cold. “Not as long as we walk this earth—we will *never* forget this.”

Katerina froze in terror, but her charming savior merely smiled—chuckling quietly as he reached across the bar and poured himself a shot of whiskey. “You know where to find me.”

Bold words. Ones that sufficiently ended the conversation.

Just a second later, the door slammed shut.

A rush of blood poured back into Katerina’s frozen limbs, and she felt as though she could breathe for the first time. Her eyes flickered anxiously



to the back of the man's head, along with the rest of the bar, but he stayed right where he was—quietly sipping his whiskey. A few seconds later, his eyes drifted apologetically up to the owner, who looked back at him with a mixture of intense amusement and frustration. The barmaid joined in with a little grin before her boss leapt up onto the counter, stretching his arms out with a wide smile.

“Why so quiet? This isn't a house of prayer! The next round's on the house!”

The little tavern burst to life again as the fight was forgotten and people started pouring forward to get their free drinks. The man melted back into the crowd, leaving his own glass on the counter, and Katerina was quick to follow, desperate not to lose him in the crowd. She hurried this way and that, wishing desperately that she'd gotten a better look at his face, when a hand came out of nowhere and pulled her gently away from the drunken crowd.

“You were looking for Dylan Aires?”

Katerina stared up in disbelief, only to see a pair of blue eyes twinkling down at her.

“You just found him.”



## Chapter 4

**T**alk about being put on the spot. Considering all the hype and anticipation, now that Katerina was faced with Dylan head on she found herself at a complete loss as to what to say.

To be fair, there was no telling whether she would've been able to speak anyway. In her entire life—through all the royal gatherings and banquets, all the foreign dignitaries and eighteen years of processions—she had never met anyone quite like Dylan.

It was impossible to take your eyes off him.

Despite being dressed like a commoner, there was a strange kind of magnetism to him. The way he looked. The way he moved. Even in stillness, it was impossible to ignore. When he raised his eyes to look at something, other people turned around to see, too. When his lips twitched up in a smile, one felt compelled to discover the reason why—if only to prolong the experience. When he fixed those mesmerizing eyes on Katerina, she felt as though she'd been frozen still.

He had dark hair that swept across his face with an effortless sort of grace, and what her father would only describe as 'well-bred' features. High cheekbones, a strong jaw. There was a masculine sort of ruggedness about him, but an undeniable beauty as well. A beauty that stood out just as much in this filthy bar as did her own. A beauty he seemed determined to ignore himself.

When she simply stood there, at a loss for words, he cocked his head to the side, staring down at her as though there might be something broken in her head.

"...Good talking with you."

Without another word, he turned on his heel and started walking away.

It wasn't until he'd gone back to the bar that Katerina's senses returned to her and she came back to life. "Wait!" She battled her way through the crowd and slid onto the stool next to him, grabbing hold of his sleeve. A pointed look made her carefully retract her hand, but she had no inten-

tion of letting him go a second time. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stare. It's just...*you're* Dylan?"

Looks aside, she had expected someone much, much older. The strong, silent, overly-bearded type. Preferably with a battle-ax permanently affixed to his hand.

Dylan didn't speak again, as he'd already answered the question. He simply inclined his head and stared down at her, waiting for an explanation.

An explanation she was still too shell-shocked to give.

"You...you saved my life." She wasn't quite sure how she knew, but she was suddenly certain that those men had no intention of letting her walk away. That, instead, they had every intention of killing her.

He snapped his fingers for another whiskey, laying a bronze coin upon the bar. "It seemed like someone should."

Katerina blinked, completely stunned by his indifference. But something in her pressed on. "...and you're bleeding."

He glanced down at her for a moment before wiping a smudge off his forehead, looking highly inconvenienced by the whole thing. "You have a brilliant knack for stating the obvious."

*Was he serious?! How was he being so...so casual about everything?!*

She pulled her chair an inch or so closer, hoping that the random men leering at her around the bar would take it as a sign, even though the man in question was far more interested in his drink.

"I saw you sitting in the corner when the proprietor called out your name." She stared at him with wide eyes, trying desperately to latch on to anything she could. "You didn't come forward."

Not only that, but he was clearly *never* going to come forward. He'd glanced up just long enough to see what was going on before returning to his drink—smiling to himself as various creatures started piping up around the bar, claiming to be him.

"I didn't answer because I didn't want to speak to you."

*What?*

She flinched, stung by the blunt honesty. Never in her life had someone dared speak to her that way. Let alone a stranger who was miles beneath her rank. Let alone when she was already on the verge of tears. He saw her reaction and softened a fraction of a degree.

“In these parts, it isn’t exactly wise to answer an open call. You never know who might be looking for you, or why.” A flicker of curiosity danced through his eyes as he made a quick study of her face. “I only say that because you’re clearly not from around these parts.” He finished his whiskey and set down the glass, turning to face her. The chit-chat part of the conversation had clearly come to an end. He wanted answers now. “Who are you? Why did you ask for me?”

Moment of truth. Katerina’s hands curled around the note in her pocket. Did she give it to him right now, in the middle of the busy tavern? And how much exactly was he allowed to know?

The fairies obviously thought he could be trusted, but he only looked a year or two older than Katerina was herself. And, yes, he had technically just saved her life but, to be honest, it seemed like more of an afterthought. Something he merely did on the way to get his drink.

“Well, you see...” She tucked her hair nervously into her cloak, feeling his smoldering eyes burning into her skin. “I mean, the thing is...”

A flagon of ale crashed down on the counter between them, putting an end to her quiet explanation before it could even get off the ground. But the flagon was the least of her troubles.

“Well, well, well! Look who suddenly remembered his own name!”

Dylan and Katerina turned at the same time as Mika, the beguiling barmaid, set down her towel and joined the conversation, positioning herself firmly between the two.

“So, I see you found him.” She winked at Katerina before leaning all the way over the bar, giving Dylan a clear view of her bosom as she flashed him a seductive smile. “And here we were, all prepared to keep your secret till the bitter end.”

Katerina stiffened uncomfortably, discreetly looking away while Dylan chuckled softly.

“Never really thought loyalty was one of your strong suits.”

Mika flashed another smile, pleased with his teasing. “Maybe not, but I have other talents.”

His lips twitched up in a caustic grin. “So I’ve heard.”

Katerina blinked in shock, unable to believe she was hearing what she was hearing. At the castle, people were only as forward as three centuries

of etiquette and a corset would allow, but Mika was on a roll. She leaned down even further, casually reaching for his hand.

"I'd love to show you sometime."

He shifted just as casually away, thoroughly unfazed by her advances. "Sometime. Right now, I'd just like to see you pour."

The back and forth came to a sudden stop. A second later Mika straightened up, staring across the counter in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"Whiskey. Two of them," he added with a nod to Katerina, placing another bronze coin upon the counter. "You drink, don't you, princess?"

Katerina's face went pale as her eyes flashed up in terror. "...why would you call me that?"

A peculiar smile flitted across Dylan's face, while Mika merely rolled her eyes and poured two glasses of the thick, amber liquid. The smell of it saturated the air, burning the inside of the princess' nose as she forced the awkward moment behind them, and held it up for a tentative sniff.

*Holy hells! How can anyone drink this stuff?!*

Her revulsion must have showed on her face, because Dylan chuckled again as Mika shook her head, looking distinctly unimpressed. "*This* is why you're blowing me off? For *her*?"

"Don't be unkind." His eyes danced with amusement as they rested upon the princess. "I'm sure she has a few hidden talents herself."

Mika scoffed as if this was highly unlikely, while Katerina blushed to the roots of her hair. In a desperate attempt to fit in she took a brave gulp of whiskey, fighting back a gasp of shock as her eyes watered involuntarily. It was like swallowing liquid fire. A far cry from the floral wines and sparkling ales of the castle. Whatever was in that cup would be better used resuscitating the dead.

"It's..." she cleared her throat and forced a pained smile, "it's very good."

Dylan's eyes twinkled as he took a sip from his own glass, but Mika's rather limited patience had reached an end. She was unwilling to admit defeat. And she was just as unwilling to let her prize go off with someone she deemed highly unworthy.

"Seriously, how many times are you going to keep saying no to me?" She ignored Katerina completely, plumping her lips out in a sexy pout. "I've got

a room upstairs. You know you want to.” This time she caught his hand, lacing her long fingers through his own.

For a split second, a strange, vacant expression came over his face before he tugged his wrist away with a rueful grin. “What I *want* is to live to see tomorrow morning.”

She stepped back with a playful smile. “Call it a lack of imagination on your part.”

“More like a vested interest in my own self-preservation.”

With a parting grin he pushed to his feet, holding out an arm and gesturing for Katerina to do the same. She quickly followed after him, completely baffled by what had just happened.

“You never know.” Mika cast him a wistful look as the two of them melted away into the crowd, picking up her towel and returning to the glasses. “You might get lucky...”

For whatever reason, the words gave Katerina chills as she followed her unlikely *savoir* to the same private booth he’d already claimed in the back. It wasn’t until she sat down that she realized the strategic advantage of such a position. He was back far enough to have a view of the entire tavern, and close enough to the exit to make a quick getaway if he so desired.

Katerina’s eyes were still lingering on the door, when he cleared his throat quietly, summoning her attention.

“As you were saying—”

“What did you mean?” Katerina interrupted with wide eyes. “That you wanted to live to see tomorrow morning?”

Dylan paused, a little taken aback, before his eyes flickered reflexively to the bar. “Mika’s a succubus. It would be an amazing night, but it would also be my last.”

*Well, that explains it!*

While the succubae were a little too racy for her royal nursery books, Katerina had heard some of the male servants talking about them. Supernatural temptresses who lured men to their deaths by enticing them to bed. They were supposed to be nearly impossible to resist. Even more so if they managed to lay a hand on your bare skin. She didn’t know how Dylan managed to do it.

“But surely she can’t want to kill you!”

Katerina had only observed them for a short time, but despite the dangerous banter there was a playfulness to the way they interacted. She'd even go so far as to say they were friends.

Dylan shrugged good-naturedly, as if these things could seldom be helped.

"It's what she is—you can hardly blame her. Just like you can hardly blame those vampires."

*Oh yeah? Why don't you watch me blame...wait...what?!*

Katerina froze perfectly still, a beautiful statue amidst the frenzy of the bar. "Did you say...vampires?"

Dylan took a swig of whiskey, staring at her over the rim of the glass. Unable to decide whether or not she was joking. In the end, he decided to take her at her word.

"What did you think they were—men? And honestly," he gestured to her with a careless wave of his hand, "what did you expect?"

"Excuse me?" Her eyebrows shot into her hair as she bristled defensively. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? I should *expect* to get attacked, just because I'm a woman on my own—"

"You're covered in blood."

Well, *that* stopped her in her tracks.

At first she just stared at him, convinced that she must have misheard. Then a couple of things started clicking into place. The glass that had broken over her head when she'd first walked through the door. The one she'd hoped was red wine. The way the four pale men had stood up the second they laid eyes on her, sniffing the air eagerly as they wound their way through the crowd.

*A drink for me, then,* the vampire had said. *Just a taste.*

Katerina reached up to touch the damp hood of her cloak in horror.

*Well, no wonder! It's like walking around with a giant 'EAT ME' sign around my neck!*

"You could always take it off," Dylan said casually, gesturing to the slick fabric. "Unless you're going for the whole goth-chic look. In which case, you're taking it a bit too seriously."

Instead of taking his suggestion Katerina pulled the cloak tighter around herself, glaring at the beautiful man with growing dislike. “Is everything a damn joke to you—”

“Why were you looking for me?”

There was no preamble. No wind-up to give her any warning. People living on the outskirts of the kingdom had learned long ago to dispense with wasted words. They cut to the core of a matter. No pretenses. No delays. Just the cold, hard truth.

Still...she didn't know exactly what to say. It was no ordinary secret she was carrying. It was the kind of secret that could topple an empire. The kind of secret that could get her killed.

After a second of waiting, Dylan shifted impatiently. “All right, let's start with something easier. Why don't you tell me your name?”

*Crap...not easier at all.*

Katerina blanched, her mind racing as she simultaneously blanked on every single human name. When those didn't work, she decided to go with an inhuman one. “Marigold.”

Dylan leaned back in surprise, his sky-blue eyes taking in every detail of her face. It was clearly not the answer he'd been expecting. “Your name is—”

“Marigold sent me to find you. She seemed to think that you could help me.” Katerina fumbled quickly in her pocket, pulling out the note. “Here. She said to give you this.”

He didn't reach for the note. He didn't even acknowledge it. It lay on the table between them. A silent invitation.

One he clearly had no intention of accepting.

“Marigold sent you to find me,” he repeated slowly, testing out the words for truth. When Katerina only nodded his eyes narrowed slightly, fixing with unnerving intensity on her face. “Well, if you met Marigold, then I take it you met her sisters, Freya and Nair.”

“Nixie and Beck?” the princess answered, rising to the challenge. “Yes, we've met.”

He gave a slight nod, temporarily satisfied. But still, he had yet to even look at the note, and Katerina's skin had broken out in a cold sweat. Finally, after a full minute of silence, he took a swig of his drink, hardly blinking as



the aged whiskey burned down his throat. "So why is Marigold under the impression that you need my help?" he asked bluntly. "I'm assuming you're in some kind of trouble."

An image of her brother's hell hounds flashed through her head, and Katerina stifled a shudder. Trouble? Yeah, you could say that. She almost felt guilty bringing it to his door. "The thing is, I've sort of...run away from home." She hesitated nervously, editing on the fly. "My family will have sent people after me, the kind of people who make those vampires look tame, but I can't go back. No matter what happens...I can't go back."

She'd tried to keep her voice as steady as possible. Tried to ignore the hell hounds, and the frightening tavern, and her blood-soaked clothing. She tried to tune it all out and simply force herself to keep pushing forward. But after everything that had happened...it was a lost cause.

A visible tremble shook her shoulders as the tiniest sigh escaped her lips. It was a sigh of pure exhaustion. As defeated as it was resigned.

Dylan didn't miss a thing.

His eyes swept over her with growing curiosity. Curiosity, and another emotion that was harder to identify. Was it sympathetic? Was it protective? For a split second he glanced down, and it looked as though he was going to pick up the note right then and there. But a stronger, more practiced, side of him held back. The side that had learned to keep his head down and mind his own business. The kind that had learned the hard way not to get tangled up in the troubles of strangers.

Instead, he stalled for time. Rehashing the facts. Getting the full sum of the story.

"So I take it you ran away from home straight into Marigold's arms? And you've been hiding out from these familial repercussions ever since?"

Katerina nodded quickly. It was obvious there were quite a few gaps in her tale, but if he was going to be gracious enough to overlook them she certainly wasn't going to press. "Yes, that's right."

There was a slight pause before he broke her gaze and looked down at the table.

"And she sent you to me?" A faint smile ghosted across his face before he drained what was left of his whiskey, muttering under his breath. "Interfering, self-important fairies..."

By now, Katerina was on the edge of her seat. Hardly daring to move. Hardly daring to breathe as she watched his every move. Waiting to see what he would do next. “So...does that mean that you’ll—”

“Sorry, princess. Can’t help.”

In a brisk movement he was up from the table, leaving the whole dismal story behind him as he headed for the door. He’d left the note, too.

Katerina stared after him in shock. Unable to believe it was true. Unable to believe that the fairies could be so wrong. That their hometown hero was leaving her to fend for herself. It took a second for her to find her feet. For her to snatch up the note and race after him.

“Wait!” She pushed open the heavy door and ran out into the street. By now, the full moon had risen high above the little village and a gust of frigid air hit her right in the face, stunning her senseless. She squinted her eyes as she tried to find him in the dark.

It wasn’t easy. Unlike the bright colors and opulent shades of the castle, everything here seemed to be in earth tones. Worn creams. Dirtied browns. Dark, weathered boots. It wasn’t until he passed under the light of a distant store front that she saw him again striding purposefully into the night as the moon streaked silver into his dark hair.

She took after him without a second thought. Tearing down the middle of the road. Pushing past whatever scattered pedestrians were still left on the street. Hardly noticing anything going on around her, until she’d shoved him in the back as hard as she could.

“What the he—” He whirled around in surprise, but by that time she’d already recovered her balance. And her anger.

Her arms were folded tightly around her chest, and her eyes flashed pure fire as they burned into him in the dark. “So that’s it?!” she demanded. “You’re just walking away?!”

He blinked incredulously. “Did you just *push* me?”

She pushed him again. “Like it never even happened! Like we never even met!”

He stumbled backwards in surprise, staring down at her ineffectual hands. “What are you—six?”

“I will NOT make any apologies!” she shouted. “I am fighting for my LIFE!”

He stared at her in shock for a moment before recovering himself, smoothing down his disheveled clothes and raking his fingers through his hair. "And I wish you the best of luck with that. But it's not going to involve me."

He tried to turn again but she grabbed his arm, pulling with all her might. For a moment, he merely stared down at his sleeve, both astonished and exasperated at the same time. Then he seemed to take pity on her and reluctantly turned back. Either that, or he didn't want to rip his coat.

"So the fairies were wrong to trust you," she spat, channeling every bit of misdirected rage into a single moment, onto a single target. "You're not a savior, you're just a drunk."

He opened his mouth to answer, but seemed to think better of it. There was something too desperate about her to challenge. Something too dependent to engage. Instead, he merely agreed with a tip of his head. "That's me. Just a drunk. And I'd best be getting home."

She threw up her hands with a bitter laugh—all the fears and emotions of the last few days catching up as hysterical tears began pouring down her face. "Of course you should! Please, don't let my impending death keep you from any of the fascinating things I'm sure you had planned for the evening. Mucking out the stables, feeding the pigs..."

His eyes flashed as they glanced about the darkened street before he reached out suddenly and grabbed her arm. The tears stopped immediately as she stared up at him in terror. She knew this man could fight. She knew this man could kill. And here she was, yelling at him in the middle of the street, giving him every possible motivation to do exactly that.

"Three things."

While he was clearly just as incensed as she, he didn't raise his voice to make it known. He lowered it instead. Speaking in a dangerously soft clip.

"First of all, you don't know a thing about me or my life. So keep your delightful opinions to yourself. Second, no one in this world is under any obligation to help you. Do you understand? You chose to leave, that's it. You're on your own. Simple as that. Don't go around expecting a hand up, because that's just not the way things work around here."

He released her arm just as abruptly as he'd grabbed it, leaving her trembling and shaken in its wake. The reality of her situation was beginning to

settle upon her but, strangely enough, she didn't blame him in the slightest. He was right—he was under no obligation. Nothing that had happened had anything to do with him, let alone was his fault. He was just a man whose name she'd heard from a trio of lunatic fairies. The nightmare? The men chasing after her in the night?

Those were hers to deal with alone.

“What's the third thing?”

He looked down in surprise at the sudden change of her tone. The lifeless sort of resignation that dulled her sharp words. It was as if a light had gone out. One that wouldn't rekindle.

“Excuse me?”

Her eyes glassed over as she stared blankly into the dark, hardly aware of what she was saying. “You said there were three things, but you only said two. What's the third?”

For the first time all night, the hint of an apology flashed across his handsome face. It was obviously a feeling he wasn't accustomed to, and it didn't linger long. But it was there for a moment.

“You might want to rinse off some of that blood. Can never be too careful in these parts.”

Their eyes met for a fleeting moment before she took a step back. The roaring bonfire had simmered down to coals, and her time in the tiny village had come to an end. In the morning she'd be leaving, for better or worse. Her lips twitched up in a lifeless smile as she nodded in farewell. “Thanks for the tip.”

Before he could open his mouth to respond, she was already walking away. Sparing not a glance behind her. Keeping her bloodshot eyes locked on the shadowy road. When she was about halfway back to the tavern, she rifled around in her pocket and tossed the note from the fairies onto the street. She wouldn't be needing it. Not anymore.

*Just one night, then you'll leave this place behind. Just one night, then you'll start off someplace new.*

Little did she know the night was just getting started...



## Chapter 5

The room Katerina booked for the night looked like something she'd find in the servant's corridor back at the castle. A simple cot. A rickety dresser. And a thick taper sitting on the windowsill to allow for light. On second thought, it was more like a room she'd find in the stables.

Nevertheless, she locked the door quickly and sank down into the center of the sagging bed, glad to be away from prying eyes no matter the circumstances. Although she'd only left the fairies a few hours before, and had only left the castle a few days before that, she felt as though she'd been running for as long as she could remember. Running and looking over her shoulder. Terrified as to who might be running after her. Petrified as to who she might see.

With an exhausted sigh, she pulled off her cloak and settled down beneath the threadbare comforter, ignoring the pieces of straw that poked through the mattress. She quickly added the cloak as a secondary blanket, vowing to clean off the blood first thing in the morning.

*Can never be too careful in these parts...*

Dylan's words echoed back to her as she lay there in the dark, a chilling reminder that the real world was nothing like her childhood storybooks. That life had grown harder, and the people had hardened with it. There were no heroes or happily-ever-afters. Empathy, optimism, and the belief in miracles had long since died. The most people wanted now was to simply survive.

And she must become one of them.

With another shaky sigh, she blew out the candle and closed her eyes. Praying she wouldn't dream. Praying she would simply fall asleep.

But it wasn't meant to be.



*CRASH!*

Katerina's eyes shot open with a gasp as the wooden door to her room was kicked clean off the hinges. The blinding light of a dozen torches came pouring in, and before she could make sense of what was going on—before she could even identify her attackers—she was being lifted straight out of bed and dragged down the stairs. Her bare feet knocked painfully against the steep steps, and by the time she reached the ground floor she finally caught her breath enough to let out a scream.

But a single scream was all she got.

The second she cried out, she was struck over the head with something heavy enough to leave her in a daze. Her eyes fluttered open and shut, and her head dropped weakly to the side as she was carried out of the tavern and into the freezing night.

“What...” she murmured weakly, trying to stay awake. “What’s going on—”

There was a sharp slap, and her world darkened once more. It didn't come back into focus until she was suddenly dropped onto the wet street. She lay in a daze, staring up at her attackers.

...not that she had to look up too far.

*Dwarves?*

She couldn't believe it. As the world blinked slowly back into focus, she found herself face to face with the same group of creatures she'd seen earlier in the tavern. The ones who were greedily eyeing her fancy travelling cloak. At the time, she'd been too preoccupied with far more immediate concerns to give them much thought. But now, it was easy to see that this was their plan all along.

Fortunately, they cared not for her. Only for her money.

“You'll speak when you're spoken to!” The same dwarf who had slapped her raised his hand in warning. He did it once, he'd do it again. “Until then—you'll keep quiet!”

“Yes, but we need her to speak,” another dwarf grumbled under his breath, one hand fiddling nervously with his long beard. “To tell us about her relations.”

There was an awkward beat of silence as everyone froze.

“Yes, I was just getting to that!” the first dwarf snapped defensively, glaring down at the fallen princess as if it was somehow all her fault. “You, girl, tell us about your family!”

*My family?*

Katerina went pale as ice, knees curling into her chest as she stared up at the ring of little men circling her. They weren't much to look at from afar but she knew now that, despite their size, they possessed unnatural strength. And the fact that they were asking about her family—

How could they have possibly guessed? What could they possibly know?

“My...my family?” she stuttered, staring helplessly around the ring. She was on the verge of making a run for it but they had her completely surrounded, and she had the sneaking suspicion the little bastards were a lot faster than they looked. “What do you mean?”

“What do you *think* he means?” A dwarf with a giant ear-horn spat on the ground as the tiny fellow hovering near his elbow glanced nervously down the street. “Where do your people come from? How many of them are still alive? How are we to get in contact?”

Katerina flinched at from his tone, but she was still at a complete loss. Not only did she have no idea what they were trying to get at, but she was understandably a little distracted by the deadly collection of weapons the gang was wearing on their belts.

A man wielding what looked like a pick-ax was especially intimidating.

“I'm sorry...get in contact?” She looked from one to the next in a panic, trying desperately to understand. “Why would you want to—”

“Do you not get what this is, lady?!” The dwarf who'd spat on the ground before took an angry step forward, waving his little arms. “We intend to ransom you! Clothes like this means you obviously come from money, and since you're travelling alone I'm willing to bet that whoever lost you would be willing to pay a lot of money to get you back! Honestly, are you *stupid*?!”

He hit the side of his head so hard that the ear-horn popped right out.

The rest of the dwarves stared down at it, but said nothing. Katerina stared up at her abductors, but had no idea where to start. Should she

just make up a family? Should she say that they'd all died? What province should she say they hailed from?

...shouldn't someone pick up that poor man's ear-horn?

"Actually," she began hesitantly, "I lost my family. Just a few weeks ago. My village supported me for as long as they could, and when that stopped I set out on my own."

A profound silence followed this remark. She couldn't tell whether it was a good or a bad thing. Resisting the urge to over-embellish with details, as was her custom, she lowered her eyes to the ground, praying for someone to venture onto the street and see her there.

*Not that I should expect any help...*

"You lost your family, eh?" The tallest of the dwarves stepped forward, a man with a ginger beard that trailed all the way down to the street. "And how did that conveniently ill-timed tragedy come about?"

Katerina was almost offended. If she really had lost her family, that would have been an incredibly insensitive thing to say. Then again, she supposed the whole 'kidnap with the intent to ransom' thing was insensitive enough.

"They died in a fire," she murmured in a low voice, hoping like hell the tears in her eyes would be misconstrued as grief. "It destroyed our entire farm. I was away at a friend's. By the time I got back in the morning, everything was gone."

The dwarf's eyes flashed knowingly as he took a step forward, leaving his ring of companions behind. Up close, it was even easier to see that dwarves were clearly built for the mining that had made them so famous in the time before the rebellion, that had made them so valuable to the crown. That is, until the crown felt threatened like it always did and decided to decimate their entire race. The little fellow might have been small, but he was nothing but pure muscle.

And right now, all of it was directed straight at Katerina.

"A fire," he repeated softly, staring deep into her eyes. "And it destroyed your entire farm."

She'd thought it was a good excuse at the time, but suddenly it couldn't sound less believable. Her face flushed as he came even closer, towering over her as she huddled on the street.



“Pray tell, good lady...where was this farm?”

*Game over.*

A sudden chill swept over the princess as she realized she was out of cards. Yes, she'd studied the different provinces as a child back at the castle, but she couldn't remember any of their names let alone which ones were cities versus agricultural centers.

What was worse, she suspected the ginger dwarf knew it all along.

“It was...” She cringed as his eyes flashed with rage. “It was near...”

There was a ghastly profanity as the dwarf raised his hand once more.

Katerina braced for the impact, but just before he could strike several things happened at once.

A streak of light flashed through the darkness. The dwarf fell backwards with a gasp of surprise. And Katerina was lifted to her feet, a strong arm wrapped protectively around her waist. She pulled in a silent breath, staring up at a familiar head of dark hair as a surge of relief warmed her body. But just as quickly as it had come, that relief melted away into the cold night.

“Dylan?”

The arm disappeared. Along with the warmth that came with it.

“Craston?”

The dwarf who'd been about to strike her let out a burst of laughter as Dylan took a step away from Katerina, staring in surprise. One by one, the rest of the deadly gang relaxed their positions, bustling cheerfully forward to shake his hand.

“It's been ages!” The ginger dwarf clapped him cheerfully on the shoulder. Well, he tried. It ended up being more in the center of his back. “Not since that smuggling operation in Kail! You know, the one where you so graciously decided to distract the magistrate's daughter.”

The tops of Dylan's cheeks flushed pink as he gave the man a playful shove. “I thought we agreed never to talk about that again.”

Katerina stared between them in complete dismay. One second, her rescue had seemed almost inevitable. But now? She'd be surprised if they didn't all decide to go out for drinks!

*No, no, no! Don't LIKE him! FIGHT him!*

The dwarf straightened the back of Dylan's coat, and she closed her eyes with a grimace.

“Well, what brings you up to these parts?” Dylan finally had the sense to ask, bending down at the same time to return the stray ear-horn. “What’re you doing here?”

*Yeah, anyone remember me?! The girl in the process of being kidnapped?!*

“We were just about to ransom this foreigner,” the dwarf replied cheerfully. “And you?”

For the first time, Dylan glanced over his shoulder at Katerina. She was still standing exactly where he’d left her. Arms folded tightly across her thin nightgown. Their eyes met ever so briefly before he turned back to the dwarves—a portrait of ease.

“Actually, I was about to do the same myself.”

*He...what?! Is he serious?! Not only is he refusing to help me, he’s going to ransom me instead?!*

Her first instinct was to smack him upside the back of the head. Her second instinct was to kick him once he’d fallen. But something about the look they’d shared made her hold back. There was something more going on beneath the surface. She wouldn’t call him an enemy just yet.

“You were?” The ginger dwarf was equal parts surprised and dismayed. “But I thought you were still up north doing—”

“I was,” Dylan cut him off quickly. “But that’s when I ran into our little friend over here. I saw she came from a wealthy family and was setting out on her own, so I followed her down south.”

*At which point my farm burned to the ground, taking my imaginary family along with it.*

The dwarf’s eyes flickered between them. First once. Then twice.

“Well...that’s a real shame.”

The words sent chills down Katerina’s spine, and Dylan quickly lowered his gaze.

“I know,” he said apologetically, his eyes flickering surreptitiously around the little circle. “I almost feel bad insisting. But times are hard.”

The obvious deference aside, Katerina noticed he slipped into a slightly different accent when he was talking to them. Something that sounded more like their own.

If only it would work.

The dwarf he'd been speaking with frowned deeply, the lines crinkling up the side of his face. While he clearly had the superior numbers, and could most likely win if it came to a fight, he and Dylan obviously had a history. Possibly even a distant friendship.

Katerina held her breath, and unless she was mistaken she could have sworn Dylan's hand drifted ever so casually to the blade by his side.

But a moment later the frown disappeared, and the dwarf's face melted into a friendly smile.

"They most certainly are." He again clapped Dylan on the back, inadvertently buckling the young man's knees. "We'll leave you to it. Sorry about the prior claim."

*Prior claim?! Like I'm some kind of property! First come, first serve!*

"That's quite all right," Dylan said graciously, taking Katerina by the arm and pulling her back to his side. At a glance, the motion looked very rough indeed, but in reality he couldn't have been more delicate. "Say hi to Bruella for me."

The dwarf nodded in acknowledgement then, one by one, the entire gang disappeared into the night, waving farewell as they went.

Katerina and Dylan stared after them for a long time. A very long time. Neither one could think what to do. Neither one could think what to say. Then, finally, Katerina asked a question.

"Who's Bruella?"

Dylan glanced down at her in surprise, almost as if he'd forgotten she was there. "His wife."

There were a million things to say. A million questions she wanted answered. But at that moment, she couldn't seem to do anything but nod.

"Oh."

They lapsed into silence again, staring out at the cold night. It wasn't until she suddenly shivered that Dylan glanced down at her, his eyes sweeping up and down her thin nightgown. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could Katerina beat him to the punch.

"So what *are* you doing here?" she repeated the dwarf's question, casting him a sly glance from the corner of her eye. "Unless you really did come to ransom me."

His lips twitched up in the hint of a smile. It was gone before she could see it. "I changed my mind. Decided to come back." It looked like there were several more things he wanted to say, but he shut down instead, suddenly brisk. "And it's a good thing I did. It looks like you can't go more than a few hours without getting into trouble."

Those warm sentiments melted away, and she glared in disbelief. "Are you serious? You actually think this was my fault—"

"Come on, we'll get a different room for the night. Set out in the morning."

He walked off before she could stop him, heading in the opposite direction of the tavern. At this rate, it was for the best. They'd probably demand that she pay to replace the broken door. She picked up her cloak that one of the men must have grabbed and was about to follow, when she saw a crumpled piece of paper on the ground. It had fallen out of his pocket when he charged into the fight. He hadn't noticed it himself.

She cast a quick glance up the street, making sure he wasn't looking, before she scooped it up—reading it in the flickering light of the moon.

*I remember a little boy who once needed some help himself..*

Katerina's lips parted in surprise, then curved up into the faintest smile as she stared after him in the dark. It seemed the fairies might have been right after all...



## Chapter 6

Katerina stood in the village square the next morning with a significantly brighter outlook on life. After what had felt like an endless night, the world was bathed in sunlight. The dawn had chased away the shadows. The dawn, or something like it...

“Good morning!” Dylan strode across the damp cobblestones, looking her up and down as he put on his jacket. “Here, I got you a dress. Keep walking around in that nightgown, and people are going to start asking me how much you charge by the hour.”

Katerina’s smile faded as a wad of fabric flew into her face. She was able to catch it just before it hit the ground. Just in time to see him duck into a bakery and out of sight.

*How is it possible to be so grateful and so infuriated at the same time?*

Fortunately, the anger faded as she held up the dress, watching it sway back and forth in the morning breeze. It was...pretty. She didn’t know how else to say it. Not pretty like her dresses from the castle, but pretty in a simple kind of way. Although it was in the same basic style as the other dresses she saw in the village, this one had avoided the muddy earth tones entirely. It was a robin’s-egg blue. Almost the exact same color as the sky.

A little smile crept up her face as her fingers played with white ribbon lacing up the side. If you had asked her three days ago, she wouldn’t have been caught dead in it. But now? She didn’t know if she had ever been more touched by a simple act of kindness.

“Don’t tell me it’s not your size.”

Katerina looked up with a start as Dylan swept back into the cobblestone square. He was holding a loaf of bread in one hand, and two apples in the other.

“No,” she said quickly. “No, it’s actually—”

“Because there were only two hanging up on the laundress’ clothesline, and the other could have stuffed at least four of you inside.”

There was brief pause. Then Katerina's mouth fell open in shock. "Did you...*steal* this dress?"

Dylan glanced over his shoulder then took her by the wrist, pulling her gently in the direction of the forest that bordered the little town. "Of course I stole it. You didn't think I actually went out and *bought* you a dress, did you?" His eyes twinkled at the mere thought, but he picked up the pace as they headed past the local café. "On that note, we'd better get going. Don't want whoever owns it to come running out and see you carrying it away."

Katerina's eyes widened at the thought and she quickly stuffed it under her cloak. Feeling more and more like a petty criminal as she and Dylan hurried down the misty street. Feeling more and more adventurous at the same time...



THERE WAS NO BETTER time for slipping away undetected than in the early morning. Katerina quickly understood why Dylan had insisted they get up so early. There were few enough people out and about that they were able to make good time on the main roads. Only the occasional farmer or miner lifted a distracted hand as they passed by, their minds already focused on a long day's work.

They walked for about an hour without saying a word, and quickly left any stragglers from the village behind them. It wasn't long before they were completely alone. The roads got narrower. The trees got thicker. About ten minutes after that, Dylan gestured to a secluded grove.

"Why don't you get changed? You have to be cold."

Katerina *was* cold. She was freezing, in fact. But she hadn't dared say a single word. She knew the task Dylan was taking on by helping her. And even if he didn't fully understand it, she knew the risk. It was hard enough being a fugitive nowadays without half the royal army after you. The last thing she wanted to do was make his life any harder by slowing them down.

"Thanks," she said quietly, feeling suddenly shy. "That would be great."

Without another word she scampered up into the trees, leaving him behind on the dusty road. Her eyes peered curiously through the gaps in the

branches as she quickly peeled off her silky nightgown and slipped the dress over her head instead. She didn't know why she was so shy. For that matter, she didn't know why they were being so quiet. They had shared a room last night—completely alone. A fact that would have made Katerina's royal handlers faint dead away. It was intimate, scary, and very real. And while it could have been incredibly awkward on all counts, it somehow felt as natural as could be.

"Try to get some sleep," he'd advised as he pulled a chair over to the door. "We'll have to set out early tomorrow morning. You'll want all the rest you can get."

Katerina's eyes had flickered to the bed before returning to the chair. He was already settling down, propping up his feet on the nearby dresser, his entire body angled to the door.

"What about you?" she asked quietly, feeling guilty without really knowing the reason why.

She'd had guards before. She'd had people fight for her, chaperone her, stay awake all night to protect her. Why did she feel guilty making this stranger do it now?

Dylan glanced over his shoulder before giving her a swift smile. "I'm fine right here."

*In a hard-backed chair? One hand on the armrest, the other on a blade?*

Katerina didn't say a word of protest, didn't question his plan. But she did get silently out of bed, padding across the wooden floor to lay a soft hand on his shoulder.

"Thank you," she murmured. "For what you did today. For deciding to come back."

His body had stiffened at the touch, but he didn't turn around. Not for a second. He kept his eyes fixed squarely on the door. Never deviating from his mission. "Get some sleep, princess. We've got a long day tomorrow."

And that was it. That had been all they said. Not until he'd hurled a stolen dress into her face and implied she looked like a prostitute had they spoken again.

Nevertheless, Katerina slept better that night than she had since she'd left the castle. Maybe even before. Secure in the fact that, as long as he was

with her, no harm could come. Lulled into the deepest of slumbers by the quiet rhythm of his breath.

But all of that silent solidarity seemed to vanish the longer they were on the road. Maybe it was because of the strange circumstance of their meeting. Maybe it was because they were finally out on the road, exposed and hunted, trying to outrun the darkness that closed in behind.

*We need a fresh start. A real introduction. Heck, he doesn't even know my name.*

Dylan seemed to be thinking the same thing. The second she walked back out of the trees, her blue dress swishing lightly over the dew-tipped grass, he walked forward with a genuine smile.

“Much better. And now, princess, we can do things properly.” Without a word of warning, he offered out his hand. “Dylan Aires. Patron saint of runaways. At your service.”

Katerina froze, blinking in surprise. She supposed that in all the time she'd had to think about it, she probably should have come up with some sort of name. But after everything that had happened, she'd given it no more thought than that fateful moment down at the bar.

In the end, she went with a half-truth. A childhood nickname that had faded over time.

“Kat.” She took his hand, shaking hesitantly. “Patron saint of nothing. Nice to meet you.”

His eyes twinkled as he echoed the words. “Nice to meet you.”

She thought that was it, but the introduction didn't end there. Instead of merely shaking her hand, Dylan pulled her in for a sudden embrace. She froze perfectly still as they came together, his hands lingering on her jacket, his face brushing up against her hair.

Truth be told, she really didn't know what to make of it. The man was distant to the point of being cold one moment, and was wrapping his arms around her the next. Sure enough, before she could figure out what was happening, he took a sudden step back, looking almost bored, as if the strange moment had never even happened.

“Well, now that that's settled, we can work out the terms to this little arrangement.”



*I'm sorry, now that what's settled? And what terms? The fairies didn't say anything about terms.*

Katerina shifted nervously, suddenly afraid to meet his eyes. "Okay..."

For his part, Dylan had no trouble looking at her. And he had a way of forcing people to look back at him, whether they wanted to or not. "You want protection, is that right? A safe haven until the danger hanging over your head has passed?"

"Yes, that's right," Katerina answered, feeling more and more anxious all the while.

Dylan paused for a moment, thinking, before suddenly making up his mind. "I'll do it for a price."

*A price?! I don't have two shillings to rub together!*

Katerina shook her head slowly, trapped in the hypnotic gaze of those eyes. "I have nothing to give you. If I did...it would be different. But I don't have a thing."

He stared at her for a moment before touching the front of her dress. "What about that?"

She froze for a second, then jerked back like she'd been burned, gasping in disbelief. "EXCUSE ME??"

His eyes twinkled but he didn't back down. Instead, he reached out a long finger to catch the chain around her neck, slowly pulling out her mother's pendant.

"That's beautiful," he murmured, his eyes dancing with the magical glow. "And expensive."

"It was my mother's." Katerina's eyes watered involuntarily as she took a step back. "I can't give it away. You can have anything else...but not that."

Dylan's eyes cooled as he slowly lowered his hand. He looked at her appraisingly for a moment before turning on his heel and walking away. "Fine."

He left without a backwards glance. Without even telling her which direction they were headed. Her hand clutched the pendant as silent tears streamed down her face, but just before he disappeared around the bend in the road he glanced back. "Your mother...she'd want you to live, wouldn't she?"



NINE HOURS LATER, KATERINA and Dylan were sitting around a roaring campfire in the middle of the woods. The chain was around his neck. Not hers.

*Opportunistic bastard...*

She eyed it sullenly, itching to steal it back. Not only had she been forced to give up the one thing left in the world she could call her own, a precious memento of her deceased mother, but it looked as though the necklace was almost happy to be rid of her. Instead of cooling and dulling the way it had when she left the castle, it seemed to glow even brighter the second it touched his skin.

*Traitorous pendant...*

“You’re going to have to get that face of yours under control if you want to make any new friends out here in the woods.”

Unlike the princess, Dylan was obnoxiously cheerful. He poked happily at the fire, sending up a spray of sparks, before passing her a stick with a bit of roasted squirrel.

She stared down in complete revulsion, turning up her nose.

“You’ll also have to learn to eat when we’re lucky enough to find food,” he said softly.

She shot him a hostile glare as he propped the stick back up atop the flames. There was probably a point to what he was saying, but at this point she was too irritable to hear it. And furthermore, she’d like nothing better than to wipe that infuriating smile right off his face. “I thought you were going to have to fight those dwarves,” she said suddenly, imagining each one of them taking a piece out of him in turn. The thought made her smile.

He flashed her a peculiar look, returning his attention to the fire. “Good thing I didn’t. Dwarves are tough fighters. Don’t be fooled by their size.”

“I won’t.” The mask of anger fell away as she lifted a hand to the side of her face, wincing as she touched the tender skin where Castor had struck her.

Dylan dropped what he was doing immediately and knelt by her side, frowning sympathetically as he removed her hand and examined it for himself. "You should put some meat on that."

She pulled away in surprise, staring at him like it might be some kind of joke. "Meat?"

A flicker of what looked almost like embarrassment flashed across his face before he pulled back with a scowl, returning to his seat on the opposite side of the fire. "If you don't have ice, raw meat is the best thing. You'll learn that soon enough. Use some of the squirrel."

Katerina matched his scowl with one of her own. "I'm not putting that dead squirrel on my face. And if you don't see anything strange about that statement, you've been living in the woods too long."

"Maybe I have." He gave her a cool smile. "But I'm not the one who's going to wake up with a massive migraine because she was too proud to indulge in a natural remedy."

Before the argument could continue he pushed to his feet, leaving her to either take his advice or not, however she saw fit. She watched as he disappeared into the tent. Waited until he was completely out of sight. Then she grabbed the stick of meat off the fire and tore into it with her teeth, too ravenous to care much where it had come from.

He watched quietly from inside the tent. Never to say a word.



THE PLAN WAS TO GET lost in the woods. Too deep into the wilderness for anyone who could be tracking. Too far off the grid for Katerina's family to ever find her. Of course, she alone knew the truth. She knew they weren't dealing with a trio of vengeful uncles. She knew that her family happened to employ different people to fight their battles.

Assassins, spies, mercenaries, hounds.

With the weight of the entire kingdom behind him, there was very little that her brother couldn't do in terms of finding her and bringing her back to the castle in chains. Or worse.

But as frightening as that possibility was, Katerina had to admit that even Kailas was going to have a hard time finding her with Dylan by her

side. It wasn't just that the man set a brutal pace and forced her to follow it twelve hours a day. It wasn't just that he insisted they traipse through every river, trek up every mountain quarry in the hopes of losing her scent.

The man was meticulous.

He was awake by the time Katerina opened her eyes each morning, and was still patrolling the campsite by the time she went to sleep. No detail was too small to escape his attention. No element was too trivial to ignore. Upon seeing a cluster of inexplicably broken branches, he'd once insisted they make a three-day detour, rappelling down the side of some nearby cliffs. When Katerina woke up in the middle of the night, convinced she'd heard a noise, he went on the warpath, combing through every inch of the woods before he came back with a slain raccoon that the two of them proceeded to eat for dinner.

Every move was carefully planned. Every plan was meticulously executed.

But not even the greatest ranger in the world could account for every problem. No matter how hard one tried to ward against it, there were bound to be some mistakes. Like the mistake Katerina walked straight into one balmy afternoon.

It all started when she decided she wanted a bath...

They had been travelling together for two weeks, but despite spending every waking moment together they'd made very little progress in terms of communication. They hardly ever said a word unless they were setting up the campsite. She could count on one hand the number of times she'd heard him laugh. Most of which were at her expense. And yet, a strange sort of familiarity had sprung up between them. A kind of shorthand they were barely aware of themselves.

Yes, the road they shared was incredibly quiet. But it was an attentive kind of quiet. A quiet full of secret looks and hidden glances. A quiet that was slowly driving Katerina insane.

She knew he watched her—same as she watched him. It was part of his job, but even if it wasn't she didn't think the man could resist. Not after he'd pledged to protect her. Even on the rare moments he was out hunting for their food, she still got the feeling he was keeping tabs on her. That he was never very far away.

Of course, that was the very rule she was about to break.

"I'm going for a swim," she declared out of the blue. "There's a river nearby. I'll go now."

Dylan looked up from where he'd been assembling the fire. He knew there was a river nearby, it was where he'd caught the fish he was preparing to cook. But close as it was, he had absolutely no intention of letting her out of his sight.

"The water's freezing," he said dismissively, returning to his work. "You'll hate it."

*Nice try. But you can't stop me.*

"I'm sure I won't." She pushed to her feet, flashing him a sweet smile. "At any rate, it's not just a swim. I need a bath. And need to wash this dress. It's been days since the last rain."

His hands paused over the kindling as his eyes flickered up to the sky, silently hoping the sun would cloud over and it would start to rain right then and there. When that didn't happen, he pushed to his feet with a sigh. "Look, Kat, I know it's been a long time and we've been moving at a fast pace, but it's just not a good idea for you to go off on your own. I could come with you—"

"Not a chance!" Katerina exclaimed. "I'm going to be *naked*, Dylan. As in, not wearing any clothes. No, you most certainly *cannot* come with me!"

"Well, you're certainly not going alone," he fired back, folding his arms across his chest.

*Okay...maybe he can stop me.*

She took a step towards the water, weighing her chances of beating him there on foot. But when he raised a single eyebrow, her shoulders wilted with a sigh. "Dylan, it's been weeks," she said quietly, lowering her eyes to the ground. "I know things are dangerous, and I appreciate what you're doing—I really do—but I need a break."

Her defeated tone softened him, as she'd hoped it would, and he glanced back at the river, a worried line creasing down the center of his forehead.

"It's just a dip," she added quickly. "I'll be in and out. I swear."

He hesitated a second more, considering, before his eyes locked onto hers. "Will you talk to me?"

She blinked, trying to understand. “What?”

“Will you talk to me?” he asked again. “I’ll stay far enough away so I can’t see anything, but you have to talk to me—the whole time. Let me know you’re all right.”

*Overprotective much?*

*...not that I should be complaining about that.*

“Agreed.” Katerina beamed victoriously, thrilled with her success. Not only was she allowed to go on a little excursion, but he’d be forced to break this wretched silence barrier as well. “Now?”

He actually chuckled, glancing down at the half-made fire. The next second he pushed gracefully to his feet, kicking a wave of dirt over the top of it. “Why not.”

The princess was so pleased with her impromptu swim in the river that she was unintentionally forgetting a few important things. A towel—for one. Leeches, for another. Not to mention the fact that she was going to be having a conversation with Dylan while completely naked.

It might not have seemed like a lot to other people. And judging by what she’d seen at the bar, the man was most certainly used to it. But the castle had certain rules. The royal family had certain rules. And her father, the late king, was nothing short of terrifying in enforcing them. She had never been alone with a man until a few days ago, discounting Alwyn and Kailas. Let alone allowed to go on a two-week-long camping trip, unsupervised in a tiny tent. And while Dylan had been nothing but a perfect gentleman, to be honest he seemed borderline disinterested, she had the sneaking suspicion that this naked jump into the river might change that.

By the time they’d reached the shore, she’d worked herself into a full-on fright.

“You know what?” she began nervously, staring down at the crystalline water. “You were right. This is a bad idea. Let’s just head back to camp. I’ll help with the fire.”

Dylan’s eyes danced with amusement as he cocked his head innocently to the side. “Too cold?”

She nodded quickly, grateful for the escape. “Yeah—way too cold.”

There was an incriminating pause.

“But you haven’t even felt it yet.”

An even longer pause. Followed by a guilty, sideways glance.

"I feel like maybe I didn't think this through..."

He laughed shortly before turning abruptly on his heel, heading off into the thick grove of trees. "Relax, princess. You're not my type."

*Ridiculous. I've everybody's type.*

She glared after him for a moment, kicking off her shoes and turning back to the river. It was a steep climb down, but there were a lot of reeds growing along the side to help her. In only a moment or so she was standing in the frothy surf, which turned out to be pleasantly warm.

"Freezing water, huh," she muttered under her breath. "Yeah, I'm sure I'll hate it."

"What was that?" Dylan called from the trees. "I can't hear you."

A warning to speak up. And to keep talking.

Katerina sighed, then pulled her new dress up over her head, draping it carefully across the rocks so it couldn't get wet. She'd clean it later. For now, she wanted to swim. With a giant smile she pushed out into the open waves, tilting onto her back and staring up at the cloudless sky. "I said I wish the fairies had just given me a guard dog. It would've been a lot easier."

He laughed quietly as he walked through the trees, humming a tuneless melody under his breath. "For you and me both, sweetheart."

She grinned in spite of herself, stretching up an arm to trace nonsense figures into the air. "So you never told me...why did you agree to help me?"

Of course, she'd already seen the note. She already knew that Marigold had created a massive guilt trip out of something in his past. But he didn't know she knew that. He probably didn't realize he'd even lost the note. As far as he was concerned, she was completely in the dark.

"Oh, you know..." He kicked absentmindedly at the pebbles and stones in his path. "An overdeveloped sense of masochism."

She snorted out loud then quickly covered her mouth, glancing nervously at the shoreline. "I'm serious," she insisted, unwilling to let him off the hook. "Why did you come back? You certainly didn't have to—you made that perfectly clear back at the village."

A rather awkward moment of silence followed the statement and Katerina bit her lip nervously, glancing again at the shore. She hadn't meant to

make him feel guilty. She simply wanted to know his side. And maybe get him to tell her a little more about himself in the process.

Something he was clearly unwilling to do.

“You ask a lot of questions for a girl on the run,” he deflected. “Don’t you, *Kat*.”

She froze mid-paddle, staring unblinkingly through the trees. “What the heck’s that supposed to mean? You’re out of dead rodents to torment me, so you’re making fun of my name now?”

“Not in the slightest,” he replied. “It’s a perfectly lovely name. Is there a last name that goes with it? Or did it burn up with your family farm?”

*If I didn’t need him so much, I’d kill him myself.*

She ducked under the water with a silent scream, then resurfaced in perfect calm. “I’m not even dignifying that with an answer.”

He chuckled again. She had the terrible feeling that he could somehow hear the scream. “As long as you answer me something, princess. You need to keep talking.”

“Oh yeah?” she shot back. “And what about you? You took my mother’s pendant—the most precious thing in the world to me. I’ve officially bought the *privilege* of traipsing around in the mud with you, except—”

“Except what?”

“—except I don’t know a thing about you!” She threw her hands up in exasperation, sending a shower of water droplets shimmering into the sky. “You could be an oversized leprechaun for all I know. A cannibal who’s waiting until the next full moon to eat me alive.”

“Right on both counts.”

“I’m *serious*.” She grinned again in spite of herself, simultaneously hating the way he was always able to make her do that. “Tell me something about *you*. I think I deserve that.”

“You paid for protection, princess. Not information. You don’t deserve a bloody thing.”

She hesitated, glancing at the shoreline with a coy smile. “All right...I *want* to know.”

There was a lengthy pause. Followed by a quiet sigh.

“What do you want to know?”



“Everything,” she said immediately, paddling closer so she could better hear. “Start at the beginning. Where are you from? What’s your family like? When did you decide to trade in all your mother’s good manners and become a thief?”

He laughed again, clear and loud. A contagious, sparkling sound that seemed to echo through the trees. It brightened everything around it, bringing a glowing smile to Katerina’s face.

“What makes you think my mother wasn’t a thief?” he asked, and she could hear the grin in his voice. “Maybe I was born in a den of thieves. Or to a group of carnival clowns, travelling from village to village. I was in charge of tending to the elephants. This isn’t even my true height.”

“You really can’t do it, can you?” she laughed. “You really can’t tell the truth.”

“Of course I can.”

“Tell me something true.”

“One of my limbs is actually artificial.”

She burst out laughing again, dunking her head under the water and running her fingers through her silky red hair. By the time she resurfaced he was already in his third or fourth stanza, detailing the nonsensical fallacies of his life. Each as fantastical as the last.

“—at which point I dedicated my time to the study of croquet—”

A sudden noise in the bushes made her jump. Another noise was soon to follow. Dylan was still chattering on obliviously, but whatever it was had been close. And big. And it was far too deliberate not to have been intentional.

*Call for Dylan. Call for Dylan!*

It was the obvious thing to do. Given the fact that she couldn’t fight, it was the only logical option. But in the blind adrenaline that followed, it never even crossed her mind.

Quiet as a mouse, she grabbed her clothes and paddled to the opposite side of the river, climbing out onto the far shore. After quickly slipping the dress over her pale shoulders she crept up the slick bank, holding onto handfuls of the tall grass to help, and out into the sunlit meadow beyond. It was here that she stopped. Looking around. Listening hard. Half convinced she’d imagined the whole thing as her eyes danced with a sea of butterflies.

That's when the world turned upside-down and she flew into the air.

She managed to let out a piercing scream, just the one, before her eyes focused on what had grabbed her and she was stunned silent. Never could she have believed it was possible. Never in her wildest dreams could she have thought it was true. But there he was. Staring right back at her.

A real-life giant.

"Pretty."

He swung her back and forth by the ankle, dangling her at least twenty feet in the air. A wave of nausea crept up her throat and she clapped her hands over her mouth—half to keep from throwing up, half to keep from screaming all over again.

Not that it mattered. Just a few seconds later, Dylan was there.

"Kat?!"

She and the giant heard him shout, and turned toward the river. Rather, the giant turned, and she was swung like a rag doll over the grass. Her dress flew up over her head, and she'd just managed to pull it back down when Dylan raced into the clearing, then skidded to an abrupt stop.

"Crap...that's big."

For a second, he froze in what could only be described as boyish terror. Then he sprinted forward with a fierce shout—fighting it with everything he had. Arrows. Knives. Rocks. Anything that let him keep attacking without getting too close.

It was a valiant effort, but the giant hardly seemed to notice. Quite the contrary. He glanced over curiously, seemed to get annoyed, then lashed out with the back of his hand—swatting, the way one would get rid of a fly. Katerina let out a horrified shriek as Dylan flew seventy feet across the clearing. He landed with a soft crunch in the tall grass, then lay terrifyingly still.

*Please let him not be dead! PLEASE let him not be dead!*

Katerina was still staring in horror when the giant shook her again, poking at her red hair with a crooked smile. "Pretty."

"Would you stop saying that, you stupid brute!" She smacked his finger away with every bit of strength she had, furious to the point of hysteria. "You might have killed him!"

“Killed?” The giant’s face fell with unmistakable remorse as he turned back to look at the fallen warrior. A second later he was plodding across the meadow, crossing it in just three huge steps. He picked up Dylan with a single hand, trying to prop him up as though he was still standing, then let out a miserable sigh when he fell to the ground once more. “Bernie didn’t mean to...”

An enormous tear slid down his cheek. Soaking the base of Katerina’s dress.

“Bernie?” she asked tentatively. She hadn’t seen any blood on Dylan, and it was enough to at least temporarily calm her nerves. “Is that your name?”

The giant nodded at the ground, his bottom lip quivering precariously as more tears slid down his ruddy face. Katerina hastened to reassure him. Half because the tears melted her heart, and half because she was afraid they might unintentionally drown her if they continued to fall.

“My name’s Kat. And that’s my friend Dylan.” She forced her lips up into a smile, trying to cheer the colossus as best she could. “I don’t think you killed him. I think he’s just asleep.”

“Sleep?” The giant squinted curiously at the sun before throwing his head back with ear-shattering laughter. “Now is not the time! There is still light! Silly human!”

“Yeah...” Katerina’s eyes watered involuntarily as her ears popped a dozen times. “Silly human. Have you met a lot of us? Humans, I mean?”

Bernie shook his massive head, looking suddenly sad. “They hate Bernie. Call him a monster. Try to burn down his cave.”

Katerina stared up in shock, both arms wrapped around his largest finger. “They try to burn down your cave? Even after having talked with you? That’s horrible!”

The giant nodded, and sniffed in a way that reminded her very much of a child. The most unlikely of smiles tugged at the corner of her lips, and she suddenly found herself considering the impossible. A second later, she was putting it to words.

“Bernie...could you take us to your cave? Until my friend wakes up, at least?”

To be fair, it's probably not the best idea to voluntarily enter a giant's lair. But with Dylan knocked out cold, she had no way to defend herself. Or him, for that matter. The giant in question seemed nice enough. He might be their only hope.

"You come visit Bernie?"

She nodded tentatively and the giant leapt up into the air, cheering in delight. The earth trembled and shook as they came down, catapulting Dylan's body another ten feet away. She glanced down nervously and beat against his hand with all her might, trying to get his attention. The last thing she needed was to negotiate their safe passage, only to have him accidentally squash her protector in celebration.

"Yes, we'd love to visit Bernie. But you have to let me down first to see if he's okay."

The giant immediately complied, lowering her to the ground with surprisingly delicate hands, then looking around curiously to see where Dylan's body had rolled off to. By the time they found it, he was looking distinctly the worse for wear.

Both Katerina and Bernie flinched at the same time.

"He doesn't like me. Your friend doesn't like Bernie."

Katerina sighed, looping one of Dylan's arms around her neck. "Don't worry. He doesn't like anybody..."



## Chapter 7

While Katerina hadn't been in a lot of cave-homes to compare them, she had to admit that this one was quite nice. And for a giant's home... she couldn't even begin to allow herself to fathom that this was actually, truly, happening. Bernie had clearly gone out of his way to make things as comfortable and cozy as possible. Scavenging what little he could from campsites, and using flowers and strings of garland to make up the rest. There was a roaring fire in the middle, a pile of wagon covers shoved into the corner to make a bed, even a rudimentary table made from a giant tree stump.

Katerina was propped up on a stool as tall as she was, happily finishing her second bowl of broth. She set it down with a wide smile, licking her lips as she cheerfully applauded the chef. "It was wonderful, Bernie! Thank you so much!" As soon as she'd been sure she wasn't going to be placed *in* the caldron, she'd embraced the idea of dinner wholeheartedly. "Another recipe of your mother's?"

The giant nodded happily, helping himself to second leg of what looked like a giant sort of cow. "She taught Bernie when he was just a baby. Most humans don't know all the spices and yummys you can find in the forest. You just need to know where to look."

They had been talking happily for the last few hours as Dylan lay unconscious upon the hearth. It was a strange meeting, to be sure but, circumstances aside, Katerina had to admit that she was having a fine time. She'd helped him drag the ingredients to the mixing bowl, lobbing them over the side one by one to his fervent applause. She'd perched upon the tip of the spoon as he circled it around and around, trying to explain the finer points of chess. She'd even found the time to drag Dylan further away from the flames when the sleeves of his coat caught fire.

All in all...it had been one of her better days.

A soft moan made them both turn towards the fire. There was a hitch in Dylan's breathing and he was starting to stir, his eyes fluttering open and

shut. Katerina set down the piece of mutton she'd been chewing and looked on with interest, while Bernie leapt to his feet.

"He's awake! He's awake! Kat, look—he's awake!"

In his excitement the giant started jumping up and down, waving around his arms in wild delight. Unfortunately, that was the precise moment Dylan opened his eyes for good.

"*What the hell?!*" He yelped, and scrambled backward, only to hit his head on the wall.

"Careful," Katerina said with a sympathetic wince. "Bernie thinks you have a concussion."

Dylan's eyes drifted from the giant to the princess, dilating wide with fear. They took a second more to focus—either from the head wound or from the impossibility of what he was seeing—before he pushed shakily to his feet. One hand went to the wall for balance. The other drifted up to his temple in a daze.

"What in seven hounds is happening right now?"

The giant jumped again, shaking the very stone foundation they were standing on.

"Bernie will get more wood for the fire!" he exclaimed. "Make the cave nice and warm for your friend."

"Oh, that's all right, Bernie," Katerina said quickly. "He really doesn't need special—" She glanced behind her but the giant was already gone, bounding away towards the woods. "—treatment."

The door swung shut behind him, leaving the cave in ringing silence. Katerina looked at Dylan. Dylan looked at Katerina. For a moment, neither one spoke. Then the floodgates opened.

"Who the heck is Bernie? How long was I out? Where the... Where are we?" He paused his rant long enough to glance down at the meat her hand. "...why are you eating a ferret?"

*Holy crap, is that what this is?* Katerina set it down gingerly and started making her way back to the ground level. It was a laborious process. After she hopped off her stool, she was at a bit of a loss as to what to do next. Bernie had lifted her up onto the high table, and without his giant hands she had to shimmy down the wood face herself, digging her nails into whatever grooves in the bark she could find.

She made it halfway down before her dress caught on a snarl in the wood. A not-so-clever jump later, and her foot got stuck in a crevice. Dylan watched with increasing levels of irritation and restrained sarcasm, and by the time she fell in an undignified pile at his feet he was ready to explode.

“Are you good now?” he asked testily. “You ready?”

Up close, he didn't look nearly as steady as he had from the table. One hand was twitching sporadically against his leg, and the other was half-reaching towards the wall, as if at any moment the blunt-force trauma might catch up and his legs would give way.

“Yes, I am.” Katerina straightened herself up with as much dignity as she could muster, trying her very best to project an air of calm. “And to answer your questions, you were only out for a couple of hours and Bernie is the giant you just saw. We're in his house.”

There was a beat of silence.

“The giant's name is Bernie?”

Another beat.

“Well...*Bernard*, really.” Katerina tossed back her long hair. “But you can hardly expect to be so formal. Not after he invited us over and cooked his mother's soup.”

Dylan followed every word, then blinked several times and lowered his eyes to the floor. Not entirely convinced this wasn't all a dream. “...his mother's soup?”

The princess lit up with a bright smile. “Yes, well, you see, Doria had a knack for cooking that she got from her paternal grandfather. So from the time Bernie was just a baby, she tried to—”

Dylan closed his eyes and held up his hand, a wordless plea for silence. It was clearly taking every bit of restraint he had just to control his temper, and when he finally did speak it looked like each word was taking a physical toll.

“Okay...” he began slowly, “you're not from around these parts, so there are certain things you can't be expected to know. One might think common sense would guide you there, but in this case it clearly missed the mark.” His eyes flickered back to the cave door before burning into hers with a panicked sort of intensity. “Giants are savage, brutal creatures. Rip

you in half for losing at cards kind of brutal. And you're playing house in the middle of its freakin' *cave*??"

"HIS freakin' cave," Katerina corrected angrily. "Don't be rude. I don't discriminate against you just because you're an intolerable street urchin with a penchant for taking things that don't belong to you."

Dylan grabbed the chain around his neck in a muted rage. "This is for services rendered! I didn't steal it!"

"Oh, really." Katerina folded her arms across her chest with a smug smile. "I'm *paying* you to get knocked unconscious by a giant and make me nurse you back to health?"

Dylan's face paled as his eyes flashed in the firelight. "You call this nursing me back to health?"

She resisted the strong urge to stick out her tongue. "I didn't let you catch on fire, did I?"

In what was probably fortunate timing, the door to the outside world swung open again as the giant came back. He had what looked like half the forest piled up in his arms, and without a second thought as to his new little friends he threw it full tilt towards the flickering flames.

Katerina and Dylan dove out of the way just in time.

"Katy?" he called, looking around the cave. "Katy?"

Dylan raised his eyebrows, flashing her an accusatory look as fiery bits of ash rained down around them. "*Katy*?"

He hardly dared to speak above a whisper, and was discreetly pulling them both out of sight behind a fire poker the entire time. Katerina rolled her eyes and tugged herself free, whispering back.

"What? I call him Bernie, but he doesn't get to use a nickname? Be reasonable."

"*Reasonable*." Dylan made a visible effort to rein himself in. "You're going to lecture *me* about being reasonable when you've landed us straight in the middle of—"

"KATY!"

The fire poker they were hiding behind lifted straight into the air as the giant beamed down at them in delight. He crouched down and laid his open palms upon the floor, but while Katerina climbed right inside—hold-



ing onto his thumb for balance—Dylan held back, looking like at any moment the beast might dislodge its jaw entirely and swallow him whole.

“It’s okay, Dylan,” Bernie reassured him with a toothy smile. “I’ll be so careful.”

“It knows my name...” Dylan said faintly, backing away into the leg of the table.

Katerina pursed her lips to hide a grin. In hindsight, maybe the giant’s smile wasn’t so reassuring after all, not when it happened to show every one of his teeth.

“Bernie’s just helping us up onto the table, aren’t you, Bernie? It’s the easiest way to speak back and forth,” she explained. “Otherwise he’d have to lie down on the floor.”

It seemed so practical when she said it that way, when it was anything but. Her brave young warrior still looked like the world was about to end, but when it became clear that Katerina was going up with or without him, he placed himself hesitantly in the giant’s outstretched hand.

“And we’re up!”

The two of them jerked violently into the air before grabbing onto his fingers for balance. It wasn’t exactly ideal, and by the time they’d found their sea legs they were spilling out onto the table.

“There, you see?” Bernie beamed at Katerina before reaching down ever-so-carefully to pat Dylan on the back. He was clearly being as delicate as possible, even when he accidentally knocked him over a fork. “It’s not so bad.”

As Katerina smothered a fit of laughter behind her hand, Dylan caught himself gracefully and spun around to look the giant in the eye. Whatever was going through his head, battling a lifetime’s worth of experience must have been extraordinary. Because, after a lengthy appraisal, he nodded his head with a little smile.

“Not so bad.”

Bernie started smiling so hard Katerina thought his face might burst. Then his eyes welled up with tears, and she hurried forward to hold his hand. Life for something as ostracized and feared as a giant had to be very lonely. Especially so far out in the woods. She and Dylan had left the road

behind more than eight days ago. No one came so deep into the forest. It was basically abandoned.

At least, it was supposed to be. But it apparently wasn't tonight.

"Bernie is so glad he made new friends," the giant wailed, trying and failing to keep his emotions under control. "Such good humans. Not like the bad ones."

Katerina stroked his hand sympathetically, while Dylan stepped forward with a little frown.

"The bad ones?" he repeated.

In a flash, his entire face transformed. No longer was he the weather-hardened ranger, secretly plotting how to impale the giant and make his great escape. He was an open book. A shoulder to lean on. A gentle soul. If Katerina hadn't been so disturbed by the whole metamorphosis, she might have been seriously impressed.

"What bad ones, Bernie?" he asked kindly, silently pleading for more information. "Did you meet some of them tonight?"

Bernie shook his head fearfully. A fairytale monster who didn't know his own strength. "Not tonight. But there are bad tracks in the woods. Made by bad things."

An image of her brother's hell hounds flashed through Katerina's mind, and she stepped closer to Dylan with a shudder. Was it really possible? Had they somehow picked up on their trail?

"What kinds of things?" she asked fearfully.

It was the giant's turn to shudder.

"Bernie doesn't want to say."

She glanced at Dylan for help, but the man said nothing. His eyes merely flickered out to the darkness, looking decidedly grim. In the end, it was up to her to lift spirits.

"Well...you don't have to say anything, Bernie." She forced a cheerful smile, stopping the giant's tears before they could begin. "You're right. You made some good new friends today."

It was the right thing to say. The second she said it, the tears in Bernie's eyes vanished completely, replaced with the brightest of smiles. "Yes, Kat and Dylan are my friends, and Dylan was *not* killed, and would he like some soup?"

One sentence ran into the next, and it took Dylan a second to realize he'd been asked a question. "What? No, that's...I'm fine. Thank you," he added hastily, in an effort to be polite. And to stay alive.

"You should really try some," Katerina urged. "He's actually a much better cook than you."

Dylan flashed her a chilling look, and she raised her hands innocently.

"I'm just saying...squirrel isn't for everyone."

Bernie obviously took the hushed argument to mean a 'yes,' and snatched up a giant knife to chop up some more parsley. Dylan closed his eyes with a shudder as the blade whipped through the air, just inches above his head. When he opened them again, he was looking rather green.

"I think I'm going to be sick..."

"That's the spirit." Katerina clapped him cheerfully on the back, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "But not until after the soup."



THE NEXT MORNING, DYLAN and Katerina set out as soon as he was able to walk in a straight line. They were laden with gifts from their own personal friendly giant. Tubs of berries and butter. A loaf of bread the size of a small horse. Even a cache of herbs from his garden.

They thanked him profusely and dragged it all away with cheerful smiles until he was out of sight. Then they set it on the ground in front of them, and took stock of what could be used. While the sentiment was incredibly sweet, they simply didn't have enough strength, or enough limbs, to lug around a giant-sized portion of food. So after packing everything they could possibly carry, they sat down beside a giant waterfall and proceeded to feast on the rest.

"I'm not going to lie," Katerina said between mouthfuls of biscuit, "this is a lot more what I had in mind when you said we'd be living deep in the woods."

Dylan spread a helping of butter across his toast with the tip of his hunting knife, chuckling all the while. "Biscuits and tea? Someone got used to the finer things back on the farm."

She tensed for a moment, then let it go. It had become clear over the course of their travels that both of them had secrets. But as long as he wasn't spilling his, she kept hers close to the vest.

"And what about you?" she asked with a rueful grin. "You used to the finer things?"

Dylan licked the butter off the blade before sticking it back in his jacket. "Clearly."

"I'm serious," she giggled, "you may act like this rough and tumble mountain man, but there are some things that you can't hide. Literary references. Patterns of speech." She cocked her head curiously, looking him up and down. Just the other day, he'd sarcastically quoted the Gutenberg Bible. "You've clearly been educated. How did that come about? For a travelling thief, I mean."

He flashed her a grin. "I thought we agreed I wasn't a thief."

She grinned back. "Stop dodging the question."

Perhaps it was the sudden abundance of food. A luxury that can't possibly be overstated for two slightly malnourished people living in the woods. Perhaps it was the fact that they'd recently walked unharmed out of the cave of a giant. But something had loosened his tongue.

He set down a bottle of cider as the grin faded slowly from his face. It faded into something thoughtful. Something almost nostalgic.

"My mother taught me," he said quietly. "My father wanted me to get a tutor, which was the custom at the time. But she wanted to teach me herself. Science and mathematics. History and literature. Whatever she could get her hands on. It was all there."

His eyes warmed for a moment, softening with a tenderness that Kate-rina had never seen before. She couldn't help but soften in return. "Where is your mother now?"

Just like that, the tenderness faded. The warm light vanished from his eyes.

"She's dead," he answered bluntly. "Both my parents are dead."

That was the end of the conversation. Neither one of them said anymore. A few minutes after they'd finished Dylan pushed to his feet, surveying the remaining supplies with a trained eye. "We should haul these down to the nearest village, see what kind of price we can get."

Katerina looked down in surprise, then realized the obvious practicality of his words. “Oh. Right.” She’d been planning on merely leaving it. A gift to the forest creatures.

*Stop thinking like a princess, and start thinking like a fugitive. Waste not, want not.*

“There’s one just a few miles down the road.” He squinted through the trees, trying to gauge the distance. “We should make it there before noon. Can you take the cider?”

“Yeah.” Katerina scooped up the leather straps and flung the bottles over her shoulder. The second they were balanced she grabbed up the deer-skin blanket they used in the tent, as well as whatever cooking supplies she could manage before slipping them quickly into her pack. The cloak was the next to go on. Hair back. Hood up. The bottom of it tucked safely into the tops of her boots so it wouldn’t drag—a lesson she’d learned the hard way after getting stuck in some brambles.

It was a necessary routine, but a quick one. She didn’t realize Dylan was staring at her until she’d already made it to the bottom of the hill.

“Well, look at you.” His eyes twinkled as he brushed a stray lock of hair away from her eyes, tucking it safely back into her hood. “A seasoned traveler. Even survived your first giant.”

She blushed with embarrassment, but couldn’t resist a small smile. “It helped that he gave me soup.”

Dylan laughed shortly, then shook his head—staring off into the horizon. “It helped that he gave you soup...”



## Chapter 8

Although Katerina wouldn't have believed it just a few weeks before, her legs had become conditioned for a mountain hike. They made it into the village well before noon, and were able to set up an impromptu stand to sell their remaining food before the local workmen came back from the mines for lunch. As fresh-made jam and butter were in short supply, especially the delicious ones Bernie had provided, they sold all their wares quickly and were left counting their coins.

"Not bad," Dylan murmured, slipping a handful of bronze into a leather pouch inside his jacket. "Not quite enough for what we need to buy...but it's close."

"And what exactly is it that we need to buy?" Katerina asked, sticking close to Dylan as she dodged the usual curious stares from the townsfolk.

Strangers were seldom seen in those parts; towns tended to act as giant families, and any traveler from the outside world was news indeed. Let alone travelers that looked like her and Dylan.

Sure enough she heard the telltale giggling, and looked up to see a group of blushing girls hurry past, casting him secret looks as they whispered behind their hands.

"I need a new handle for my hatchet. It split up the middle when that flippin' giant threw me across the field. And you need a new a pair of shoes. Proper hiking ones."

Katerina turned to him in surprise, automatically glancing down at her tiny feet. While the rest of her wardrobe might have changed, she was still wearing the same dainty slippers as when she'd left the castle, and they weren't holding up well to the mountain terrain. "Oh, I didn't..." She trailed off, not knowing quite what to say. "I mean, can we afford something like that?"

A little grin crept up the side of his face as he continued packing the supplies they'd be taking with them. "I think we can splurge just this once. Heaven knows I love shoe shopping."

Katerina let out a giggle, which was soon echoing across the town square. She looked over again to see the same group of girls still watching, hiding behind the door of the local pub. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes and was about to get back to work, when a sudden question occurred to her. One she hadn't thought to ask until that very moment. "Dylan...do you have a girlfriend?"

He almost dropped the bag he was holding. Those blue eyes of his shot up in surprise before hastily lowering back to the ground. "What do you mean?"

A mischievous smile danced in her eyes, and she suddenly found herself highly interested in his response. "It isn't a difficult question. What part of it didn't you understand?"

"No, I... uh... meant, why are you asking me?"

This time it was Katerina's turn to suddenly not know where to look, taken aback by the directness of the question. She fumbled for a moment, before the girls giggled again and she found her escape. "I'm just saying...you're breaking a lot of hearts over there. The least you could do is show them some skin. Do a little dance or something."

He glanced towards the pub in surprise, noticing the girls for the first time, before returning to his work with a look of complete indifference. "A dance, huh? Show some skin?"

She flashed him a grin and tightened the strap on her bag. "If nothing else, we may be able to get some more coin—"

"Princess Katerina?!"

She and Dylan froze at the same time. Eyes fixed on the ground. Every muscle hardening perfectly still. They were facing away from whoever had spoken, and without turning around it was impossible to gauge how bad the situation might be.

One guard? A dozen?

Katerina's heart pounded behind her eyes as a strange tingling sensation started spreading up the base of her neck. She was going into shock. It was easy to recognize, but hard to avoid. At any rate, she didn't have time to be shocked right now. She needed to breathe. She needed to think.

"But I thought she was older than the prince. That they were twins, but she was born first."

*Wait... what?*

The icy panic holding the princess loosened its grasp just enough that she was able to turn around. That she was able to glance over her shoulder and see the two farmers talking behind her.

“I thought so, too, but I guess not.” The taller of the two men folded his arms authoritatively, then spat on the ground. “If Kailas is on the throne, he has to be the rightful heir.”

*The rightful heir.*

Just hearing the words was enough to make her blood boil. The image in front of her started pulsing with rage, and she was about to lose herself entirely when a hand clamped down on her arm.

“Kat?”

She jumped like she’d been burned, and looked up to see Dylan standing in between her and the farmers.

He was staring down at her with a very strange expression on his face. A mixture of concern and a sort of abstract caution she didn’t fully understand. He studied her for a moment, trying to decide what to say, when he cocked his head suddenly to the main road. “There’s another village just a few miles from here. They might have what we need.” His dark hair spilled across his forehead as he stared into her eyes. “Do you want to leave?”

It was a strange question. One made even stranger by the fact that they were already in a village, and just over his shoulder she could see rows upon rows of little shops.

But in that specific moment, none of that seemed to matter.

Katerina took one more look at the farmers behind her. One more look at the chain circling around Dylan’s neck. And she suddenly couldn’t stand to be in the town any longer. “Yes.” She pulled her arm away and stormed up the street. “Let’s go.”

They left without a backward glance. Without a word between them. But it wasn’t until the little village was far behind them that Katerina realized the obvious question.

She knew why she had frozen.

But why had Dylan frozen, too?





THEY HIKED THE FOUR miles to the next village in relative silence. Either unwilling or unable to address what had transpired in the marketplace. Oddly enough, it was Dylan's silence that frightened Katerina more than anything else. More than questions, or accusations, or even carrying on as though nothing had happened. Because something *had* happened. She just didn't know what.

Fortunately, she didn't have long to wait. Before it would have seemed possible, a chorus of familiar sounds echoed up the road. The sound of people laughing, people talking, people bargaining as they haggled over things to buy. Both she and Dylan came to a simultaneous pause before proceeding onward at the same time. Moving with an instinctual synchronicity. Never more than a few inches of space between them. As two travelling companions alone in the world tended to do.

"Now *this* is more like it."

They stopped at the top of a hill, looking out over the encampment in the canyon below. It was an outdoor market on wheels. A giant, multi-colored extravaganza. Teeming with life. Bursting with activity. But that wasn't all there was to it. For a second, Katerina simply stared. Then her eyes widened as she began to slowly process what she was seeing.

"None of them..." She trailed off, feeling very much like she'd stepped out of the real world and into one of her childhood storybooks. "None of them are human."

Indeed, they were everything but.

Dwarves were peddling their treasures. Trolls and pixies were working side by side. There were clusters of fairies selling nectar from a high-hanging row of potted plants, and a pack of shifters was challenging everyone who walked past to arm wrestle (after inadvertently consuming all the ale they'd been intending to sell). Scores of witches, and goblins, and vampires, and nymphs were wandering from booth to booth. At times they'd pause to make a purchase. At times they'd pause to flirt. But most often they simply wandered around. Chattering noisily. Drinking heavily. Completely isolated from the rest of the world in the safety of their own little bubble.

*Carnival of freaks.*

"*This* is where we're going?" Katerina asked, failing to understand Dylan's enthusiasm. While she might be literally aching to see some of the

creatures up close, after her last encounter with the supernatural world she was more than a little hesitant to venture any closer. “Down there?”

He felt her stiffen, and glanced down with a crooked smile. “Relax. I can feel you stressing from here. Just stay close, and you’ll be fine.”

*Yeah, or maybe I’ll be attacked by vampires. Or kidnapped by dwarves. Stranger things have happened. Like, VERY recently.*

She put her hands on her hips and tried her best to sound reasonable. “You do realize that we’re going to stand out, right?”

A look of anticipation danced in his eyes as he took her by the wrist and started leading her down the hill. “In this crowd...what better way is there to blend in?”

What better way indeed?

As ironic as it was, Dylan was right. No one gave them a second glance as they wandered through the bustling market. There was simply too much else to see. There were fire-breathers and baton-twirlers. Contortionists, and a woman who looked suspiciously as though she might be part bird. Everywhere you looked, there was something new and exciting. Katerina was so spellbound that she hardly realized someone was talking to her until a wrinkled hand grabbed her by the wrist.

“Such beautiful eyes you have, my dear.”

She looked down in surprise to see the most ancient, mottled, semi-terrifying lady she’d ever seen. Her yellowing fingernails were long enough to curl. Her beady eyes seemed to pierce right through the princess’ skin. And her brittle white hair framed a face so overtaken by a hooked-nose that there was little room for anything else. But, despite being born sometime in the Stone Age, she was nothing if not strong. Already, the tips of Katerina’s fingers were starting to turn blue.

“I’m...I’m sorry?”

*A hag, she suddenly realized. This must be a hag.*

She elbowed Dylan discreetly in the ribs to get his attention, while the hag took a step closer, curling a crooked finger around the princess’ cheek. Katerina shuddered at the touch.

“You have such beautiful eyes,” she repeated, a hungry look flashing in her own. “I’ll give you twenty shillings for the left.”

“For the left...” Katerina trailed off, her face paling in horror. “For my left eye?!”

A strong hand pulled her backward, out of the hag’s grasp.

“No, thank you,” Dylan said sweetly.

A second later, he was tugging her down the street. The old woman melted into the crowd, pouting, as Katerina struggled clumsily to keep pace. She couldn’t help flashing continual looks over her shoulder, as if at any moment the crone might reappear and demand her right eye as well. “Did you just...” she panted in shock, clawing at his arm, “...did you just hear what she—”

“Yeah, I did.” He came to a sudden stop, far too preoccupied with his own problems to care much about hers. “Take it as a compliment. In the meantime, we’re going to need a bit more money than what we have now.”

Katerina waited for further elaboration, but none came. Instead he fell silent, levelling her with an expectant stare. She stared back for a moment, waiting, before flashing a sarcastic smile. “Well, why don’t I just run down to the magical money store and get some?”

“That’s hilarious.” He didn’t crack a smile. “But not exactly what I had in mind. Do you have any skills? Cooking? Sewing? Singing? Anything at all that could be of use?”

Perhaps he didn’t realize how condescending he sounded, or perhaps he did. With Dylan, it was hard to tell. Katerina folded her arms defensively over her chest, eyes narrowing with a glare. “Do *you* have any useful skills?” she fired back.

“I most certainly do.” Without further ado, he raised his voice and called out over the crowd. “Does anyone here need someone killed?”

Katerina’s mouth fell open in shock as the creatures nearest to them glanced over curiously, then talked amongst themselves. She’d thought it was some kind of terrible joke, but not a moment later a springy little man in a giant sunhat waved his hand about excitedly.

“I do! I have someone I need killed!”

“Perfect.” Dylan nodded at the man, then handed Katerina a shilling. “Take this, get us both some lunch. I’ll be back within the hour.”

“You have got to be joking!” she exclaimed.

He frowned at the coin before glancing at the pub. "It won't be more than that."

"No! I mean about the—"

"Gotta go." He swung his pack over his shoulder as the little man eagerly weaved his way through the crowd. "One hour. Don't go wandering off by yourself. Stay at the pub."

Katerina quickly slipped the shilling into her pocket, fighting the rising panic in her chest. "But I thought we were supposed to stick—"

A second later, he was gone.

"—together."

Her shoulders wilted as she was left standing perfectly still in the middle of the bustling crowd. Then her head turned towards the pub and she started trudging forward with a quiet sigh.

"They'd better have biscuits..."



AFTER HER LAST VISIT to a tavern, Katerina had learned to be cautious. After being stolen by a band of thugs away from said tavern, that caution had developed into a healthy fear.

She sat at a private booth in the back corner, where she had a good view of the action without really being a part of it. It was a wise decision. Over the course of the next hour, she witnessed no less than nine fights, five dance-offs, and one very uncomfortable proposal.

A dwarf drunkenly serenaded a nymph. A shifter proudly proclaimed he could turn into the 'king of beasts' before accidentally shrinking into a hedgehog. And unless Katerina was very much mistaken, the same troll she'd seen dancing in the first tavern was dancing here as well—eyes closed with a beatific smile on his face as he swayed back and forth to a melancholy ballad.

*And this is why we're supposed to stick together...*

As it neared the hour mark, Katerina got up from the table and made her way up to the bar to order some food. They seemed to have a wide selection, but she had yet to see anything remotely edible for humans. Although

a part of her dearly wanted to order Dylan some scarab shells just to see the look on his face.

“What’ll it be today, miss?”

Her eyes flickered up to the bar as a man with three too many arms wiped off the counter while simultaneously offering her a menu. She took it quickly, not wanting to stare, and ordered the first thing innocuous enough for her to recognize.

“Two sandwiches and two ciders please.” She laid her money upon the counter and tapped her fingers nervously as he disappeared into the kitchen. It had only been about thirty seconds since she’d gotten up from her table, but already she was getting ‘the eye’ from no fewer than seven different men seated around the bar.

*Don’t accept drinks from anyone, and don’t let anyone drink you. Rules to live by.*

To *live* by is right.

When Katerina finally chanced a peek around, she saw a man grinning at her from the end of the bar. A grin that was made all the more feral by the two giant fangs hanging all the way down to his collar. The man by his side wasn’t much better. He was suave enough to blow a kiss, but when he turned to the side Katerina could have sworn she saw a pair of gills.

She stifled a shudder and took the tray of food as soon as it was offered. With a hasty “keep the change,” she swiftly headed back to the table, keeping her head down and her eyes locked firmly on the floor.

If only it was enough.

“Well, hello there!”

The tray vanished right out of her hands, disappearing into thin air. Her lips parted with a gasp, and she jerked up her chin to see the tallest man in the world smiling down at her. At a first glance, he seemed to be all limbs. Legs as long as her body. Arms that stretched down to the floor. But upon closer inspection, he was actually quite small. The impressive height, as well as everything else about him, was nothing but an illusion. The same sort of illusion that had stolen her lunch.

“Hello yourself,” she snapped, her temper getting the better of her. She’d watched these hooligans long enough to have no patience with them now. “Want to give me back that tray?”

He lowered to the floor with a toothy grin. "What's the hurry? I've been watching you for a while, you know. The most beautiful girl in the village." He curled his finger through the air, and a sprig of flowers popped into his hand. "I was hoping we might spend a little time together..."

"Absolutely not!" She swiped the flowers away and cast them to the floor. "Now give me back that tray before I—"

"Before you what?" he taunted playfully, thrilled that she was talking to him no matter how angry her tone. "You know, I think you're even cuter when you're mad."

*Oh, that's it!*

Without stopping to think, she swung her fist towards his face. It was a strong punch. One that came with absolutely no warning. She might have made contact, too, if the man hadn't seen it coming and vanished into the air. The second he was gone his magic went with him. The flowers disappeared while her tray popped back into sight, sitting innocently on her table.

"That's right, you'd better run!" she gloated, smoothing down her dress. Those who had seen the altercation lifted their hands with a polite smattering of applause, further boosting her rapidly inflating ego. "You have to use force with upstarts like that," she said authoritatively, wishing very much that Dylan had been there to see her success. "Little coward—"

If only she had stopped there. But ever since her father was murdered and she was chased out of her rightful kingdom by a pair of hellish dogs, the princess was stuck with the very worst luck.

Her foot caught on the edge of a table, and her dress twisted around her legs. Less than a second later, she was falling in what felt like slow motion. Falling right...*through* one of the patrons?

She let out a frightened shriek as the man flashed her a cartoonishly-somber look. But just like clockwork, a strong hand came out of nowhere and caught her a second before she hit the floor.

"Making friends, I see."

She straightened up to see Dylan staring down at her with a beaming smile. There was a flush of color to his cheeks and a windswept look of triumph about him. It only made things even worse.

"I wasn't..." Her cheeks blossomed bright red as she gestured back to the tray. "If you must know, I was actually teaching these good people a lesson about...holy hot-sticks!" She both forgot and remembered all at once. "That man! Dylan, I think that I actually—"

"—went through him. Yeah, you did."

She paled in horror as she glanced back to where he was still sitting, but Dylan merely flashed the man a cheerful smile. A smile that was absolutely not returned.

"Don't worry about Lester—he died ages ago. Hardly even notices anymore." The translucent outline of the man seemed to shimmer in rage as Dylan grinned again. "You all right, Lester?"

The ghost flipped him off and returned his eyes to the table, staring longingly at an untouched drink. Dylan waved obliviously and led Katerina back to their table.

"Yeah, he's great..." She stared at him in shock as he settled down at the booth—tearing into his sandwich with the hunger of a thousand men—before perching tentatively beside him. He might be unaware of the giant elephant in the room, but she was unable to let it go so easily. And, no, it wasn't the ghost.

"Did you really just kill someone?"

There was a pause in the eating. Followed by a splash of cider.

"Not *someone* so much as...*something*." He lifted his arms and looked down in disgust at a thick layer of green ooze covering the front of his jacket. "That'll take ages to clean..." A rather mournful expression flitted across his face before he lit up again. "But hey, I got the new hatchet I needed as well as some shoes for you. They're in my pack—I'll show you later."

So many questions. So little time. But, strangely enough, now that the world had settled back on its axis and the two of them were reunited, eating sandwiches, it was a different question entirely that rose to the princess' lips. "What did you mean earlier? When you said I wasn't your type?"

Dylan choked on a piece of bread and washed it quickly down with a drink. He resurfaced a moment later with an unexpected smile. "Where the heck did that come from?"

Katerina grinned guiltily, pushing her sandwich around on her plate. "I was just wondering. I mean, when you asked me earlier today if I had any

skills, if I could do anything useful..” She trailed off, the smile melting off her face. “Do you wish you hadn’t agreed to this?”

He froze a moment in absolute surprise before setting the sandwich back on his plate. “Kat, I never wanted to give you the impression that—”

“Because I get it,” she said quickly. “You’ve been out on your own for longer than you can probably remember. You know how to live off the land. You know how to fight. You can take care of yourself.” A sudden pang tightened her chest. She didn’t realize how jealous she was of those words until she said them out loud. “It isn’t any wonder that someone like me isn’t your type.”

His lips parted as a very strange expression flickered across his face. One that bore a strong resemblance to that soft tenderness she’d seen back in the woods. It was gone before she could say for sure. Replaced with an enchanting smile. “Yes, except that’s not what I meant in the slightest.” His eyes twinkled as he took a deep drink of his cider. “Beautiful, inquisitive, resilient, stubborn...that’s not my type at all.”



THE TWO OF THEM FINISHED eating as quickly as possible and made their way out of the outdoor marketplace, heading back to the main road. Dylan told her quietly over their food that he’d heard rumors and bits of idle talk that groups of strange men had been combing the countryside—working their way deeper and deeper away from the kingdom. While the news hardly came as a surprise, especially after what the giant, Bernie, had seen, it was plenty of motivation for them to get out of the open and into the woods.

“I still can’t believe you bought me shoes,” Katerina murmured as they headed past a caravan of shifters and goblins who’d set up shop on the side of the road. “The mighty Dylan Aires, shopping for women’s footwear. I certainly hoped you remembered that red is *out* this season—”

A low whistle interrupted her teasing, and the two of them glanced over to see trio of shifters gawking appreciatively from the side of the road. They may have looked like men on the outside, but whatever beast lay within had most certainly endowed them with strength. Even hidden beneath



their clothing, Katerina could see the thick, muscular arms. Their powerful frames leaning casually against the side of a wagon, an assortment of need-less weapons dangling from their belts.

“Well, aren’t you the luckiest man in the kingdom?” The tallest one called to Dylan, peeling himself away from the wagon and walking towards them with a surprisingly friendly smile. “I don’t know if I’ve ever seen such a pretty girl in person. She yours?”

*Am I...his?! What the heck kind of place is this?!*

Dylan avoided the question but smiled back, keeping things intentionally light and cheerful. “Where are you folks headed?”

By now, the other shifters had joined them and a group of goblins came out as well, each one looking Katerina up and down before joining in the conversation.

“We heard there was a market nearby.” The man gestured to the wagons behind him, each one filled to the brim with everything from food, to clothing, to blankets, to blades. “Thought we might try our luck. See if we can unload any of this merchandise.”

*And I wonder where you got that merchandise.* Katerina’s eyes flickered over the wagons, suddenly convinced that everything she was looking at was either stolen or forged.

Dylan obviously thought so, too, but he kept a smile on his face and his opinions safely to himself. “I’m sure you will. The place is packed.”

“You just came from there?” The shifter pretended to be surprised, although it was clear they’d been walking down the road. “Shame. We were hoping we might entice you to trade. The girl for some food?” he asked coaxingly. “Or maybe a new blade to keep you occupied?”

*Are they freakin’ serious?!*

Both she and Dylan stiffened at the same time, although he kept his face a perfect mask of calm. For a second he raised a teasing eyebrow, pretending to consider, before refusing outright.

“If only I could.” He wrapped a deliberate arm around her waist, pulling her closer in an unmistakable display of possessiveness. “But I’m afraid I can’t do without her.” His eyes flashed to her face, twinkling with the hint of a secret smile. “She’s indispensable.”

For a split second, she was terrified they were going to take her by force. Terrified that the entire encounter would dissolve into a bloodbath that neither she nor Dylan would be able to walk away from. But the shifter in charge merely threw his head back with a laugh.

“Like I said...it’s a shame.” He lifted a hand to wave, while simultaneously signaling for the wagons to keep moving. “Safe travels. And please come find me...if you ever change your mind.”

Dylan’s arm tightened around her waist as he forced a tight smile of farewell. It wasn’t until the first wagon had passed them by that he dared to release her. And even then, she maintained a close distance as they walked through the tiny crowd. Dylan didn’t seem to mind. Men and goblins parted in front of them as they cut through, but they got their fair share of whispers and stares. At one point, Katerina could have sworn an especially brazen goblin grabbed Dylan’s *derrière* as they walked by.

It didn’t matter. He kept moving. Never slowing down. Never making direct eye contact with anyone they passed. It was a good strategy. The only strategy that was guaranteed to keep them both alive apparently. And it worked, too.

It worked all the way until a drunken shifter near the back of the group reached out and caught the edge of Katerina’s skirt.

Dylan had him up against a wagon before she could even turn around. His face pale with rage and the edge of his knife pressed against the man’s throat.

“Dylan, no!” she gasped, but it was too late.

The second the rest of them heard the commotion, the caravan stopped in place. Within seconds, the shifter they’d been speaking to—the one in charge—hurried to the back of the group, stopping short in surprise when he saw the scuffling pair by the wagon.

“What the heck is this?!”

Dylan glanced over his shoulder, but the knife didn’t move an inch. “I’d assumed when you bid us safe travels that you were being sincere. That we could pass through without harm.” He spoke through gritted teeth, visibly fighting the urge to cut the shifter in half. “I’d assumed that your word carried the authority for the rest of the group. Perhaps I was mistaken.”

Katerina's eyes shot to the man in terror. It was a brilliantly worded explanation, one that required their release in order for the man to save face. She just wasn't sure that kind of logic would work on people who lived in such a manner. The kind who were always itching for a fight.

She underestimated their pride.

"You were *not* mistaken."

The man strode forward and ripped Dylan's knife away with his bare hands. The shifter pinned against the wagon gasped in relief, but no sooner had he done so than his own leader grabbed him by the throat—punching him three times in quick succession. He crumpled to the ground without a sound. Eyes sealed shut. Out cold.

"And you will have no other problems. I assure you."

His eyes flashed as he cocked his head towards the open road. It was a welcome dismissal, but a curt one. If Dylan hadn't so publicly challenged his authority, there would most likely have been a different man lying on the ground.

And Katerina wouldn't be leaving anytime soon.

She stood staring, her breath caught in her throat.

Dylan said not a word. He just nodded swiftly and grabbed Katerina by the arm, pulling her down the road at such a pace it was all she could do to keep from breaking into a jog. They didn't slow down until the wagons were far behind them. Even then, they kept up a steady clip until they'd lost themselves in the greenery of the woods. It was only then that Dylan suddenly released her, spinning around so that he could examine her for himself.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly, looking her up and down while avoiding her eyes.

She nodded mutely. Now that the danger was behind them, she was far more interested in Dylan's reaction than anything the shifters had done.

*Indispensable, was she? Impossible to live without?*

"I'm sorry I couldn't do more," he muttered, still avoiding her gaze. "But with so many of them and just the two of us...I couldn't see a way to kill the man while keeping you safe."

*Perhaps it's because I'm beautiful, inquisitive, resilient, and stubborn...*

“At any rate, I don’t imagine we’ll be seeing them again.” He took a step back, squinting up at the mid-afternoon sun. “Bands like that usually travel... they usually... why are you smiling?”

It was true. Despite everything that had just happened, Katerina was standing there with a giant smile plastered on her face. She didn’t answer him. She didn’t say a word. She simply took a step forward, stretched up on her toes, and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you for the shoes.”



## Chapter 9

“I’m telling you the truth!” Katerina exclaimed. “The guy had to be at least nine feet tall! He vanished our sandwiches into thin air, challenged me to some sort of duel, then pulled out a sword!”

Dylan kept his eyes on the ground, a faint smile playing about his lips. “A sword, huh? Sounds intense.”

The two had been walking for the last three hours, mostly uphill, straight into the heart of the forest, losing themselves in the emerald trees. It had been a difficult journey, filled with steep ravines and mountain climbs, but their spirits were surprisingly high. The longer the journey, the taller the tales. When Katerina had started telling Dylan about the tavern twenty minutes earlier, she had more or less stuck to the facts. By now, the magician was a near-giant. The sprig of flowers had turned into a blade. And the flirting had escalated to a full-out declaration of war. After kissing his cheek earlier she still touched her lower lip periodically, swearing she could still feel the faint roughness of his chin. He needed a shave. It had been a few days, and there was a light shadow now showing on his jawline. It made him more rugged, more—

Enough! She wasn’t interested. He was a thief. Taking her mother’s necklace. He was only doing what he needed to because a deal had been struck. And after the last near altercation with the shifters... She forced herself to take a deep breath. He’d only done what he had to in order to protect his own hide, not hers.

At least, that’s what she kept telling herself.

Where was she again on her story about the pub? When Dylan had so irresponsibly left her alone?

“It *was* intense!” Katerina’s eyes were wide as saucers. By now, she was half-believing the story herself. “So, anyway, he swung at me a couple times—nothing I couldn’t handle. But before he could strike the final blow, I back-flipped over his head.”

“I thought he was nine feet tall.”

“...I’m a world-class jumper.”

They exchanged a quick look, and she stared at his cheek where she’d kissed him before the story continued anew.

“By the time he turned back around, I was ready.” Katerina lifted her fists in the air, enthusiastically miming a fight that never happened. “One punch to the nose—that’s all it took. The guy went down hard. Took half the tavern down with him. He may have cracked the floor.”

Dylan nodded practically, reaching out to help her over a fallen log. “And that’s when you tripped through Lester?”

Ah, yes, she’d forgotten about that little part.

She accepted his hand automatically, chewing on her bottom lip as she stalled for time. Keep telling the story, when he knew the ending, or focus on the warmth of his touch? In the end, she decided it was probably best to just change the subject.

“So what about you?” she asked casually. “How did you get covered in green slime?”

He grimaced automatically as he remembered, sending a simultaneous tremor through his hands. “That’s a story for another time. But I’m glad you enjoyed the market. Aside from that old woman trying to take your eyes, I think the whole thing was a huge success.”

*How could I have possibly forgotten about that? My life has gotten so strange.* Katerina nodded fervently, her mind racing as she played back the events of the day. Yes, there were some near-misses. And yes, she’d received some unwanted attention that could have landed her in serious trouble if Dylan hadn’t intervened. But she couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt more alive. More free. More connected to and captivated by the world around her.

And on that note...

“So all these creatures,” she began excitedly, “the entire supernatural community I learned about as a kid...they’re all real?” She felt silly asking the question, but on the other hand she couldn’t help but be amazed. As a rule, magic was never allowed within the castle—Alwyn aside—and although she’d grown up reading about ‘mythical’ creatures to her heart’s content, she and the rest of the kingdom had been led to believe that most everything had been decimated to the point of extinction over the course

of the rebellions. Magic was little more than a myth. Her books were little more than fairytales.

But what she saw today...that defied the imagination! And she'd seen a giant! Had lunch with the fine chap!

"I have no idea what you learned as a child," Dylan responded. "But after having spent most of my life amongst them, I know for a fact they'll resent being called *creatures*. Best keep that term to yourself."

Katerina nodded swiftly, but she was on a roll. Her mind was racing and her eyes were dancing with a million memories she could hardly dare to believe. "But what about mermaids?" she questioned, rapid-fire. "If there're such things as hags, *please* tell me there're such things as mermaids!"

Dylan laughed, clearly unable to stop himself. "How are we actually having this conversation?"

"And what about werewolves?!" Her eyes widened at the mere thought. She remembered the pictures from her stories. Giant black wolves, silhouetted against the shadowy horizon. They were terrifying. Absolutely terrifying. "You know, it's coming up on a full moon—"

"There are no such things as werewolves." He cast her a sideways glance and continued cautiously forward. "There are *wolves*—shifters, I mean. The men we ran into by the wagons, they're from a well-known pack."

She stopped dead in her tracks, staring up at him in shock. "Are you serious? How do you know that?"

One way or another, it certainly explained his sudden discovery of manners. Discounting that little bit at the end with the knife.

He ran a hand back through his hair, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground. "I've been out here for a while, Kat. You get to know people. You get to know where they're from."

She didn't understand his sudden caginess. The sudden need to avoid her gaze. But, at the moment, her mind was too wrapped up in other matters to really notice. "I can't believe they shift into wolves. I mean, you did say something about shifters, but at the time I hadn't really been paying attention. I was more worried about staying alive. But wolves? That's something I never would've guessed."

His eyes danced with sudden amusement as he turned to look at her for the first time. "Why do you say that?"

“They were huge! The guy in charge had a neck the size of my leg.” She shook her head and continued marching through the underbrush. “I assumed they shifted into bison or something.”

Dylan threw his head back with a sudden laugh. The same sparkling sound she’d heard when she was swimming. The one that echoed brightly through the trees. She glanced at him from the corner of her eye and found herself star-struck, the same way she’d been the first time they met.

It wasn’t something he could hide. And it wasn’t something he could fake. Whatever it was about him, it was deep inside his bones. A stunning magnetism that seemed to draw in everyone else around him. An almost otherworldly beauty, as if he’d been kissed by some distant star.

*Truth...who are you?*

She wanted to ask. She wanted to ask more than anything in the world.

But she didn’t. If only because she didn’t want to do anything to risk losing that breathtaking smile. She asked another question instead. One that was only slightly less important.

“So... what about mermaids?”

The laughter continued, and without seeming to think about it he reached out to tuck a lock of her fiery red hair behind her ear. “I’ve never seen a mermaid. Although I would very much like to.”

Katerina snorted as they scampered up the side of a ravine and headed into a clearing just beyond. “Yeah, I bet you would. Until she lured you to the edge of the water and pulled you in.”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t mind.”

“Until you drowned?”

“...yeah, until I drowned.”

The two of them laughed again, hands in their pockets, kicking up piles of leaves as they made their way through the picturesque meadow. *It really is beautiful*, Katerina thought as she gazed around. *Peaceful*. A little postcard, bordered on all sides by mountain trees.

It was the kind of place where it seemed like nothing bad could ever happen. A tranquil little oasis, hidden from the rest of the tumultuous world. A part of her would happily stay there forever.

Of course, that’s when the postcard shattered into a million little pieces.



“Whatever happens next, it’s important that you don’t scream.”

Katerina’s head jerked up in surprise as her happy thought bubble popped mid-air. “...what?”

But Dylan was already gone. In a movement almost too fast to follow, he doubled back suddenly and leapt into a grove of trees. There was a violent scuffle, followed by a high-pitched shriek. When he emerged, a moment later, he was dragging someone out by the arm.

*What the heck?!*

Katerina stumbled back in shock, then let out a forbidden scream.

At a first glance, the girl looked rather wild. There were leaves in her hair, brambles in her clothes, and a thick coating of dirt had painted her from head to toe.

At a second glance, the girl looked rather beautiful. She was about their age, just eighteen or nineteen years old, and had deceptively delicate features considering the ferocity of her scowl. Her eyes were a light hazel that glowed green when they caught the light, and her hair was the exact color of cinnamon, falling in a straight line down to her shoulders.

She was stunning, but oddly frightening at the same time. Like a homicidal doll who’d gotten lost in the woods. A doll who was doing her very best to kick Dylan’s ass.

“Let me GO you little worm!” She leapt up with a ferocious kick, but he held her far enough away that it couldn’t touch him. “I didn’t do ANYTHING!”

In a move that was just as surprising as it was effective she flipped over where she stood, wrenching her arm free in the process. It was a magnificent show of both grace and agility, performed at a blinding speed.

Unfortunately, Dylan caught her again the second she landed. “No, you didn’t do anything,” he replied, sounding remarkably calm considering the circumstances. “You’ve just been following us for the last ten miles.”

The girl stopped struggling at the same time Katerina’s mouth fell open in shock. “Ten miles? And you knew this whole time?!” she cried. “Why didn’t you say anything?!”

“I had to be sure she wasn’t a spy.” Dylan answered her question, but kept his eyes locked on the stranger the whole time. “That she wasn’t sent

ahead to lead the others. But it's been ten miles. And she hasn't made any intentional tracks."

*Okay, how the heck does he KNOW that?! He was talking with me the whole time!*

Although her entire nefarious plot had been called into the open, the girl didn't back down for an instant. In fact, she seemed incapable of admitting defeat. "I might just be going the same direction. You don't know!" She tugged at her arm again, literally growling in frustration when it didn't budge. Her second kick failed to land as well so she settled for stomping on Dylan's foot, smearing it with mud.

Katerina didn't understand it. The unwavering spirit. The unshakable defiance that seemed to dictate her every move. It didn't seem to matter that she only came up to Dylan's chin. It didn't seem to matter that she was outnumbered two-to-one and had been caught red-handed.

When Dylan failed to release her, she punched him as hard as she could in the chest...then lifted her head with a vicious glare when he failed to react.

"...coward."

*What?!*

The initial alarm at being followed had begun to fade, and Katerina was finding herself strangely endeared to the girl. At the very least she deserved to be committed, not imprisoned.

Unfortunately, not everyone shared her generous view.

"Okay." Dylan took a deep breath, visibly reining in his temper. "So are you going to tell me why you've been shadowing us or not?"

He seemed to anticipate what her answer would be. Sure enough, the second he asked the question she took on the expression of a sixth-century martyr. Tilting back her head with an air of righteous indignation worthy of the theater itself.

"Not until you release me and apologize for my so-called capture." She jutted out her chin, matching him glare for glare. "At which point, I'll require some of your cider. Some of us weren't able to rehydrate every time we took a break."

“Unbelievable.” Without another word, Dylan tightened his grasp and began dragging her back into the woods, muttering dark profanities under his breath the entire time.

The girl dug in her heels, but was no match against his weight, while Katerina hurried after them with a shout.

“Dylan—you can’t *kill* her!”

He never broke his stride. By now, his prisoner was leaving little trenches in her wake. “I’m not going to kill her,” he said resolutely. “I’m going to tie her to a tree.”

The girl folded her arms across her chest with an evil smirk. “You think that’ll stop me?”

*Okay, on second thought, she’s legitimately crazy.*

Katerina stopped in her tracks and watched as Dylan shoved her up against the base of a wide oak. It wasn’t until he fished the rope from his pack that she seemed to understand her plight.

“I’m not crazy.”

Both Dylan and Katerina looked up warily. They must’ve been thinking the same exact thing. An almost cartoonish look of conflict washed across the girl’s face, as if it was physically paining her to be the first to back down. Then her shoulders wilted and her face cleared with a sudden sigh.

“I’m not crazy,” she said again. “I saw you by the wagons, heard that you were heading toward the Black Forest. I thought maybe I could come along.”

If it was possible, this made the least amount of sense yet.

“You saw us by the wagons?” Dylan repeated. One look at his face said he wasn’t in the mood to play games. “That’s funny, I didn’t see you.”

For whatever reason, the girl blushed. Her hands twitched nervously by her side, and she seemed to be bracing herself for something. “That’s because I wasn’t exactly feeling like myself.”

For a second, the three of them just stood there. Then the girl disappeared.

“Kat—get back!”

Katerina stumbled backwards with a gasp, while Dylan’s hand flew to his blade. It took them a second to realize that she hadn’t vanished after all, she had merely shrunk in size...

And turned into a goblin?

The tiny creature blinked up at them. Giant ears. Hooked nose. The works. The ropes dropped from Dylan's hand as the goblin-girl did a little curtsy, complete with an apologetic smile.

"The name's Tanya Oberon. Pleased to meet you."

*This is...a little too much.*

Katerina fell back another step, hand over her heart, while Dylan tried his very best to keep his composure. "You were...you were one of the goblins back at the wagons?"

"I was." The air around the little beast seemed to shimmer, and a second later, the girl, Tanya, was standing back in its place. "I even introduced myself. But this is my true form."

*Introduced herself? What does she...*

Katerina clapped a hand over her mouth. *SEVEN HELLS! She's the goblin who grabbed Dylan's ass!*

Dylan made the connection at the same time. His lips parted in shock as he stared down at the tiny girl, temporarily speechless. "That was you?!"

She flashed a devilish smirk, and Katerina warmed to her on the spot.

But personal boundaries aside, there was a far more obvious issue that needed to be discussed. The implications of which Katerina was only beginning to understand.

"You're a shifter?" she asked curiously.

Tanya turned to her slowly and nodded. For a moment, the two girls simply stared at one another. Then Tanya's nervous hesitation suddenly made sense.

*A shifter that doesn't turn into an animal. A shifter that turns into people instead.*

Dylan took a step forward, a completely indecipherable expression on his face. "You're a *shape*-shifter."

Tanya nodded again. Then hung her head.

Katerina pursed her lips. Thinking hard to remember the stories she'd heard as a kid. Shape-shifters. They were the scourge of the shifter world. Regarded with even more disdain than most of the other magical creatures who made up the realm. To shift with no affiliation, no pack, was considered the lowest form of magic. Unfit to even claim the shifter name.

Her eyes flickered up to Dylan, bracing automatically for his censure.

Except Dylan wasn't one to judge. In fact, he looked her up and down with interest before flashing a small smile. "If only we were all so lucky."

It was like popping a balloon. The second he said the words the tension in the little clearing suddenly disappeared, and the unlikely trio was finally able to breathe. No longer were they standing at odds against each other. There was a chance they could even be on the same side.

"So, Tanya Oberon," Dylan inclined his head with an introductory grin, "why is it that you want to come with us to the Black Forest?" As he spoke, he reached into his pack and pulled out a bottle of cider.

Tanya took it with a grateful smile, biting off the cork and gulping down half. A second later, she gulped down the rest.

Katerina and Dylan shared a secret grin.

For a moment, things were looking up. For a moment, it looked as though everyone might actually be getting friendly.

But such things were never meant to last.

She tossed back the empty bottle with a grin, completely oblivious to the disastrous effect of her next words. "Well, to help protect the princess, of course."



## Chapter 10

“**W**hat princess?” Dylan looked behind him.

Katerina looked up, but not before shooting Tanya an if-looks-could-kill look.

“Her.” Tanya clearly didn’t notice Katerina’s glare.

“I’m not a princess.”

At the same time, Dylan said, “She’s not the princess.”

Though, somehow, Katerina thought he didn’t sound very convincing.

Several arguments happened over the course of the next few minutes. A combination of searing accusations, heated denials, vile profanities, and an eventual confession.

“I’m the princess,” Katerina said quietly, staring at the ground when she knew there was no denying it any longer.

What resulted was a three-way shouting match, the likes of which the peaceful little clearing had never heard. A showdown for the ages but, strangely enough, when the dust settled it had very little to do with the apologetic shape-shifter. It was between the princess and her reluctant protector.

Dylan hadn’t been surprised by the confession. Because he already knew. “I know.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?!” Katerina shouted as she stormed into the woods. “This whole time, I’ve been *killing* myself trying to keep it secret! Worrying about it day and night! Living in a constant state of panic! This *whole time*, Dylan, and you already freakin’ knew!”

The shape-shifter was wisely keeping her distance, but the princess was in a rage. Without a second thought, she threw down her pack and marched blindly into the woods. She didn’t care where she was going. She didn’t if she ever found her way back. The only thing she cared about was getting as much space between her and Dylan Aires as possible.

Of course, that didn’t stop her from screaming at the top of her lungs.

"You had *no reason!*" she shouted. "*No reason* in the world to keep it to yourself! Other than everything has to be so freakin' mysterious with you. Other than you like to play sick little games—"

"You're mad at *me!*!" One second, he was back in the clearing. The next, he was grabbing her by the arm, yanking her to a sudden stop. "I don't believe it. *You're* mad at me!"

"Why didn't you tell me—"

"Why didn't you tell *me!*!" The space between them grew abruptly quiet. Filled only with the sound of their shallow breathing, their chests heaving up and down. "I'm the one who has a right to be angry here, *Katerina*, not you!"

She flinched when he said her full name. There was a time when she might have wanted to hear him say it. But now, it sounded harsh and unforgiving to her ears. "I told you I'd run away from my family," she mumbled.

"Yes, but you didn't tell me it was the *royal* family," he spat. "That makes a little bit of a difference, don't you think?"

All at once, her rage disappeared. It had been brought about by panic and a misguided sense of betrayal, but it was hypocrisy at its worse. He was right. She should have told him from the start.

Her eyes lowered to the forest floor, but Dylan wasn't the type to let her off the hook so easily. He stood tall and firm in front of her, refusing to budge an inch.

"You didn't think I had a right to know what I was getting in to?" His voice had dropped to that soft, dangerous clip he'd used the night they met at the tavern. The one that sent chills down her spine. "That the people coming after you weren't some disgruntled relatives, but royal soldiers? Soldiers, and knights, and who the heck knows what else?!"

She hung her head as she felt the anger, knew his eyes flashed with rage.

"Maybe it was just that I'm a commoner." His face hardened in disgust. "What's the life of one ranger? We're all expendable to you people—"

"That's not true!" A pair of tears flew down her face as she finally lifted her head to face him. "You have to know that's not true!"

He grew unexpectedly gentle. His sky-blue eyes softened, and every hint of anger vanished from his handsome face as he stared at the wetness

on her cheeks. "Then why didn't you tell me?" he asked softly, bending down to hold her gaze. "You had so many chances..."

Yes, she had. And she'd almost taken them, every single time. By this point, Katerina couldn't even remember how many times she'd almost spilled her secret. When they were trekking through the woods each afternoon. When they were packing up the tent each morning. When they were sitting beside the evening fire, telling stories and staring up at the stars. She'd almost told him every single time. But something hadn't let her. Something held her back.

"I didn't want you to leave me."

The interrogation came to an abrupt stop as the quiet words were whispered between them. She hadn't realized them herself until she'd said them out loud, and they were certainly the last thing he'd expected to hear. He pulled back a few inches, searching her face for the truth.

"You thought that would happen?" he finally asked. "You actually thought I'd leave you?"

She bit down on her lip, refusing to let herself cry. "You did it once. Why wouldn't you do it again? When the stakes were so much higher? When there was a chance you could be killed? And to do it for—"

She broke off suddenly, refusing to let herself say anymore. Things were finally honest between them, but she'd come dangerously close to the edge of a terrible truth. A truth that had been haunting her every day since she'd left the castle.

Another tear slipped down her cheek, but a warm hand wiped it away. Tilting her face until she was staring into a pair of staggering eyes. "To do it for...what?"

For a fleeting moment, all she could do was stare. The second she said the words, it would be over. The strange understanding that had sprung up between them would be gone, and she'd be very lucky if he didn't decide to leave with it. Then the moment passed, and she pulled in a breath. "To do it for a princess."

Never before had she hated the position she held until that very moment. Never before had she been ashamed of her birth, repulsed by her own legacy. But it was true. She had seen firsthand the way the 'other half' lived. In poverty. In fear. In the knowledge that they were perceived as less



by those who were supposed to protect and lead them. And she knew firsthand, after spending her entire life in the castle, that they were absolutely right.

Her family were the oppressors. These people were the oppressed. That's all there was to it.

"Before I left the castle, I didn't know..." She trailed off, lifting her eyes to the horizon as the faces of those she'd met on her travels flashed before her eyes. Finally, when the silence could go on no longer, she simply said, "If I was in your place, I wouldn't want to help someone like me."

For the second time, they lapsed into silence. It seemed an odd place to be so...at odds. The birds were chirping in the trees above them. The afternoon breeze was rustling through their hair. If it wasn't for what they were discussing, it would have made a lovely portrait.

Then Dylan's quiet voice brought the picture back to life. "And what gives me the right to judge?"

Katerina looked up in shock. Convinced she hadn't heard him correctly. Convinced he'd meant to say goodbye instead. "I'm... excuse me, sorry?"

"Did you turn your father against his own realm? Did you enforce his laws? Write his policies?" His eyes gentled as they stared down into hers. "Did you fight in his rebellions?"

She couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe. She merely shook her head.

He bowed his head with the softest sigh before looking back up with a sad smile. "You cannot judge a person based on where they're from. You cannot hold a person responsible for the sins of their family. If there's anyone who knows that, it's me."

She didn't completely understand what he was saying. She certainly didn't understand how it connected to him.

But at least one thing had been made perfectly clear.

She was forgiven.

According to Dylan, there was nothing to forgive.

The wind danced her hair around in a fiery cloud as she gave him a tentative smile. "So you've known from the very beginning, huh? Am I that obvious? Or did the fairies tell you?"

He laughed softly, combing back his dark hair. "They didn't have to tell me. I've always known. From the minute I laid eyes on you."

Katerina nodded, then froze. Her heart quickened as she asked the final question. "Is it why you left?"

He was quiet for a moment, then his eyes danced with a twinkling smile. "It's why I came back."



IT SAID A LOT ABOUT the weight of Katerina's confession that the two most cautious people in the world had left their self-proclaimed stalker unsupervised. Little flutters of nerves started beating away in the princess' stomach as she realized that she'd also left her pack. But the moment they returned to the clearing, all their fears were put to rest.

While she had clearly been eavesdropping, Tanya had also been busy. The tent was pitched between two tall trees bordering the clearing, exactly where Dylan would have pitched it himself. A blazing fire was already waiting to greet them, and a caldron full of what smelled like the world's most delicious stew hung bubbling over the flames.

She looked up immediately when they came into view, her silky hair swinging lightly atop her shoulders. "Oh, hello there! While you two were screaming at each other, I decided to make myself useful by pilfering through Her Highness's pack. Found some food inside. Hope you don't mind."

For a second, Katerina was worried very much that Dylan *would* mind. He didn't exactly take kindly to strangers, and was even less inclined to share his things. But his eyes flickered over the little camp before warming with a gracious smile.

"Not at all. What's ours is yours."

*It was the stew. He smelled the stew.*

Tanya pushed immediately to her feet, looking from one to the other as she perched on the tips of her toes. "Do you really mean that? I can stay?"

Dylan looked her up and down before turning to Katerina. "What do you think, Kat? Could we use one more misfit?"

At this point, Katerina fervently believed they could use all the help they could get. And if that help happened to come in the form of an ass-grabbing, back-talking, princess-stalking, shape-shifting misfit...well, so

much the better. "Absolutely." She settled down onto the log without a second thought, patting the spot beside her with a grin. "Welcome to our crew."

It was perhaps the last thing that any of them had expected to happen when they woke up that morning, but despite their violent introduction, by the time they sat down around the fire, passing out bowls of stew, it was clear to see the trio had all the makings to become fast friends.

The initial introductions and standard pleasantries soon gave way to hilarious stories and the sort of bawdy jokes that would never have been allowed at the castle. The initial social boundaries soon broke down with a familiarity and natural sort of ease that spoke to years of acquaintance, not a simple shared meal over the flames of a campfire.

Tanya Oberon was a bright, vivacious girl with a searing wit and a caustic sense of humor that left even the impassive Dylan shaking with silent laughter. Blessed with both beauty and brains, the whole world should have opened its doors, but alas, such a thing was never meant to be. For no matter how high she was able to rise on her own merits, she was tethered down by a social prejudice she was unable to shake. The stigma of a shape-shifter was a shadow that followed her wherever she went. Closing those doors. Vanishing those opportunities. Turning that bright, vivacious girl into an outsider. A perpetual nomad, doomed to travel from place to place. Never settling. Never assimilating. Never able to find a place where she could truly belong.

It hadn't dampened her, exactly. It had roughly the same effect that it had on Dylan.

Instilling caution instead of trust. Experience instead of optimism. Creating walls where perhaps none had existed before. Her past, specifically, was a subject she seemed determined to avoid. Where she had come from and how she had joined up with the shifter caravan remained a mystery. What *was* made clear, was how eager she was to leave.

"—which is when I realized not only that we weren't going for ice cream after all, but also that The Sultry Scullion was, in fact, a brothel." She bit her lower lip, staring down contemplatively into her stew. "In hindsight, the name probably should have cued me in..."

Katerina's sides hurt from both laughing and trying to hold the laughter in. She had never in her life met such a paradox. The girl was her own worst enemy, and her own best friend. Either way, she was a force to be reckoned with.

"Don't feel bad." Dylan pulled out a silver flask and took a swig of whiskey. The flask was then passed around the fire. "I once spent three days at a Bedouin solstice party before realizing I had unwittingly married the chief's daughter on the first night."

The girls raised their eyebrows at the same time, and he hastily clarified. "...I had it annulled."

Tanya burst out laughing, helping herself to more whiskey, but Katerina felt the strong need to contribute something. Over the course of the night it had become clear that, while the unlikely trio was approximately the same age, they had vastly different levels of experience. Both Tanya and Dylan had been on their own since childhood. Travelling the world. Drifting from adventure to adventure. Getting into the kinds of mischief that one could hardly believe.

But Katerina? The high princess of all the land? She had scarcely been outside the walls of the castle. Until a few weeks ago she'd had yet to leave the kingdom, and although the courtiers and dignitaries who visited the court were from all over the world they lived in their own bubbles of luxurious isolation. Never would they find themselves in a goblin brothel. Never would they dare travel to the badlands, let alone be savvy enough to come back and tell the tale.

As if sensing her exclusion, Tanya provided a gracious opening.

"What about you, princess? I'm sure you have some stories to tell."

The others turned to her expectedly and Katerina froze on the spot. The whiskey was already making her a little light-headed, and it certainly didn't help to be trapped in the piercing gaze of two sets of eyes. She opened her mouth once or twice, but came up blank. A sort of panic set over her, and in the end she blurted out the first thing that came into her mind.

"I snuck down to the kitchens one time when I was supposed to be at dance class." Two blank faces stared back at her across the fire, and she hurried to defend her work. "It was in the servants' hall. A place Kailas and I were most definitely *not* supposed to go."

It had felt quite rebellious at the time. But when she said it out loud...

A profound silence followed this remark. One made all the worse by the looks of restrained amusement on Dylan's and Tanya's faces. They looked quickly down at the fire, hiding their smile but, fortunately, they didn't make her wait too long.

The impromptu confession brought up a rather serious subject. One the trio had been strategically dancing around the entire time.

"I won't ask why exactly you're on the run," Tanya began slowly. "I saw the beacon, just like everyone else. I'm assuming it has something to do with the death of your father."

It was a gracious out, but a clear opening at the same time. An open invitation for the princess to tell them whatever she so desired. And while Katerina would rather walk through fire than relive what had happened that terrible night, she felt as though she had to tell. Dylan was right: The two of them were risking their lives to protect her. They deserved to know why.

"My father didn't just die...he was murdered," she said softly. "Stabbed through the heart while he slept. One of the knights came to tell me about it. He helped get me out of the castle."

The unspoken question hung between them. Like a dark cloud hovering in the air. Neither of the others could bring themselves to ask, and Katerina wouldn't make them.

After a moment of silence, she answered it herself.

"It was my brother."

There was a soft gasp as Tanya clapped her hands over her mouth. Even Dylan couldn't fully hide his surprise. His blue eyes widened in the dark before dropping down to the flames. Shining with sympathy. Lost in thought. Flickering with the dancing flames.

"He wants me dead. I'm the eldest. I'm next in line. Without me..."

It was quiet for a long time. The pleasant buzz created by the whiskey had suddenly sobered, and the cheerful evening had abruptly chilled in the breeze. Katerina looked from one to the other, both of whom were avoiding her gaze. She felt strangely relieved to have gotten the secret off her chest, but she wondered if they would have rather been kept in the dark. If they regretted bringing up the question and learning the terrible truth. It was a heavy burden. One that came with a price.

Finally, when the silence could go on no longer, Tanya lifted her head. "So where does that leave us?" she asked quietly.

Katerina's heart literally warmed in her chest. Her eyes welled up as she stared across the fire at the strange girl. A girl who was willing to help her no matter what stakes were leveled against them. A girl who was willing to risk her very life for someone she hardly knew.

"Are you...are you serious?" She hardly dared to ask the question, at the risk of changing the answer. "You're willing to stay?"

Tanya met her gaze for a split second before shrugging it off with a signature grin. "It's better than spending my time at the height of a trash can, staring at people's knees."

Katerina let out a gasp of breathless laughter before turning to Dylan. He, too, met her eyes and a knowing look passed between them. The same question she'd asked Tanya died on the tip of her tongue. There was no need to ask it again. She already knew the answer.

She asked another instead. Effectively placing her life in his steady hands.

"So where *does* this leave us?"

It was one thing to be on the run from her brother and his minions. Hiding in the woods from contingents of royal guards and military servicemen. Both of whom were predictable. Both of whom would find it completely impossible to blend in. It was another thing entirely if they were dancing around the edge of a civil war. A covert, one-sided war. The kind that used mercenaries and assassins. The kind that pitted prince against princess. Brother against sister. Locked in a deadly race to the throne.

Dylan thought about it a long time, frowning slightly as he stared into the flames. "I think it says a lot that your brother hasn't put a bounty on your head," he finally answered. "If people knew the truth, he's afraid they'd rally around you to help you take back the throne. He's obviously hoping he can have you killed before that's an option."

A few weeks ago, those words would have shocked Katerina to the core. As it stood, she absorbed them silently and focused on the next step of the plan. "So, then, why don't I just tell people who I am?"

Dylan and Tanya exchanged a quick look before answering.

“Because your brother is underestimating the realm’s goodwill towards the entire royal family,” he said almost apologetically. “You tell people in these parts you descend from the Damaris bloodline, and they’ll likely find your body in a ditch the next morning.”

“No offense,” Tanya added hastily.

Katerina nodded, feeling a bit dazed. “...of course not.”

Only Dylan remained unaffected. But he wasn’t the type to shy away from hard truths. “We’ll tell people in time, but they will be the *right* people,” he said quietly, almost to himself, planning as he went. “And only at a time when you’re safe.”

It sounded practical enough. Especially considering Dylan was the one saying it. But it begged the obvious question.

A question Tanya had no problem pointing out. “And how exactly is she going to *get* safe?”

A little shiver rocketed up Katerina’s spine, and she wrapped her cloak tighter around herself. Tanya was right. Alone in the middle of the woods, so outnumbered and exposed it seemed almost impossible. How could she fight a war without an army? How could she take the throne with two people? How could she even manage to stay alive, if these were the odds stacked against them?

It wasn’t like they could hide out in the wilderness forever. And it wasn’t like a princess on the run was an easy secret to keep. Tanya had guessed who she was simply because she recognized her face from royal portraits and decrees. It was only a matter of time before someone else did the same thing. Someone who wasn’t as sympathetic to her cause.

So the question remained: What the heck were they going to do?

“I don’t know,” Dylan murmured, staring off into the shadowy trees. “But I know someone who can help...”



## Chapter 11

The more time Katerina spent in the world outside the castle, the more she realized how inter-connected it really was. Over the next few days of travelling, there wasn't a town or village that either Dylan or Tanya hadn't been to personally. There wasn't a situation or creature they hadn't dealt with before. There wasn't a single barman they didn't know by name.

By the time they ended up in Lakewood, the town for which they'd been aiming, Katerina had developed a whole new level of respect for her travelling companions. What was more, they'd developed a whole new level of respect for each other.

"Dylan, if you don't slow down, I'm going to stab you in the back with a tent peg."

Respect. Friendship was still a ways off.

The ranger cast a long-suffering look behind him, but slowed his pace as they made their way out of the forest and onto a bluff that overlooked the town. It was here that the trio came to a simultaneous stop, looking down with a bit of apprehension as they considered what was to come.

Dylan had been deliberately vague about the 'old friend' they were travelling to meet. The one who would supposedly help them on their journey. Whatever it was he was keeping to himself, the girls didn't know. But one way or another, they were in no position to be refusing help.

"How do you know he'll be here?" Katerina asked curiously. "You guys keep in touch?"

"Not much," Dylan replied evasively, shifting his weight as he gazed out over the town. "But Lakewood's hosting the Festival of Woodland Lights. He'll be here. And he won't be hard to find."

The girls exchanged a quick look. Won't be hard to find? What did that mean?

"Come on." Dylan seemed eager to end the conversation before it could really get off the ground. "It's coming up on mid-day. With any luck, he's still in bed. And mostly sober..."



Another look. This time it was paired with a grin.

Katerina's mind bubbled with a million questions, but she held her tongue. Even Tanya, who had no filter whatsoever, had the sense to keep quiet. Instead, the three of them started heading down the mountain. Bracing for whatever mischief the day had in store...



MAGICAL HOLIDAYS WERE never celebrated in the castle. As such, Katerina had never even heard of the Festival of Woodland Lights. But walking through the town, it quickly became clear what Dylan meant when he said his friend would be there. There wasn't a man in the realm who wasn't.

The purpose of the festival was to celebrate the spirits of the forest along with the coming of the new celestial year. To get into the festive mood, the store fronts were strung with garlands of white flowers. Giant vats of nectar and baskets of ambrosia cast a heavenly aroma over the streets. Musicians armed with fiddles and lutes were walking through the crowd, and the festival-goers had painted their faces green in order to honor the spirit of the trees...

...which meant that all the wood nymphs had come out to play.

Never before had the princess seen so many beautiful women in one place. And beautiful didn't begin to cover it. She had long ago read that nymphs were famed for their beauty, but the writing in the castle library hardly did them justice.

They were like angels. Waif-like, woodsy angels that floated along down the street. Dresses of gauzy silk. Clouds of white hair that fell down to their waists. Eyes so bright, they made everything around them dim in comparison. They moved in little clusters. Pausing every now and then to buy another flowery adornment for their long hair. Casting occasional glances in mirrors and store-front windows to admire their flawless reflections. Shooting bewitching smiles at the gaggles of men that followed in their wake—openly salivating as they tried to remember how to speak.

Katerina raised her eyebrows as one of them blew a playful kiss at Dylan, shaking back a wave of silky white-blonde hair. Her friends were quick

to pick up on the chase—shooting curious glances at the rugged ranger as they giggled quietly and whispered behind their hands.

*Obvious, much?*

He blushed faintly, but did nothing to encourage them. He merely flashed a polite smile as he and the girls walked past. Unfortunately, that did nothing to stop the giggling. Nor did it stop Tanya from taking great delight in the entire exchange. Her face lit up with mischief as she ostentatiously elbowed him in the ribs, raising her voice for everyone to hear.

“What’s that?” She cupped a hand around her ear with a theatric frown. “You just got out of a serious relationship, and you’re looking for someone special to help you rebuild?”

He looked down with a start, paling to the color of sour milk as he lowered his voice to a frantic hiss. “What the heck are you doing?”

“Well, I know you’re shy, sweetie, but you’ve just got to get past it.” She patted him sympathetically on the shoulder, staying carefully out of reach of his blade. “Nobody here is going to judge. We all just want what’s best for you.”

He grabbed the back of her coat and dragged her along at a faster pace, ignoring the chorus of snickering laughter that followed in their wake.

“Okay, level with me...do you really have a friend here, or did you just want to find a nymph?”

Even Katerina had to smile at that one, but Dylan shot the shifter a look that promised certain death the second they were out of the public eye. Sensing trouble, the princess intercepted the look and pulled them both to a stop as they reached a fountain in the center of the town square.

“You, hand over the dagger. You, keep the colorful commentary to yourself unless you want to get killed.” She cast each one a stern look of warning before glancing back at the bustling crowd. “Let’s just find this friend of yours and get the bloody heck out of here.” She cast Dylan a sideways glance. “The less time we spend out in the open, the better.”

*For all our sakes.*

“Fine.” Tanya rolled her eyes, but abandoned her teasing and got down to business. “You said this guy wouldn’t be hard to find. What did you mean?”

With a quiet sigh, Dylan slipped his knife back into its sheath.

“That’s easy.” His eyes drifted briefly around the square before zeroing in on a specific target. “Just look for the fanciest hotel...”



OVER THE COURSE OF the last few weeks, Katerina had seen Dylan in a variety of different circumstances. She’d seen him tired, and charming, and defensive, and even adorably upbeat. She’d never once seen him nervous. Not until that very moment.

“Okay, Dylan, what the heck happened with this guy?? Did you accidentally kill his dog? Or purposely?”

They were standing in front of the door to the best room in the best tavern in the entire town. The proprietor had confirmed the identity of his guest, after a significant bribe, and after locating the correct room all that was left to do was knock on the door.

Except that Dylan couldn’t seem to raise his hand.

He shot Katerina a quick glance, as if she wasn’t too far off the mark, before forcing a casual smile onto his face. “No, it’s...it’s going to be fine.” He lifted his hand, then paused again, staring at the door like it had burst into flames. An almost sickly expression swept over him and he muttered the words again, saying them only to himself. “It’s going to be fine.”

After taking a deep breath, he knocked three times on the door.

By now, even the girls were a bit nervous as to what was waiting on the other side. Was the man going to be horrifically disfigured? Had Dylan accidentally set the guy on fire? Burned off an arm? They listened breathlessly as the silence gave way to a faint shuffling, then the sound of light footsteps making their way to the door. By the time it pulled open, they had mentally prepared themselves for anything and everything.

Except for the exquisite nymph who stood in the doorway.

“Yes?”

Everything about her was perfect. From her pearly smile, to her sparkling eyes, to the silky hair that billowed in waves down her bare back. Both Katerina and Tanya exchanged a quick look of confusion, but Dylan just rolled his eyes with a quiet sigh.

“I’m looking for Cass.”

She vanished without another word, closing the door behind her. When it opened again a moment later, there was another nymph. She was even more beautiful than the first. And if it was possible, she was wearing even less clothing. Just a tiny slip that stopped an inch below her thighs.

“Good morning.” Her face melted into a welcoming smile as she made a sleepy effort to smooth down her sex-tousled hair. “Are you here with the food?”

Katerina smothered a grin as Tanya bit down on her lip to keep from laughing. Dylan, however, looked almost physically sick as he forced a tight smile.

“Nope. Not here with the food. I’m looking for Cass. Is he here?”

She glanced behind her, gaze resting briefly on the bed, before she turned around with a mischievous giggle. “He’s still sleeping. I’m afraid we’re all a little worn out.”

Dylan’s smile tightened into a grimace. “I’ll bet. The thing is, I really need to speak with him—”

The door closed again. Mid-sentence. Right in his face. He stared at it a moment, then took a step back, his hands balling into fists as his teeth ground together.

“It had to be nymphs...”

“We should have intercepted their room service.” Tanya stepped forward with a grin, raising her hand to knock on the door. “Why don’t you let me try this time?”

Dylan took a step back as the air around her seemed to shimmer. By the time her fist came down on the wood she was no longer a young girl, but had taken the shape of a burly village constable. She had the mustache, the badge, everything down to the authoritative scowl.

A scowl that was only slightly ruined when she gave her friends an impish wink.

The door was pulled open by yet a third nymph, but this one stepped back in surprise when she saw the officer standing in front of her. Her eyes widened and she hurried to slip on a robe.

“Can I help you, Constable?”

Tanya didn’t waste any time. And she didn’t pull any punches. “This is the third time my associates and I have knocked on this door, and let me

assure you there will not be a fourth. We're looking for a man named Cass. Now either you send him out in the next thirty seconds, or I'm going to cite you for obstruction of justice."

The girl melted away so fast, Katerina could have sworn she vanished on the spot. The three of them waited in tense silence, wondering if their plan had worked, but only a few seconds later the door pulled open again and a beautiful man walked outside.

*Holy bloomin' cow!*

Katerina said 'man' because she didn't know what else to call him. And she said 'beautiful' even though the word fell utterly short. It was like the guy walked straight out of a fairytale.

He was pure grace. There was no other way to describe him. An ethereal, radiant sort of grace that seemed to shine a little brighter than everything in the world around it. He was as tall as Dylan, and just as strong. But while one man was all dark—tan skin, chocolate hair—the other was all light. Fair skin. A silver tunic. White-blond hair that fell to his shoulders. The only thing that differed were his eyes. He had dark, rich eyes. Eyes that shone so bright, they leapt right off his face.

Right now, those enchanting eyes were resting curiously on Constable Tanya.

"My apologies," he said courteously. "What seems to be the.."

He trailed off a second later, staring in absolute shock.

Katerina felt Dylan stiffen beside her, and sure enough it only took a moment for that lovely face to tighten with unspeakable rage.

*"...you."*

Dylan held up his hands, trying his very best to project an air of rational calm.

"Now, just hold on a second. Let's not do anything we'll both—"

A sudden punch caught him right in the face.

"—regret."

A river of blood streamed from his nose as he cupped his face in his hand. The other was still raised in supplication, though he didn't seem to expect much of a reprieve.

"Cass, I didn't come here to—"

Another punch. This one was even harder than the first.

“—fight.”

Dylan staggered back a step, this time blinking away a stream of blood that was pouring from a cut above his eye. His face tightened with pain as he lifted his free hand like a shield.

“Seven hells, man! Will you just let me—”

A third punch. This one threatened to finish him completely.

“—talk?!”

The nymphs scattered to the four winds, while Katerina and Tanya stood there in absolute shock. They hadn't exactly been expecting a warm welcome, but they certainly hadn't been expecting a blow-out either. That being said, it wasn't like either one of them was particularly inclined to jump in. Not only was it all a bit out of their league, but it sounded like Dylan certainly had it coming. And there wasn't a force in the world that would get them to stand in the way of those fists.

There was a savage cry as Cass lifted Dylan straight off his feet and slammed him into the adjacent wall, dangling him a foot above the floor.

“You dare to come here?!” he cried, smashing his head against the stone. “You dare to look me in the face?! After what you've done!”

Yep, certainly had it coming.

Cass bashed him into the wall once more, his blonde hair falling to reveal the tips of his pointed ears. It was only then Katerina realized what he was. Realized that he wasn't a man at all. Realized why he looked like the ancient prince from all of her storybooks come to life.

*He's a fae.*

She sucked in a gasp of surprise, staring in fascination. Completely ignoring the fact that her new best friend was slowly getting beaten to a pulp against a hotel wall.

*I can't believe it! Right here in the flesh!*

Dylan was slightly less enchanted. He was making no attempt to defend himself, but that did nothing to temper the fae's rage. It wasn't until an *actual* constable rounded the corner that the four of them slipped inside the hotel room, closing the door with a hasty *click*.

The second that he was free Dylan fell to his knees, panting, and bleeding freely onto the floor. Tanya melted quickly back to her actual shape, looking pale, while Katerina stared at Cass with equal parts terror and fas-

ination. A childish part of her hoped he would get past his murderous vendetta quickly. Then maybe he'd let her touch his ears...

"Well, now that *that's* out of the way," Dylan began as he pushed painfully to his feet, gesturing from one person to the next, "I believe introductions are in order. Cass, this is Tanya and Katerina. Girls, this is my oldest friend, Cassiel."

All four of them froze perfectly still, looking from one to the other.

*What the heck are we supposed to do? Shake hands?*

Luckily, though he might have been about two seconds away from committing a daylight homicide, the fae still seemed to have some manners. He tore his murderous eyes away from Dylan, wiped the blood off his knuckles, and offered a polite hand to each of the women in turn. "A pleasure to meet you," he said softly.

The girls blinked, then hastened to comply.

"Pleasure's all mine."

"Yeah, it's...it's really nice to meet you."

The three of them shook quickly, giving each other a cursory glance before turning back to the fourth member of their party, who was still bleeding a small ocean onto the floor. At this point, exsanguination was an actual risk, but you'd never have known it from his face. Now that the savage beating was over, he seemed to think the little reunion was going brilliantly.

"There—see?" Dylan flashed them all a beaming smile. "No reason we can't all get along."

The girls stared at him in disbelief, while Cassiel gave him an icy glare.

"What do you want, Dylan?" he asked coldly.

*A bloody good question. Given the bad blood that was literally staining the ground between them, what could Dylan possibly expect to come of the surprise visit?*

As it turned out, his request was as simple as it was disarming.

"I want to buy you a drink."



TEN MINUTES LATER THE four of them were circled around a booth in a local tavern, sitting in an almost comically uncomfortable silence. The

ranger, the fae, the shifter, and the princess. Never was there such an unlikely gathering, and what a priceless picture they made.

Dylan had yet to stop bleeding, Cassiel was glaring a hole into the table, Tanya was chewing anxiously on her lip, and Katerina was so nervous she was having some kind of heart palpitations.

It wasn't until a full minute had passed that Cassiel looked up with a glare.

"So where's the flippin' drink?"

Dylan jumped in surprise, as if he'd been thinking about something else, before pulling a handful of bronze coins out of his pocket and laying them quickly upon the table. "Right. Get yourself whatever you want."

Three pairs of eyes shot down to the coins, each more baffled than the last, then back up to Dylan. Tanya kicked him under the table for good measure.

"Are you serious?" Cassiel asked in disgust. "This is your grand gesture?"

"What do you expect?" Dylan shot back. "It looks like a carriage ran over my face."

The two men shared an indecipherable look, but unless Katerina was mistaken she could have sworn there was a hint of a grin beneath it. A second later, Cassiel pushed to his feet with a frustrated sigh, leaving the money behind as he headed off to the bar. The trio stared after him for a moment before Tanya leapt up as well, hurrying after him.

"I'm going to help."

The second it was just Katerina and Dylan, the mood at the table relaxed significantly. It relaxed to the point where she smacked him in the chest before pelting him with peanuts.

"What the *heck* is going on?!" she demanded, lobbing one after another. "You bring us to a festival of lusty nymphs, just to get your butt kicked by the one person in the world you call a *friend*?!"

"Hey!" He grabbed her wrists with a bloody grin, putting an end to the attack. "I have a plan, all right? It's not like we're going into this blind."

She yanked herself free, shaking her head with a reluctant smile. "And that plan is to let the one person you think can help us beat you to a pulp?"

"Yeah, that's the way it starts."



There was a beat of silence.

“And how does it end?”

He wiped his face clean with the hem of his shirt, helping himself to a peanut in the process.

“It ends different than that.”

*Seven bells! This man is exasperating.*

Resigned that it was the only answer she was going to get Katerina leaned back against the cracked leather, staring curiously towards the bar. As much as he seemed to hate Dylan, Cassiel didn't seem to have any problem with the rest of them. He and Tanya were talking quietly as they waited for drinks, lighting up with the occasional smile whenever something amusing was said.

“So, who is he, anyway?” Katerina asked. “This friend of yours?”

Dylan followed her gaze with a thoughtful expression on his face. Despite having taken a brutal beating, there wasn't an ounce of malice as he stared at the fae. Just a kind of brotherly affection and nostalgia Katerina didn't completely understand. “Cassiel is one of the High Born.”

The surprises just kept coming.

The fae didn't have royalty, but if they did Cassiel would have been in their inner circle. It was even more shocking because, of the thousands of fae that had died in the rebellions, none of the High Born were said to have survived. That being said, the princess was quickly coming to discover that news of the royal army's stunning victories had been greatly exaggerated.

*That's all well and good, but why in the world would he ever help me?*

Dylan read her thoughts as easily as if she'd spoken them aloud.

“Believe it or not, he actually has a strong moral compass—buried beneath all the bitterness and resentment. A sense of honor.” Dylan gave his friend another fond look. “A frightened girl on the run? The legitimate heir to the throne being hunted down by assassins? He won't be able to walk away from something like that.”

Katerina's eyebrows shot up in surprise. “So we're going to tell him the truth? That I'm the princess?”

“We're going to have to,” Dylan replied practically. “You can't lie to a fae. They'll always know.” He glanced towards the bar again before kicking back in his chair. “Besides, Cass is just like every other High Born exiled by

your father's rule. He's drunk, and bored, and restless like you wouldn't believe. We can use that."

As if on cue Tanya and Cassiel returned, their arms laden down with drinks. They doled them out around the table before sliding into the booth, smelling of whiskey and looking significantly more relaxed than when they'd left.

"Looks like you started without us," Dylan said with a smile.

Cassiel's eyes flashed up and Katerina braced for another punch but, much to her surprise, the smile was returned. "You've made some charming friends since the last time we met. Do they simply not know you yet, or have you paid them off?"

Dylan took the insult in stride, downing a shot of whisky with a grin. "You'll soon learn that Cass has a delightful sense of humor—just one of his endearing qualities. Second only to that inflated sense of self."

The two girls stiffened but the fae lifted his drink to Dylan's, clinking the glass.

"Cheers."

It was the strangest reconciliation Katerina had ever seen, but it couldn't have been more welcome all around. Together, the four of them downed their whiskey and reached for another. It went down as smoothly as the first, and before long they were starting on their third.

The liquor did the trick. Loosening their tongues and lowering their defenses all at once. It didn't take long for the ice to break and the conversations to begin. It wasn't easy at first, but it did get considerably easier the more they drank. Katerina suspected this was why Dylan suggested a bar.

"So it looked like you were enjoying the festival," Tanya began slyly, shooting the fae a sideways grin as she downed her fourth drink. "I'm sorry if we interrupted..."

"This year wasn't half bad." Cassiel leaned back in his chair, stretching his long legs beneath the table. "It was nothing compared to the summer of forty-two, but—"

"Wait. The summer of forty-two?" Katerina frowned in confusion before glancing at Dylan for help. "But that was almost half a century ago."

Dylan tipped back his drink with a grin. "The fae don't age the way the rest of us do. Cass is about a hundred years old."

Katerina's mouth fell open in shock. He didn't look more than twenty. It could have been an awkward moment, but Cassiel simply offered her a lovely smile. "Eighty of those years were good...then I met Dylan."

The ranger leaned forward with a hopeful smile.

"...and they got great?"

Even Cassiel had to laugh at that one. Albeit, rather reluctantly. The mood at the table lightened even more as the conversation and drinks continued flowing, and it wasn't that long before the better part of an hour had passed. They ordered food, ordered more drinks, and another hour passed by after that. Not long after, they finally came around to the inevitable question.

"So what are you doing here, Dylan?" Cassiel's dark eyes landed on him curiously, taking in every detail. "What kind of trouble have you landed yourself in this time?"

Dylan's eyes flashed instinctively to Katerina before he set his drink down with a deliberate smile. "Believe it or not, it isn't me this time. It's her."

Cassiel followed his gaze, landing on Katerina with a touch of surprise.

Despite the lively conversation, the fae and the princess hadn't talked directly much. Katerina couldn't look at him without feeling incredibly intimidated and shy, and Cassiel wasn't one to force his company. But all that seemed to fall away as they studied each other for the first time.

"You look familiar," he murmured, almost to himself. His dark eyes took on a faraway look as he tried to place it. "I feel like we've met before."

Katerina shifted nervously in her chair, glancing again at Dylan. She was fairly certain that if this beautiful man had stepped anywhere near the castle, she would have remembered. But his age made that another matter entirely. He could have very easily visited the castle when she was only a child, and she would never have known.

"You haven't met her," Dylan said softly. "But I believe you met her mother. Adelaide."

It was hard to tell who was more surprised—the princess or the fae. Both stared at Dylan in complete shock before turning back to each other. Pale as a ghost. At a loss for words. It was quiet for only a fleeting moment, then Cassiel pushed to his feet in a single, fluid movement.

“You’ve brought me here to help put a Damaris on the throne?” As frightening as they’d seen him, it was nothing compared to how he was now. “You must be out of your bloody mind.”

Without another word, he stormed out of the tavern. Leaving them all behind.

They stared after him for a moment, still frozen with shock, before Katerina folded her arms across her chest and shot Dylan a withering glare.

“And was *that* part of the plan?”

A cluster of coins rained down on the table as the three of them bolted outside and into the busy street. The festival was still in full swing, but it only took a second to spot Cassiel striding swiftly through the crowd. Try as he might to blend in, the guy was hard to miss.

“Hey!” Dylan sprinted after him, Katerina and Tanya hot on his tail. “Come on, man, don’t just walk away!” Still nothing. The three of them ran faster. “Will you hold on for one da—”

His voice choked off with a sudden gasp as Cassiel spun around at the last second and yanked him into an alley. The girls skidded to a stop on the slick cobblestones a moment later, panting, and watching with wide eyes as the two men faced off.

“A *Damaris*, Dylan?” Cassiel was the first to speak, shoving his friend hard in the chest to make his point. “Katerina *Damaris*—that’s who this is?”

The princess shrank back against the wall, suddenly jealous of Tanya’s ability to change shape at will. Right now, she’d give anything to have a different face. To have a different name.

Dylan held up his hands, purposely slowing down the building momentum. “She’s not what you think. Trust me, I thought the same thing when she first sought me out, but I was wrong—”

“And why exactly did she seek *you* out?” Cassiel’s voice took on a strange tone, layered with a context Katerina didn’t understand. “Did you ever stop to think about that?”

For a split second, Dylan actually paused. Then he shook his head firmly, refusing to acknowledge whatever implication had been silently made. “The fairies sent her.”

*That* got Cassiel’s attention.

He stopped pacing at once, turning to Dylan with honest surprise. His dark eyes dilated with impossible intensity as they took in every inch of the ranger's face, before he slowly turned to the pale-faced, fire-haired girl standing by his side.

"The fairies," he repeated softly, still breathing hard but calming down. "Marigold and—"

"—and Nixie and Beck," Katerina finished quickly, anxious to prove the validity of her claim. "They found me passed out in the woods after... well... it's kind of a long story."

Cassiel's face hardened to beautiful stone. "Summarize."

The word sent chills down her back, and she glanced at Dylan for confirmation. He nodded his head a fraction of an inch and she took a deep breath, bracing once again to tell her story.

"My brother Kailas killed the king." She didn't know why she was calling him the king instead of her father. "He tried to kill me, too, as I'm the next in line for the throne, but I was snuck out of the castle by those I trust. They chased me through the woods, but I managed to make it to the edge of the kingdom before passing out. When I woke up, I met Marigold and the others. They nursed me back to health for a day, then gave me Dylan's name. We've been running ever since."

It was certainly the quick version—missing several key details. But he asked for a summary.

The little alley fell silent as all those gathered absorbed the enormity of those words. Here they were, just four people standing in the middle of a woodland festival, but they happened to be the only four people alive who knew the crown prince had committed high treason.

Unfortunately, that didn't prove enough of a selling point for the fae.

"And why should I care?" He didn't ask the question of Katerina, but of Dylan. Angry as he was, he wouldn't antagonize a young woman about the death of her kin. "Tell me, Dylan, why should I, or any of those like me, care about the death of the king? The man was a *monster*."

"Cass," Dylan chided him with soft reproach, but it didn't sound like his heart was really in it. Standing just a few feet away, Tanya looked as though she agreed with the fae.

“His arrogance, his bloodlust, his intolerance of those who weren’t his kind?” Cassiel was preaching to the choir, but it didn’t seem to matter. There was a fire in his eyes that set Katerina’s teeth on edge. A deep-seated hatred she was only beginning to understand. “It wouldn’t have been long before he rounded up all the rest of us and had his soldiers finish what they started.” His face tightened with rage and he stormed back towards the main street, only to whirl back around again—incensed beyond reason. “And don’t even get me *started* on the prince—”

“The prince who’s about to become the king?” Dylan interrupted fiercely.

For the second time, the alley went quiet. But while the others fumed and worried in silence, the princess was just starting to realize the key to her survival.

Cassiel didn’t want to see her brother on the throne. Neither did Tanya. Neither did Dylan. Neither did the rest of the supernatural community, for that matter. The weight of her family blood may have hung like a curse over her head, but this one crucial fact could prove her only salvation.

The silence stretched on for longer than was bearable before breaking with a quiet question.

“You have the rightful claim?”

Katerina’s head snapped up to see Cassiel’s eyes burning into hers. She hated the way he was looking at her. Like he was trying to decide between the lesser of two evils. But on this point, at least, she was perfectly clear.

“Yes. I am.”

There was something different about the way she said the words. A ringing sort of authority that echoed off the stones. The others lifted their heads, stared at her for a moment, then turned to the fae. Waiting for whatever came next.

But Cassiel had eyes only for Katerina. Staring so hard, it was like he was looking into her very soul. For a moment, he was unconvinced. Then his shoulders fell with an almost inaudible sigh. “What’s your plan?”

Dylan let out a quick breath, unaware he’d been holding it in. His face cleared with a deep kind of relief before his lips curved up into a smile. “My plan was to find you.”

There was a beat of silence.

“...and?”

Another beat.

“And hope you could come up with something better than ‘try not to panic.’”

Katerina closed her eyes, resisting the urge to wrap her fingers around Dylan’s neck. *I knew it. I knew he didn’t have a plan.*

Cassiel shot him a look of sheer exasperation, running his hands back through his blond hair. His eyes lifted towards the horizon, lost in thought, before lightening with a sudden idea. “Brookfield Hall.”

Just two simple words, but Katerina got the feeling they were going to change her life forever. At any rate, Dylan grabbed onto them like a life raft.

“You think that could work?” he asked quietly, not daring to hope.

Cassiel looked uncertain, then worried, then resigned. “It’s the only chance we have. At least until we figure out the next step.”

The four of them fell quiet for a moment before Tanya stomped her foot, her cinnamon hair quivering with impatience. “Does someone want to clue the rest of us in? Like *now*?”

Cassiel glanced over with a faint grin, while Dylan rolled his eyes.

“Brookfield Hall is a safe house we used to have in the mountains. It’s a long way from here, but it’s completely off the grid. No matter how many people might be hunting you, they’ll never make it all the way to Brookfield. You’ll be safe.”

“For a *while*,” Cassiel clarified. Katerina got the feeling the guy wasn’t exactly the ‘glass half-full’ type. “You’ll be safe for a *while*, until we figure out what the heck we’re going to do next.”

The others shared a quick glance, more worried than they were letting on, then Tanya flipped back her hair and set off towards the street with a confident smile.

“To Brookfield, then. We’ll get there in one piece, or die trying.”

“That’s the spirit,” Cassiel echoed, following along behind. “One day at a time.”

Katerina stared after them with wide eyes, shaking her head in disbelief. “You guys have *got* to learn to give a better pep talk—”

She took a step to follow them but a hand shot out of nowhere, pulling her back. She glanced back in surprise to see Dylan standing right behind her, staring down into her eyes.

“Is this all right?” he asked softly. “The four of us. Is this something you want?”

She pulled back a few inches in surprise. “Do I have a choice?”

His face tightened with concern, and he slowly shook his head. “No, I don’t think so.”

She absorbed this silently, trying not to look as frightened as she felt. “Is the fae going to kill me in my sleep?”

He shook his head much faster this time. “No, he’d make sure you were awake.”

“Oh, well, that’s comforting.” Katerina glanced up again, forcing a smile. A trick she’d learned from him. “Then it’s the four of us. Four of us against the world.”

There was a heavy pause. One that got even heavier by the second.

“...don’t say it like that.”

Katerina stifled a shudder, hurrying after him towards the street.

“Yeah, it sounded better in my head.”





## Chapter 12

They spent the night in Lakewood, moving to a different inn on the other side of the village. The last thing they wanted was to explain to the proprietor of the first one why it was covered in blood, and according to the two men the four of them were going to need all the rest they could get before starting out on the long journey to Brookfield the following morning.

It was through the Black Forest and over the Calabrace Mountains. These were words that meant very little to Katerina, but she was quickly learning to base her reactions off the reactions of those around her. If they were worried, so was she. If they were resting, she would do the same.

“So do you think they’re going to be okay in there?” Katerina slipped under the covers of her cot, tilting her head towards the wall. “Or do you think they’ll kill each other in the night?”

For one night only, she and Tanya were sharing a room while Dylan and Cassiel were right next door. From tomorrow on, they’d all be sleeping under the same tent. But, given that it was their last night in civilization, they felt a certain level of propriety was in order.

Tanya followed her gaze then slipped into her own bed, pulling the covers up with a grin. “They’ll fight for sure. And I like Dylan, but I hope the fae wins.” Her eyes took on a dreamy sort of hue. “I could stare at him for the rest of eternity.”

Katerina snorted with laughter, imagining the mayhem just beyond the wall. “I think he could stare at *himself* for the rest of eternity.”

“Yeah...but that’s probably his only fault.”

The two girls shared a look, erupting into a sudden fit of giggles. A fit that soon escalated to the point where neither one was able to stop.

As strange as the situation was for Katerina, running for her life with a bunch of strangers through the twists and turns of a magical world, it was just as strange for Tanya. Her entire life, the girl had been alone. Her entire

life, she'd been drifting from one town to the next. Always with a different identity. Always with an expiration date before she'd have to move on.

In a way, this impromptu sleepover—two teenage girls nestled beneath the covers, laughing at the plight of their friends—was the most normal, yet completely absurd, part of the journey yet.

They laughed and laughed and laughed, then abruptly grew shy. The room fell quiet, but the smiles lingered on their faces as the beginnings of a tentative friendship were made.

“Thank you,” Tanya said suddenly, in a voice most unlike her own. “Thank you for letting me come with you.”

Their eyes met, and Katerina's entire face warmed with a smile. “Thank you for coming.”

Those were the last words they said until morning, but things were different the next day when they awoke. They were a little easier. They were a little more familiar. They were a hopeful beginning to the start of many things to come.

The men had slightly different luck.

“Seven hells!” Dylan angrily shook out his dark hair as the two emerged from the room the next morning and joined the girls outside. “I forgot what a nightmare you are to room with.”

The girls shared a giggle, but Cassiel was unfazed.

“If by a *nightmare*, you mean that I refuse to ‘keep watch’ until four in the morning with the lights on and the window down...then, yeah. I guess I'm a nightmare.”

“Completely unreasonable,” Dylan muttered as the fae pushed past him on the way to get some breakfast. “You'd think I was asking a lot.”

Katerina was unable to tell whether or not he was joking, so she wisely chose to move on.

“What's on the agenda for the morning?” she asked brightly, determined to make the most of their trip no matter how dangerous it might be. “Breakfast, then we head out?”

Cassiel shook his head, finishing off an apple as Dylan tossed back a swig of cider.

“No, we have to stock up on some supplies first,” he replied. “Brookfield is completely off the grid—that’s the whole point. It means we won’t be able to get the things we need; we’ll have to bring them with us.”

*The things we need? But we’ve been living off the land for over a month now.*

The princess shook her head in confusion, trying to understand. “What kinds of things?”

“Booze,” the men answered at the same time.

It was the only thing they’d agreed upon since meeting. They flashed each other a matching scowl, then headed off in separate directions to search the town. They’d almost disappeared completely, when Dylan doubled back, grabbing Katerina by the arm.

“Stay right by Tanya, do you understand?” He bent down, forcing her to meet his gaze. “*Right* by her. Swear it.”

“All right, all right. I swear.” Katerina yanked her arm away, rubbing it with a petulant glare. “You’re pretty flippin’ handsy, you know that? Especially considering I outrank you by about ten thousand degrees.”

His eyebrows shot up with an amused smile. “Pulling rank, are we?” She shrugged testily and he flashed another grin. “Well, you didn’t seem to mind all the times I was handsy before.”

*What?!*

As Tanya graciously excused herself, muttering something about ‘having to walk her dog,’ Katerina turned to Dylan in shock, hardly able to believe her own ears. “Excuse me?”

The grin never faltered. If anything, it only got wider.

“Saving you from the goblins, pulling you out of that ghost...” he prompted, making no effort to hide his smile. “What did you think I meant?”

Katerina didn’t know how to respond. Not only was she completely baffled as to whether or not he was teasing, but she had absolutely no experience either way. Flirting wasn’t something that was really done in the castle. Not with the princess, at least. And, yes, she’d occasionally giggled and gossiped with her ladies when a particularly fine man came to court, but giggling and gossiping was the end of it. There was never any direct contact. Let alone flirting.

Unless...he wasn't flirting. Unless...he was just making a joke.

Her senses abandoned her completely and she stood, pale and helpless, for so long that Dylan eventually took pity on her. He rolled his eyes, then pulled her in for a one-armed hug.

"Relax, Princess." His lips brushed her hair and tickled the top of her ear as he whispered. "I promise I'll keep my hands to myself in the future."

Without another word, he left her standing in the middle of the street. Wondering what the heck just happened. Wondering if she'd made things better or worse. Certain of only a single thing.

For better or worse, something had just changed between them.

"Tanya?"

The second she called the shifter's name, the girl appeared by her side. She should have known. There was no way Dylan would have walked away unless she was nearby. With as much grace and dignity as she could muster, she flashed the girl a tight smile and gestured to the shops.

"Are we supposed to be getting booze, too? You know, I don't have any money."

Tanya let out a wild giggle. The kind that startled, but made one smile at the same time. "A princess with no money. That's just the funniest thing I've ever heard."

Katerina's smile faded into something rather dry. "Oh, yeah? What about a girl who spent a significant portion of the last few months travelling around as a goblin?"

The giggling stopped abruptly.

"Touché."

They steered the conversation wisely in another direction, and wandered further up the road.

"At any rate—no. We don't need to get any more booze." Tanya flipped her hair over her shoulder, her bright eyes scanning down the street. "Between the two of them, I'm sure Dylan and Cass will come back with enough to sate an army. What we might need are medical supplies."

There was nothing particularly ominous about the way she said it. Nothing about her tone that would clue one in to trouble. It was the principle of the thing.

*Of course we will. Because what are the odds of getting out of this unscathed?*

The shifter correctly interpreted the look on her face, and quickly flashed her a reassuring smile. "It's no big deal—really. Standard practice whenever you go on a long trip. Between the four of us, I'm sure we're going to be fine."

"Right." Katerina nodded quickly. "We're going to be fine."

*Except the entire royal army is after us, my beloved giant saw tracks of theirs in the woods, and for all I know my brother's hell hounds are already on my trail.*

*But, yeah—I'm sure we'll be fine.*

It was a lie at the worst, a pipe dream at the best. But either way, the girls were content to let it go and get on with the rest of their day. There was only so long you could stay in a state of abject terror and misery before bits of light started slipping through the cracks.

"So where do we get medical supplies in a place like this?" Katerina asked, faking a great deal more confidence than she actually felt.

Tanya flashed her a grin, seeing through the effort with ease. "We get them from a witch, of course. Come on. I spotted a coven by the fountain yesterday afternoon."

*A coven?! Of witches?!*

For the second time in less than a minute Katerina flashed a deceptively confident smile, and gestured to the road ahead. "Lead the way."



THE WITCHES WERE ABSOLUTELY nothing like what Katerina had expected. She had conjured up an image of a female version of Alwyn. Stately. Refined. Wrinkled with dignity and old age. What she found was a group of cackling, haggling, abrasive young women. Frizzy hair and fraying clothes, with a bucket-load of neurotic superstitions to boot.

First, they didn't have what the girls were looking for. Then they might have it, but they were unsure as to the price. Then they had definitely found it, but wanted to know what the girls would be willing to pay before they admitted its original cost.

‘Round and ‘round they went, straining everyone’s patience. After only a few minutes Tanya was already at her wit’s end, and when one of the witches demand that Katerina leave the tent because she ‘didn’t trust people with red hair’ the princess couldn’t get out the door fast enough.

“Do not leave me with these people,” Tanya commanded through gritted teeth.

Katerina merely clapped her on the shoulder and slipped away with a smile. “I’ll be right outside. In the meantime, you should shift into one of them. Add to the confusion.”

Her smile was rewarded with a sarcastic glare.

“That’s hilarious. Who knew royalty was so flippin’ hilarious.”

It looked like she wanted to say plenty more, but before she could get the chance Katerina slipped outside, breathing in gulps of fresh air as if she’d been trapped underwater. The witches had an unhealthy obsession with incense, and she didn’t realize how much it was messing with her head until she got back into the open breeze. The music was playing, the flowers were blowing gently in the breeze, and before Katerina realized what she was doing she began drifting along with the crowd. Smiling at the children playing on the grass and peering curiously into the shops.

She didn’t go far. She had made a promise, after all. But just as she was turning around to head back to the shops, a little whimper caught her ear.

She scanned the crowd for the source of the noise, her gaze falling on a little boy, crouched by the side of the road. There were tears on his face and dirt on his knees, but despite the fact that he was openly weeping no one else stopped to pay him any notice.

“Sweetheart?” she called, weaving her way desperately through the crowd. “Sweetheart, what’s the matter?”

The boy looked up with a start, then bolted the second she got close. He appeared to be limping, and cast a frightened glance over his shoulder as he scampered up the grassy hill and away from the festival, disappearing into the trees.

Katerina paused at the edge of the road, staring at the woods with a look of tortured indecision. Twice, she stopped one of the people around her, asking if they would help her find the boy. Twice she was either propositioned or ignored.

She was about to hurry back to the witches and get Tanya for help, when another little cry drifted up out of the forest. This one was even more plaintive than the first. A chill of dread stole through her chest and she ran towards it without thinking, losing herself in the thick woods.

“Hello?” she called, searching frantically for a little boy in a sea of green. She could still hear the crying, but somehow the child had vanished into the trees. “Can you hear me? Please, don’t be afraid. I only want to help. Are you hungry? Would you like some food—”

A heavy boot caught her right in the stomach, doubling her over where she stood. A second kick and she went flying through the air, landing with a sharp crack on the forest floor.

Pain, the likes of which she’d never felt, radiated down from her head as the world in front of her flickered on and off. She could just barely make out the outlines of three people standing in front of her. Two were very tall. One was exceedingly small.

“That was even easier than I thought,” a gruff voice burst out laughing, startling the smaller figure by his side. “You did well. Now take your coins and go.”

A handful of gold rained down on the leaves in front of Katerina’s face. She blinked at them in a daze, trying to focus, when a pair of little hands scooped them up. She lifted her head just long enough to connect with a set of dark eyes. A child’s eyes. No tears on his face now.

The boy met her gaze for a split second before whispering, “I’m sorry,” then he took off into the trees. She stared after him in shock, blinking what felt like blood from her eyes, when a sudden shadow fell over her crumpled form.

“Doesn’t look much like a princess.” One of the men put his hands on his knees, cocking his head to shamelessly look her up and down. “Are you sure we got the right one?”

“I’m sure.” The first man reached down and ripped off her cloak in one, sudden movement, spilling her crimson hair all over the forest floor. “I actually saw her once at the castle at the St. Martin’s Day feast. It’s her, all right. I could never forget such a pretty face.”

The two men chuckled darkly, glancing around the woods. Katerina didn't know what was different, but there was a sudden change in the air. An anxious sort of tension that wasn't there before.

"We're the only ones out here, right?" the second man asked nervously. "The others headed up towards Banff?"

The first man nodded silently, staring down at the fallen princess with a hungry gleam in his eyes. "It's just you and me. And her. And we've got nothing but time..."

Katerina didn't understand what was happening as they dragged her through the underbrush and propped her up against the base of a tree. She didn't understand why they weren't binding her hands, preparing to take her back to their leader. For that matter, she didn't understand why they were so nervous all of a sudden. She was the one about to be taken back in chains.

*Unless I can tell them the truth. Unless I can tell them what really happened.*

"You're making a mistake," she mumbled, still trying to clear her throbbing head. "My brother set this whole thing up. He killed the—"

A gloved hand swung out of nowhere, slapping her in the face. The world went dim again, then came back only in muted colors as the men talked amongst themselves.

"Just be quick about it." The second man stood with his back to her, anxiously peering out over the trees. "Once is enough. Then it's my turn."

*...his turn?*

The first man knelt right in front of her, stroking the side of her face, a wicked smile on his lips. "I'll take my time, thank you very much. It isn't often you get to see a princess, let alone—"

A blistering growl cut through the air. A growl so wild and savage, it pierced through Katerina's bloodshot fog and roused her from the inevitable sleep.

"What was that?" the second man gasped, clutching the hilt of his blade. "Did you hear—"

Another growl and the men came together with a shout, standing back to back with weapons drawn as they looked out over the trees. Katerina's eyes opened wide, but they seemed to have forgotten all about her. Whatever



er was coming, they would surely not lift a finger in her defense—not when she was already marked for death. Or for a fate much, much worse.

She tried desperately to scream, but her tongue was glued to the roof of her mouth. She tried to bring her knees up to her chest, but her legs were palsied and weak. In the end, she could only sit there. Staring in terror at the wilderness beyond. Waiting for whatever monster had made that blood-curdling sound to come and finish her off.

“I think it’s gone.” The man who’d slapped her across the face lowered his sword a fraction of an inch. “Maybe we scared it off—”

As if to answer, another growl echoed through the trees. This one almost seemed to be laughing. For a second, the entire clearing stood still. The air quivered and even the birds paused in their song. Then the leaves parted and out stepped the biggest wolf Katerina had ever seen.

She let out a quiet gasp, freezing perfectly still.

Massive didn’t even begin to cover it. The thing was enormous. Well over two hundred pounds of solid, weather-hardened muscle. Its deadly claws pawed aggressively into the ground, and even from where she sat Katerina could see two glistening rows of razor-sharp teeth.

Most people would have fainted. Those who didn’t would have run away. But in Katerina’s semi-concussed state, she could think of only one thing to say.

“...you’re beautiful.”

The men shot her a look of utter astonishment, and even the wolf turned its head to gaze her way. Its blue eyes locked onto hers as the wind rippled through its chocolate fur.

It might have been a strange thing to say, but it was undeniably true. There was a grace and power to the animal, even in stillness. A commanding sort of presence that brought the rest of the forest to its knees. She had never seen one so close before, not a live one anyway, and despite the fact that she was surely about to die she couldn’t help but stare. There was something so familiar about it, yet foreign at the same time. As if she’d spotted it once from the road without realizing. Seen its face without remembering when or why.

A metallic hiss sliced through the air, bringing her back to the present; the two soldiers advanced at the same time. While the beast was clearly as

frightening as it sounded, they still outnumbered it two-to-one. And they still had their swords.

Katerina's heart pounded in her chest as they closed in on the animal, raising those swords at the same time. She'd seen enough soldiers in her day to know that the men were well-trained, and she'd seen enough bloodshed not to want to see any more of it now.

*Run!* Tears rolled down her face as she stared at the beautiful wolf, wishing desperately she could make it understand. *They'll kill you—please run!*

If she didn't know better, she could have sworn the animal heard her. It turned its head again, meeting her eyes for a fleeting moment, before its shoulders fell with a frustrated sigh.

It was the sigh that caught Katerina's attention. It was the sigh that brought her back to life.

*"Dylan?"*

Before anyone had a chance to reply, the forest sprang into action. One second, the wolf was standing in the clearing. Deceptively still. Facing off against the two men. The next, it was flying through the air, moving at a near blinding speed as it hurled its body straight at Katerina's attackers.

She let out a scream as the glint of two swords flashed through the air, clashing together with a sickening clang. There was a splash of blood, followed by a high-pitched scream. But it was a human scream. Not a wolf's. The man who'd been standing guard in front of her fell to his knees, dropping his sword and clutching his savaged shoulder as blood streamed over his fingers. His friend darted forward to help him, but by that time it was too late.

There was a flash of dark fur, followed by another stricken cry. A cry that cut off in a gurgle of blood as the wolf sank its teeth deep into the man's throat.

*"Thomas!"*

The first man—the one who'd slapped her, the one who proudly insisted upon taking his time—abandoned form altogether and ran full-speed towards the animal. It was a bold strategy, but it proved to be a fatal mistake. He was expecting the wolf to act like a wolf. He was expecting it to either run off in surprise or fiercely protect its kill. But the wolf did neither of

these things. As the man sprinted towards it, it sprinted at lightning speed right back towards the man.

They met in the center of the clearing with a sickening clash. Metal on bone. Teeth against blade. For a split second, they were moving too fast for Katerina to see what had happened. Then a crimson spray rained across the leaves.

She pulled in a breathless gasp, peering through the cracks in her fingers to see which one had come out on top. She knew who she *should* be hoping for, but when the dust finally cleared her heart warmed at the very sight of the wolf.

It was standing atop the man's chest, its sharp claws buried deep in his flesh. There was a streak of blood across its nose, but it didn't seem to notice. It had eyes only for the princess.

She froze very still as they locked eyes, staring across the bloody clearing. For a moment, neither of them moved. Then, without ever breaking her gaze, the wolf leapt off the man's broken body, buried its teeth in his shoulder, and dragged him back off into the trees.

What happened next was something Katerina would never forget. Something she swore she'd remember for as long as she lived. She couldn't see it, but she could hear it well enough. The snap of every breaking bone. The tear of every piece of skin. The pitiful screams that faded, then eventually died—replaced only with the low, rumbling growls of the wolf.

It didn't take very long. That's the thing that struck her most. It didn't take long for men to die. When it was finished the wolf walked back into the clearing, its chocolate fur dripping with a fresh layer of crimson blood.

She should have been afraid, but she wasn't. She should have been trying to run, but all she did was hold out her hand. The wolf stared at it for a moment before bowing its head with an unmistakable sigh and walking slowly across the clearing.

It came to a stop a few feet away, just beyond the reach of her fingers. She tried to stretch another inch more, but it was no use. In the end, she merely stared up into its eyes.

"Please?"

It waited for a moment. Watching. Thinking. Debating. Then it took a step closer.

Katerina's face lit up with a wondrous smile as her fingertips grazed the soft waves of chocolate fur. She moved cautiously at first, then with unrestrained delight. Burying her hands in the sides of its neck. Feeling the strong muscles beneath the glossy coat of fur. Letting its smoky, woody scent wash over her as she moved herself up higher and reached for its face.

But at that point the wolf pulled back, eyeing her hand uncertainly. She froze perfectly still, not daring to move, tilting her head with a little smile.

"Please?" she asked again. "I promise I won't hurt you."

*Hurt YOU?*

In hindsight, it seemed like a very stupid thing to say. The wolf apparently agreed, because it actually rolled its eyes before taking a step closer. As she hesitantly reached up between them, it lowered its giant head, pressing the side of its face against her palm.

It was unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

Her breath caught in her chest as she stared deep into its eyes. Blue eyes. Eyes the exact color of the morning sky. A sudden wave of emotion rushed over her, and without stopping to think she lifted to her knees and planted the softest kiss on its cheek.

"Dylan, is that you?"

The wolf met her eyes for the briefest moment before dropping its head with yet another frustrated sigh. A sigh that Katerina had heard many times before. A sigh that promised a furious lecture soon to come.

Her entire face warmed as she shakily pushed to her feet. The corners of her lips curved upward. "Dylan. I know it's you."

She nodded, the grin turning into a smile. *Looks like I'm not the only one with a secret...*

**To Be Continued...**



## Everlasting – Book 2

THE QUEEN'S ALPHA SERIES  
**EVERLASTING**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
W . J . M A Y





## EVERLASTING Blurb:



**W**hen the crown prince puts a bounty on her head, Katerina and her friends find themselves facing trouble at every turn. It's a race to get to the safe house in time, but will they pull together to work as a team, or will their differences pull them apart?

Strengths and weaknesses are put to the test as Katerina is plunged headfirst into a magical world she never knew existed. Fiction becomes reality as the characters from her childhood fairytales come to life, bringing with them secrets she could never have imagined.

Her bloodline gives her the right to call herself their queen, but is the division between the royal family and the magical kingdom too great? How can she mend the damage of the past?

More importantly...can she be the one to unite her people?



## Chapter 1

“Dylan, is that you?”

The wolf met her eyes for a moment before dropping its head with yet another frustrated sigh. A sigh that Katerina had heard many times before. A sigh that promised a furious lecture soon to come.

There aren't many things you can utter when the guy you've been travelling around with for the last month and a half suddenly turns into a wolf. And he failed to tell you.

Katerina wracked her brain. Trying to come up with anything remotely appropriate.

She bypassed the standard exclamations of shock. The cheesy one-liners designed to hide her bug-eyed surprise. She even avoided all her defense-mechanistic jokes—resisting the urge to throw a large stick and see whether or not he would fetch it back. In the end, she opted for a strange sort of comradeship. She'd held a secret from him—even though he'd known all along—but that wasn't the point. She thought about how he'd reacted when she told him she was the missing princess. A bizarre empathetic response she happened to think was both kind and comforting, while others, historically, did not. All this was running through her head as those blue eyes stared—or possibly glared—at her.

*Tell him something about yourself. Something weird. Fair is fair.*

Her confidence soared, and she was about to confide a story about how she, too, used to run around pretending to be a creature of the forest. Back with Kailas when they were both still children and he hadn't yet tried to kill her. But before she could get a chance to speak, the image in front of her changed.

A loud voice rang angrily through the clearing. “You STUPID girl!”

It turned out Dylan had enough words for them both.

Gone was the chocolate fur. Gone were the razor claws. Replaced instead with a guy so beside himself she'd be surprised if he didn't lift right off

the ground. He didn't. He stormed across it instead. Coming to a stop just inches away from her.

Completely naked.

“What the heck were you thinking?!”

The birds cringed away from his voice. Taking to the skies and leaving the volatile scene in the little clearing far behind them. The princess was not so lucky.

“There was this kid,” she started to say, although by now it seemed a rather transparent deception. “He was crying, and I was trying to—”

“I don't care about some KID!” Dylan thundered, completely oblivious to the rays of sunlight glinting off his bare chest. “WHAT did you DO?!”

She had wandered off. Left Tanya behind. Disobeyed his direct orders. The anger was understandable. His choice of words, however, was not.

“What did I *do*?” she repeated, trying her best to understand whilst forbidding her eyes to stray anywhere beneath his neck. There was enough going on right now without adding on the first naked body she'd ever seen. “I'm trying to tell you. Wait... What do you mean—”

“I couldn't track you!” he shouted, eyes wide and feral. “I couldn't find you!”

However impossible it seemed, she suddenly found herself more frightened than she'd been at any point during the fight. It was his voice that did it. And the look in his eyes.

She'd never seen this side of him. The loss of control. The panic. The only time she'd even seen him flustered was when they'd been in Bernie's cave; to be fair, he'd thought there was a legitimate chance he was about to be turned into soup.

Then all at once, it clicked.

“Alwyn's spell...” she murmured. Her eyes widened as they lifted to the forest trees, but before she could gather her thoughts she was abruptly grounded by that angry voice.

“What?”

Dylan had kept a firm hand on her ever since the paws had disappeared and he had hands to use. Even now, with both her attackers lying in pieces, he seemed incredibly reluctant to let go.



"I had a spell put on me when I left the palace," she was quick to explain. "A spell to make me impossible to track." Her eyes flickered down to his hand and her cheeks flushed with guilt. "It was supposed to have worn off by now. I didn't think—"

"No, you DIDN'T think!" he thundered. "You NEVER do!"

The words echoed violently among the trees, but even as he shouted them he pulled her closer. Searching her over for damages. Combing his fingers through her hair. Lifting her chin to check her eyes for a concussion. Running his hands along the base of her skull, the top of her collarbone. Down her arms and all the way to her wrists. It was there that he stopped. Breathing heavily. Holding her tight against his bare chest.

She closed her eyes and leaned against him. Trying to stop shaking. Taking a strange sort of comfort in the proximity, no matter how enraged he'd become.

"You just go wandering off in the woods, chasing after crying children. Picking fights with vampires. Stumbling upon giants and bands of assassins! No matter how many times I tell you not to! No matter how many times it comes back to BITE US IN THE ARSE!"

Katerina flinched, and her eyes filled with tears. In her periphery she saw Cassiel and Tanya rush into the clearing, weapons drawn. They took one look at the carnage and stopped short, staring warily at the couple standing in the middle of it all.

"Why should I have expected anything different from you?" Dylan released her in a single motion, spitting on the ground as he paced to the other side of the clearing. Little streams of crimson were dripping down his back, like he'd wandered out of some macabre portrait, but Katerina didn't think any of the blood was his. The only wounds Dylan had sustained in the fight were internal. Though he was doing his best to exorcise them now.

"Chasing after some kid..." He paced and cursed, muttering furiously to himself for another moment, before whirling back around and focusing all that rage on her. "It doesn't matter how many squirrels you eat, how many bogs you sleep in—you're just a stupid, spoiled little princess."

Their eyes met and something between them died.

"That's all you'll ever be." He stormed away without another word. Without a glance behind him. Without addressing the fact that he still

wasn't wearing any pants. He left Katerina standing behind him, feeling like a hole had been stabbed right through her chest. If he'd used a blade, it couldn't have cut any deeper.

*...because he's right.*

A feeling of hopelessness settled over her. One that had very little to do with the attack, and far more to do with the reprimand afterwards. She'd been expecting some degree of sympathy. A hint of concern. Or perhaps even a casual explanation for how the hell the man she'd been travelling around with had suddenly turned into a giant dog.

What she hadn't expected was the truth. But Dylan Aires didn't shy away from the truth.

It didn't matter how hard she tried to fit in. It didn't matter what skills she learned, or what sacrifices she made, or what lengths she'd gone to adjust to her new reality.

She was just a princess. A scared, sheltered little princess whose tragic naivety was bound to get either herself or someone around her killed.

*Tanya would never have wandered off like that. Cassiel would never have believed the boy. Dylan would have been able to defend himself. What the heck was I thinking?*

She didn't know how long she stood there. It must have been a while, because some of the birds had ventured back to their overhead perch by the time Tanya placed a sudden hand on her shoulder. Katerina jumped, then glanced over in surprise. She'd almost forgotten the others were still standing there. Waiting. Just as she realized she was waiting herself.

The shifter flashed her a sympathetic smile, gazed out towards the trees, then broached the subject with all the grace of a battering ram. "So...he can turn into a wolf, huh?"



IF THE MORNING HAD started badly, the rest of the day wasn't looking to be any better.

The booze and medical supplies were wrapped in blankets and tucked safely into Tanya's pack. The rooms were closed out, and the bar tabs were settled. They hit the forest trail an hour later than expected and started

moving at a near frantic pace to make up the lost time. According to the men, who had apparently made the journey before, it was a virtual nightmare. The more ground they could cover each day, the better chance they stood.

But it wasn't the logistics that had Katerina concerned. It wasn't the grueling pace, or the treacherous journey, or the fact that it seemed frightfully cold for the middle of summer.

Dylan didn't speak to her. Not a single word. For the next *eleven* hours.

At first, it was scary. Then it became depressing. Then it grew almost impressive as hour eleven stretched into hour twelve. The man may have come from nothing, but he'd certainly mastered the art of holding a grudge. No matter how many times Katerina tried to catch his attention, he kept his eyes locked firmly on the horizon. No matter how many times she tried to prompt him with a soft question or a quiet observation, he acted as though she wasn't even there. When she tripped over a log and went tumbling down the side of a ravine, he motioned to Tanya to help.

The sun rose and fell in the sky but, still, not a single word.

At first, the deafening silence was hard to ignore. But by the time they stopped for the night to pitch the tent and start a fire, Katerina found herself welcoming the quiet. At the very least, it gave her a chance to think. From the second she'd seen the wolf, standing in all his majestic glory, a dozen little things had started clicking into place.

The fact that he was able to hear more than he should. The fact that he was able to see more than he should. The fact that he recognized the pack of wolf shifters down by the wagons.

Everything, right down to that effortless grace with which he carried himself, spoke to being blessed with some otherworldly power. In a way, she was surprised she hadn't guessed it sooner.

*That's why he hugged me, that day on the road. It wasn't affection; he was learning my scent.*

She remembered it like it was yesterday. The way she'd scampered down the hill, wearing her new dress. The way he'd walked out to meet her, pulling her in for an unexpected embrace. The way his hands lingered on her clothing, his face brushed against her hair...

*But why didn't he tell me?* Her mind wandered as she tossed down another handful of kindling for the fire. *Why didn't he just tell me he was a shifter? Why keep it some big secret?*

In spite of her best intentions, Alwyn's final words of warning echoed sharply through her head. 'Never trust a shifter. They are loyal to the crown.' Her eyes flickered up to Dylan, settling a moment on his handsome face. Well, he certainly didn't have any love for the crown, but he *was* a shifter. And she was trusting him with her very life. What would her old mentor think about that?

"Nice face."

They were the first words that anyone had said in a while, and Katerina looked up at Cassiel with a start. He was staring at Dylan with a twinkle of mischief in his eyes, tired of his friend's passive-aggressive campaign. His long legs were stretched out on the ground beside the fire, and the corners of his lips twitched up as he stared across the flames.

Dylan glanced up in surprise as his hand drifted automatically to his face. "...What?"

Cassiel tilted back his head with a smile, the light of the fire dancing off his long white-blond hair. "You look like you spent the day chewing on half the king's militia. That's all."

*Oh, crap. Here we go.*

Tanya spat out a mouthful of ale. Katerina paled, and glanced quickly across the flames. Sure enough, the left side of Dylan's face was still smeared with a generous helping of dried blood. She'd assumed he'd cleaned himself off around the same time he vanished into the woods to retrieve his clothes, but apparently he'd been a bit preoccupied and missed a spot. It was a testament to how fiercely he'd been ignoring her that she hadn't noticed it until now. And it was a testament to how utterly socially awkward Cassiel was that he'd dare to make a joke.

"It isn't entirely unflattering," the fae continued helpfully. "Quite the contrary. I think it brings out the seriousness in your eyes."

*Cass—shut up!*

At this point, Tanya was frozen between a gasp and a snicker. Katerina felt as though she was going to be sick. Dylan didn't say a word. He simply

lifted his eyebrows as if to say *really*? But Cassiel played rough. His beautiful face shone with innocence as he gestured casually across the fire.

“I think you have a piece of bone in your hair.”

*THAT'S IT!*

Katerina threw down her plate, about to give him a piece of her mind, but at the same time Dylan pushed abruptly to his feet. There wasn't a shred of emotion on his face as he put on his cloak and headed off into the trees.

“I'll take first watch,” he called over his shoulder. “The rest of you should get some sleep.”

He vanished into the shadows without another word, moving soundlessly over the soft blanket of leaves. It wasn't until he was nearly out of sight that he rubbed his face with his sleeve.

“Are you happy now?!” Katerina whipped back around to the fire with a furious hiss. “It wasn't enough that he had to kill those men, now you're giving him a hard time about it?!”

Much to her surprise, Cassiel wasn't at all fazed by the venom in her voice.

He simply leaned back against the rocks with a little smile, helping himself to what was left of Dylan's ale. “Dylan doesn't care about diminishing the royal army, Your Highness, and I wasn't giving him a hard time. I was giving him a new target for all that rage. And I was giving you an opening.”

There was something unbearably sarcastic about the way he said ‘Your Highness,’ but there was something oddly sweet about it as well. As Katerina looked on in shock, he tilted his head gently towards the woods. The same place where Dylan had vanished just moments before.

“Go talk to him. Fix it.”

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Not socially awkward after all. Surprisingly...insightful.

“Well, would you look at that.” Tanya seemed to be having the same revelation. “It seems there's more going on in that pretty head of yours than we gave you credit for.”

Cassiel shot her a chilling look, but it melted quickly into a smile. “I just wanted his drink...”

A rush of gratitude welled up in Katerina's chest, but it would have to wait. Cassiel knew his friend well, and he was right. There had been a chip in the ice. A crack in the impenetrable wall of silence. If there was ever a time to mend fences, this was it.

She leapt to her feet the next moment, forgetting her cloak entirely as she went racing off into the trees. The dark night embraced her, removing every trace as she stumbled blindly across the forest floor. Past one embankment. Down another. The crescent moon provided little light to navigate, let alone search by, but she knew it wouldn't be a problem. This was *Dylan*.

She wouldn't have to find him. It would only be a matter of time before he found—

“Making a break for it?”

She heard him before she saw him. That quiet sigh, the same one he'd had as a wolf. Her feet froze on the forest floor, and a second later he walked out from between the trees. Bathed in a faint silver glow from the waning moon. His bright eyes resting gently on her face.

“Oh, you know...” Emboldened by Cassiel's success, she tried for some light-hearted banter of her own. Walking cautiously towards him all the while. “I thought I might go for a swim. See what mischief I can find...”

He sighed again but didn't turn away as she joined him by the edge of the trees. The anger that had defined him all day had gentled into something else. Something approachable. Something that gave her the courage to look him in the eyes.

“Dylan...I'm so sorry.”

He looked down at her but said nothing. A virtual war of emotions was battling just behind his eyes. A dozen different feelings, each fighting for supremacy.

“It was stupid,” she continued softly, bowing her head with shame. “You were right. It was stupid, and selfish, and I should have known better—”

“It wasn't stupid or selfish.”

Her head snapped up, convinced she'd heard him wrong. “...Pardon?”

“It wasn't stupid or selfish,” he repeated quietly, raking his fingers back through his hair with another quiet sigh. “You thought you saw a kid in trouble. You were trying to help. That isn't stupid or selfish. Exactly the opposite. And then, for your kindness...you were attacked.”

His voice tightened at the last word, and the two of them lapsed into silence once more. For her part, Katerina had no idea what was going on. A part of her thought he might just be messing with her. Another part felt like maybe she should be making a break for it after all.

"Then," she lifted her eyes tentatively, trying her best to understand, "then why did you—"

"I couldn't track you. I couldn't find you." He repeated his exact words from before. If Katerina had to guess, she'd say he'd been repeating them in his head every minute since. A faint tremble shook his body, and without seeming to think about it he reached out and took her hand. "If I hadn't decided to head west... If I hadn't heard them talking.."

"I know," she said quietly.

"You can't do that to me." A trace of that same panic shone in his eyes. That frenzied fear from the clearing. "You can't put me in a position where I'm not able to..."

He trailed off. Uncharacteristically helpless, fighting things beyond his control.

"...where I'm not able to save you."

His fingers tightened around hers, and Katerina pulled in a sudden breath. All at once, she understood. His day of silent rage. His inability to look her in the eyes. Right down to him lashing out at her in the woods. It was misdirected rage. Cassiel had known it. Now she did, too. She was always a step behind.

Dylan wasn't blaming her. He was blaming himself.

They stood in silence for a while, each one lost to their thoughts, before she looked up with a tentative smile. "How did you find me now?"

He looked down in surprise, as if she'd called him back from somewhere very far away, then his lips curved up in a crooked grin. "I tracked you."

"You tracked me?" Katerina repeated in surprise. "But I thought—"

"Something changed. Broke your little spell."

She considered this for a long moment. On the one hand, she should be terrified that her last bit of magical protection from home had finally disappeared. On the other hand, she was almost pleased to see it go. It was quiet

for a moment before she lifted her head, staring deep into his eyes. “Maybe I wanted to be found.”

Then it came without warning—their first kiss.

One second, he was staring down at her in the darkness, frozen perfectly still. The next, he was lifting her into the air. His arms circling around her back as his lips closed over hers, sending little sparks of electricity and heat shooting over her skin.

She barely had time to register what was going on. She barely had time to catch her breath before she was overwhelmed completely. Her eyes closed of their own accord as her fingers knotted clumsily in his hair. Anything to keep him close. Anything to keep the kiss going.

A second later his tongue was in her mouth, and she let out a soft moan.

*This can't be happening. I can't believe this is happening.*

Her legs hitched around his waist, and the kiss deepened. His hands slid down her lower back. They grabbed fistfuls of her dress, aching to rip it off. She didn't know whether she wanted that to happen or not. She didn't know if she was ready for any of this to happen, or if it was just the adrenaline, and the night, and the magic of the moon.

*“Dylan...”*

She whispered his name before she could stop herself. Was it to stop him? Was it to encourage him? She didn't know. It was so quiet, there was a chance he wouldn't even hear.

But, of course, he did.

A rush of cold air sprang between them as he pulled away. A second later, her feet landed back on the ground. They burned and tingled as the blood returned to them, and no matter what she did she couldn't seem to catch her breath. Neither could he. They were both quietly panting.

There was a moment of awkward silence as the two of them stood there, looking anywhere except at each other, then he cocked his head suddenly towards the camp.

“You should get some sleep.” His dark hair spilled into his eyes. Messy—where her fingers had knotted through. “We have a long day tomorrow.”



Her eyes widened as she stared up at him in shock. Had she done something wrong? Was he angry? Upset? Feeling just as confused as she was feeling herself? “Dylan, I—”

A soft finger brushed against her lips. Silencing the words that would never come. “Get some sleep, princess.”

He left without another word. Left her standing alone in the forest. Gazing helplessly after him in the dark. Her hands touching her mouth as the warmth of the kiss faded quickly from her lips.



## Chapter 2

They say that people dream as a way of sorting out their feelings. That dreams are the mind's subconscious method of making sense of the world. Of coming to terms with things that have happened. Of coming to terms with things yet to come.

Katerina dreamt that she was back in the palace library, perched atop a mountain of books, trying to find a recipe for stew, while a giant duck quacked orders at her from the veranda.

*Riddle me that.*

When she opened her eyes what felt like a very short time later, the tent was empty. The men were already long gone, scouting ahead the day's journey. And judging by the smell of smoke and burnt meat, Tanya was obviously in the middle of some failed breakfast preparation.

The princess sat up slowly. Letting her eyes adjust to the morning light. Letting one hand drift slowly to her lips as she replayed it again and again. Wondering if it really happened.

*There should really be a manual for these sorts of things. Midnight kisses in the woods. And for men! There should really be a manual for men!*

She hardly even remembered getting back to the tent last night. Her mind had been so preoccupied with other things, it was a wonder she had made it to the campsite at all.

Had he been angry with her for stopping things? *Had* she stopped things, or had the whisper been one of encouragement, urging him quietly forward? If she didn't know herself, what could *he* possibly be thinking? And on that note—

*HOLY HOUND DOGS! HE KISSED ME!*

On that point, at least, she was perfectly clear. The rest of the night might be foggy, but the kiss itself she didn't think she'd ever be able to forget. The strength of his hands as he lifted her clear off the ground. The smell of his hair as it brushed against her face. The taste of his mouth as his

tongue eased hers open, as forceful as he was gentle. As tender as he was strong.

*"You never forget your first kiss."*

It was something her governess had told her. Helene Vansprout. A woman with a face like an ox, but the heart of the mother the princess never had. Considering her charge was six years old at the time, she'd offered very little advice about men. But those words, Katerina never forgot.

*"You never forget your first kiss."*

The princess smiled to herself, her face warming with the light of the sun. No matter how confusing it had been. No matter how sudden, she knew she'd never want to. Then the smile faded to a worried frown. She could only speak for herself. The question was...did Dylan feel the same?

*"Son of a harpy!"*

Katerina's inner contemplation screeched to a halt as she gazed out the tent flap with a fond grin. Tanya may have pulled off a truly spectacular stew—one that had more to do with her entry into the gang than either Dylan or Katerina was prepared to admit—but those skills vanished completely when it came to breakfast. Chances were, the men had long since finished scouting and were simply keeping their distance until the smoke and the vile fumes had cleared.

Katerina pulled in a huge breath of air and coughed it back out. She didn't blame them.

"Kat, is that you?" Tanya's voice sounded as relieved as it was panicked. "You awake?"

It was one of Katerina's favorite things about the shifter. Her unwavering ability to go with the flow. Despite the royal revelation in the woods, Tanya carried on as if nothing extraordinary had happened. She was still Tanya. The princess was still Kat.

"Seriously, if you're awake, get your butt out here! This whole place is about to blow!"

Katerina stifled a giggle, and quickly shimmied into her clothes. It was a tight fit. With four bodies and four different packs crammed into one little tent, things were significantly more crowded than when it had just been her and Dylan.

Then again, last night might have gone very differently if it had just been her and Dylan.

*"Katerina!"*

Right. "I'm coming!"

She laced up the back of her dress, pulled on her boots, and shook out her fiery hair as she ducked under the flap and made her way into the clearing. Sure enough, the breakfast debacle was well under way. Aside from the noxious fumes, a thin layer of what looked like greenish fog had started streaming over the sides of the caldron hanging atop the fire. It crept over the ground like a hellish mist, contaminating everything in its path. Katerina could swear some of the flowers on the edge of the campsite had started to wilt.

"Smells good."

Tanya shot her an acidic look. She was perched upon a rock overlooking the caldron. A weapon in one hand, and a flask in the other. It was unclear as to which she needed more. "Laugh all you want. When Dylan and Cass get back, I'm telling them you did it."

Katerina grinned and fished around in her pack, pulling out a tin of biscuits and tossing one to the shifter. Tanya caught it on the edge of her knife and took a reluctant bite. When the caldron started emitting a low-pitched whine, she jumped down with a sigh and kicked dirt over the fire.

"Another one bites the dust."

Katerina sat down as far away from the mess as was polite, chewing thoughtfully on a biscuit of her own. "What's with the knife?"

Tanya's eyes drifted from the blade to the caldron, narrowing into a petulant sulk. "At one point, I thought there was a chance it had come to life..."

Wisely steering the conversation past the disastrous breakfast, Katerina patted the rock beside her and Tanya sat down. The two girls ate in silence for a while, casting occasional looks at the withering flames as the pot shuddered and creaked its death throes. Finally, after enough time had passed, Tanya cast the princess a sideways glance.

"So, what ended up happening last night?"

A piece of biscuit lodged in Katerina's throat, and she dissolved into a fit of frantic coughing. The flask was held out a moment later, and she took a giant gulp.

"Holy hound dogs!" She cursed and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, behavior that would have gotten her skinned alive back at the palace. "How can you guys drink that stuff?"

Tanya shrugged and took another sip for herself. "After a while, you just go numb."

*Not sure if that's a point in its favor...*

The princess shuddered and smoothed down her dress, hyper aware that the shifter's eyes were still on her. When she made no effort to speak, Tanya tried again.

"So?"

"So, what?"

"Dylan!" Tanya laughed, forcing the flask back into Katerina's hand and indicating for her to take another sip. "What happened the other night with Dylan? Was he pretty ticked?"

The second sip went down a little easier than the first. The third was even easier after that.

"He *was* ticked," Katerina admitted, wiping her mouth again and passing back the flask. "But I don't think it was at me. At least if he was, he never said."

"You're lucky," Tanya muttered, downing the top half of the bottle. Katerina shot her a curious look and she rolled her eyes. "He was certainly ticked at me, let me tell you. If Cass hadn't finally intervened this morning, I think he'd still be yelling."

"Yelling?" Katerina turned to her in shock. "But for what?! You didn't do anything—"

"I let you out of my sight," Tanya interrupted quietly. "He was right to yell. I shouldn't have let the witches send you out by yourself. If I hadn't, none of this would have happened."

"That's ridiculous!" Katerina exclaimed, feeling an overwhelming surge of guilt. "I was the one who took off after the kid. It had nothing to do with you! It was completely *my* fault!"

“And that’s what I told Dylan,” Tanya said cheerfully. “Not that I blame you myself, but I needed to point the finger someplace else. That man can be intense.”

Katerina took another look at her, then burst out laughing. She could go with the flow, all right. It seemed there was nothing in the world that wouldn’t roll off the girl’s back. “Well, thanks—for blaming me.”

Tanya passed back the flask with a bright smile. “Cheers!”

They drank in silence for a while longer, completely ignoring the fact that it was early in the morning and they had a terribly long day ahead. Truth be told, Katerina was having trouble sorting through the events of the last twenty-four hours, and a stiff drink of whiskey could only help. That, and some gentle encouragement from her new, semi-demented friend.

“I didn’t know he could shift.”

Katerina almost dropped the flask right then and there. Oh, yeah. Not only had Dylan kissed her, but the man was a freakin’ WOLF! She knew one or two details had slipped her mind...

She was quiet for a moment, then dropped her gaze to the ground. “Neither did I.”

Tanya looked over in surprise. She had obviously been expecting the opposite. “You really didn’t know? And he just burst into the clearing all wolfed out and started eating people?”

“He didn’t eat them,” Katerina began defensively. Then she thought back to the second guard and amended her answer. “He maybe just mauled them a little.”

Tanya snorted with laughter, finding inexplicable humor in the words where the princess could not. “Well, everyone has their quirks, right? What did he say about it last night?”

Katerina’s head snapped up, looking at her in surprise. “Excuse me?”

“Last night,” Tanya said again, oblivious to her friend’s reaction. “When you were talking to him last night, what did he say about the whole wolf thing?”

The hits just kept coming. Of all the things *not* to talk about. Of all the questions not to ask. The fact that he’d shifted into a giant wolf? *That* one had slipped her mind?

"It didn't..." She trailed off, the happy buzz from the whiskey faded, leaving her feeling suddenly cold. "It didn't come up."

*Somewhere between him kissing me and him sending me away...it didn't come up.*

"Whiskey for breakfast?"

The girls looked up with a start as the men marched back into the clearing. They'd obviously sensed the danger had passed, because when they saw the dirt-smothered fire neither looked surprised.

Cassiel nudged the edge of it with his boot before shooting Tanya a roguish wink. "A girl after my own heart."

"Run fast and far," Dylan teased, ruffling Tanya's hair as he walked past. She grinned back and tossed him the remainder of the flask. The two had obviously gotten past whatever trouble they'd had that morning.

Katerina could only hope she could say the same.

"Good morning," she ventured tentatively, hardly daring to glance up as Dylan slipped off his pack and tossed it beside the tent.

There was a split-second pause before he flashed her a quick smile. "Morning." Another incriminating pause. "How did you sleep?"

Katerina felt like she was choking on the biscuit again. Only this time, there was no biscuit. "...I dreamt I was making stew for a duck."

This time, the pause was much more pronounced. Dylan's eyebrows lifted slowly into his hair before his face lit with the makings of a genuine smile. "Me, too. What are the odds?"

Katerina snorted, and hopped down off the rock. "You're an exceptionally terrible liar, you know that?" She hesitated a moment, then added, "Especially for a shifter."

He'd been in the process of taking down the tent, but the second she said the word his hands froze above the rope. There was an almost imperceptible stiffening in his shoulders, and although he'd clearly heard what she'd said he didn't turn back around.

A second later, he continued with the rope.

"Oh yeah?" There was a note of caution to his voice, despite how hard he was trying to keep it light. "And how do you feel about that?"

*Well, if he won't come to me, I'll just have to go to him.*

Katerina dropped her pack and circled around to the back of the tent to help him. Her fingers wrapped around the loop of the rope he was unable to reach, and with a little tug the entire thing came free. His eyes flickered to hers as the canopy fell, just in time to see her flash a little grin. "I think I preferred the theory of the travelling circus thief."



THE NEXT FEW HOURS passed by in a sort of blur. Yes, the hike was brutal. Yes, the air was getting thinner and cooler the higher up they climbed. But, unlike the previous day, there was no layer of tension weighing them down. Things felt lighter. Conversation was funny and free. By the time they'd reached their designated stopping point for lunch, spirits were at an all-time high.

Of course, that's when the banter faded, and the bickering began.

"—which is why I warned you," Tanya was gesticulating wildly, trying to make the two much taller men standing on either side see reason, "I'm a heavy sleeper."

"Yes, you said you were a heavy sleeper," Cassiel retorted. "You didn't say that you were an inconvenient one. Never in my life would I imagine such a small girl could take up so much space."

Katerina stifled a grin as Dylan splintered away from them to join her. Last night might have been a blur, but she had vague recollections of what they were talking about. A vague memory of Tanya sprawling out in the tiny tent like some deranged starfish, either kicking or punching everyone who lay in her path. Cassiel, the poor man, had awoken with a black eye.

"It's not my fault!" she cried. "I'm used to having space. And I don't see why you should have more than me, just because you're about nine feet tall!"

The fae glared down at her like he was just inches away from showing her what that powerful frame of his could do. To make things even, Tanya shifted into him on the spot.

"Don't do that!" Cassiel shouted, leaping back in alarm while gawking at his life-size reflection. "I thought we took a vote and agreed you can't do that!"



“Do what?” Tanya asked, in a voice much deeper than her own. Cassiel’s lovely features twisted into Tanya’s signature smirk. “I’m just evening the playing field.”

Katerina and Dylan started snickering as one Cassiel began mimicking the other’s furious gestures. It wasn’t long before said gestures turned violent, and one grabbed the other by the throat.

“Dylan, make her shift back!”

“I can’t breathe, you lunatic! Let me go!”

“What do you think?” Katerina stretched up onto her tiptoes, whispering into the ranger’s ear. “Should we give them a few minutes, or pull them apart?”

Dylan grinned, watching as the two of them struggled. “Oh, I think we can give it a few minutes. This is way too much fun.”

“For bloody sake, woman!” Cassiel gritted his teeth, catching ‘himself’ in a headlock and kicking out his own legs with one swift blow. “Do you have any idea what kind of therapy I’m going to need to get past this?!”

“It’s your own flippin’ fault! No one likes a sore loser!” Tanya fell to the ground, reaching up at the same time to feel her new pointed ears. “...this is weird.”

Katerina laughed along with Dylan, until something fluttering along the edge of the little clearing caught her eye. Curious, she left the others behind, walking slowly across the tall grass.

It was a paper, she realized. A flyer that had been nailed into the tree.

A faint frown flitted across her face as she instinctively glanced around. They were tens of miles away from the nearest settlement. They had put actual mountains between themselves and the nearest road. But the flyer looked brand new. Where could it have come from?

“Kat?”

She glanced behind her, to see Dylan jogging swiftly across the field. Behind him, one Cassiel was slowly choking the other to death. A look of concern flashed across his face as he examined her. He had not yet seen the poster.

“What happened? What’s wrong?”

She didn’t say anything. She merely pointed to the tree.

His eyes found it at once, latching on as a similar look of wonder flashed across his face. A guarded wariness was soon to follow, and it was with great caution that he approached the tree. The princess hung back as he ripped the paper from off the tree, taking a second to read it.

*This can't be good.*

Every ounce of color drained from his face, leaving a pale statue standing there. He opened his mouth once to speak, then closed it. He opened it again but thought better of it each time. Instead, he pulled in a deep breath, crumpled up the paper, and stuffed it deep inside his pocket.

In a flash, Katerina sprang back to life.

“What is it? What did it say?”

By now, the others were behind her. Tanya had returned to her normal form, looking a little worse for wear, and she and Cassiel were standing side by side with matching looks of worry.

Dylan glanced at them once before shaking his head with an almost believable air of nonchalance. “Nothing. It was old. About some festival that’s already done.”

Not one of them was fooled. Not one.

“That’s funny,” Katerina took a step forward, folding her arms across her chest with an accusatory glare, “I thought we just established that you’re a *terrible* liar. What does it say, Dylan? Tell me!”

He hesitated briefly, shared a quick glance with Cassiel, then seemed to realize it was inevitable. With a soft sigh, he pulled the paper out of his pocket and tossed it her way. She caught it with trembling hands. Hands that went dead still when she unfolded it and saw what it had to say.

The first thing that caught her attention was the royal seal. The next thing was the headline.

**Katerina Damaris**

**Accused of High Treason for the Murder of the King**

**Reward for Immediate Capture**

She read the words in a daze, staring blankly at her picture below. The paper had all but fallen from her hands before she saw the last words. Soon to be burned forever into her mind.

**Dead or Alive**



## Chapter 3

The paper slipped noiselessly from Katerina's hands, but she felt as if there should have been a deafening *boom* as it landed inaudibly on the tall grass. There had been a silent aftershock as her friends absorbed the information, but already a frantic, murmured conversation was getting underway. Not that she really heard it. She couldn't hear anything past the dull ringing in her ears.

*Kailas is blaming me. He's saying I did it.*

It shouldn't have come as a huge surprise. In hindsight, she probably should have seen it coming. If her brother would go so far as to murder their father then, surely, he wouldn't hesitate to shift the blame. But no matter how logical it all sounded, the princess found herself completely unable to come to terms. In a bizarre way, it was almost harder to believe that he would publicly blame her than it was to comprehend the murder itself. Her own brother. Her own brother did this.

*He's blaming me. He's saying I did it.*

"—doesn't change a thing."

"Like hell it doesn't! It changes everything!"

"Just calm down for a second, and let me—"

"No, I'm not going to calm down," Tanya hissed. Her hazel eyes flickered around the little clearing, as if the world had shrunk dramatically since the last time she looked. "They put it up *here*, Dylan. You found it right *here* on this tree. In the heart of the Black Forest. An entire mountain range away from the nearest signs of life. They were *here*."

"The girl is right." Cassiel might look the same age as the rest of them, but in times of trouble it was suddenly easy to remember he'd been alive for almost a century. "This changes things. We're going to have to double our pace. Make for the safe house with all speed."

Tanya had been nodding along but stopped abruptly when he got to the end.

“What—no! That’s not what I’m saying at all!” She may have been about half his size, but she more than made up for it with intensity. “We need to forget about Brookfield and find someplace closer to hide. We stay out in the open, we’re dead.”

*He’s blaming me. He’s saying I did it.*

“Why do you think we’re going to Brookfield?” Cassiel countered sharply. “There isn’t a better place in this world *to* hide.”

“Yes, but it’s at least another week’s journey. Maybe more.” Tanya shook her head quickly, her cinnamon hair swishing against the tops of her shoulders. “At least one troop of guards was up here to post that banner. Maybe more. We’re not going to last another week.”

Dylan looked between them. Unwilling to commit either way.

“None of us is safe. Anywhere. Brookfield is our best option.” Cassiel crossed his arms over his chest.

It was a good sign that neither one of them had talked about jumping ship. After all, the banner mentioned only the princess, none of her accomplices. But they were both making valid arguments, and at the moment Dylan looked unsure which way to decide. His eyes flickered once or twice to Katerina, but she was still lost in her own world.

*High treason. He’s saying I killed Father.*

“—not a matter of experience,” Tanya was shouting. “This is basic common sense!”

“It’s a knee-jerk reaction,” Cassiel replied with increasingly strained patience. “One based in panic instead of clear thought. We are going where they cannot follow. That’s the entire point—”

“Kailas said I did it.”

The heated argument came to a sudden halt as all three of them turned around slowly to look at the princess. She was standing exactly where she’d been when she’d read the poster. She hadn’t blinked, breathed, or moved an inch. A strange ashen tinge was spreading its way over her fair skin, as if she had blown into a cloud of chalk, and despite the sun having come out and it being very warm she was trembling.

“He said I killed my father.”

The words were disjointed and clipped. Looping endlessly through her mind. Like the worst sort of dream—one from which she was unable to wake.

The others shared a nervous glance while Dylan stepped cautiously forward. Moving with exaggerated slowness, as if at any moment she might bolt and run away.

“Yes, he did,” he said quietly. “Kailas said that.” Another step closer, his eyes never left her face. “But Kat, this isn’t—”

But whatever he was going to say, she didn’t hear him. The next second, she was gone.



“KAT!”

The two of them tore through the trees. One chasing after another. The world flew past in a beautiful sea of green, but neither one noticed. They were looking straight ahead.

“Kat, slow down!”

It was ridiculous that a ranger would make such a request. But between the whiskey, the wanted poster, and her blind adrenaline, she was storming straight through things he was taking care to avoid. Brambles. Boulders. Frigid mountain streams. By the time he finally caught up with her, she looked as though she’d been dropped from a cliff in the middle of a temperate rain storm.

*“Katerina.”*

He caught her by the wrist, easing her to a gentle stop. Just as gently, he turned her towards him. Taking only a moment to examine her wide, vacant eyes, before pulling her into his chest.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed, bringing up one hand to stroke the back of her hair. “Your own brother, I can’t even...I’m so sorry, Kat.”

She stood there and let herself be held. Only half-registering the contact. The other half was still frozen back in the clearing. Staring down at those three fateful words.

### **Dead or Alive**

“He killed my ladies, you know?”

Dylan stiffened, then looked down at her in surprise. She hadn't said the words with any particular inflection, but they were shocking nonetheless.

"...I didn't know."

Of course, he didn't. No one did. But she was too far gone to realize that now.

"I sent them away from me," she continued in that hollow, vacant voice. "Ordered them to stay in the palace. Protect their families and submit to the new rule."

A faint shudder rippled through her body. He absorbed it into his hands.

"When I went back to get my necklace, they were lying on the floor. Dead. Stacked in some huge, bloody pile, like someone was trying to save space. Dead."

Again, he stiffened. This time, he had no idea what to say.

The people scattered around the outer rim of the kingdom had all grown up with stories of the crown prince. They knew well of his cruelty, his greed. While the princess might have known a rosier version of him up until recently, the others had long since been disillusioned.

This poster clearly did not surprise him. But saying that wouldn't help.

"I don't understand why he had to do that," Katerina said faintly. Her face was still pressed up against Dylan's chest, but the quiet words came through loud and clear. "It wasn't like I was taking them with me. I was alone. He...he knew them. We grew up together. Why would he—"

"For exactly that reason," Dylan interrupted gently. "To isolate you. To cut you off from everyone you know and make you feel entirely alone."

It was quiet for a moment, then he tilted up her head.

"...but you're not."

She gazed up at him, her eyes shining with a hundred tears.

"You're not alone," he said again, quiet but firm. "You have people who are willing to fight for you. People who are willing to risk everything. You have me—" He cut off suddenly, editing on the fly. "I mean...you have us. Me and Tanya and Cass. We're not going anywhere. I promise."

For a moment, their eyes locked. He wiped away a stray tear that had fallen and she managed to take her first deep breath. Then, just as quickly as they'd come together, she pulled away.

"Just three more people who are going to die because of me." She took a step back, her worn boots landing softly upon the damp leaves. "And as for us?" Their eyes locked again, before she turned away. "There is no us. You made that perfectly clear."



BY THE TIME THEY GOT back to their little camp, the others had come to some sort of tentative truce. For at least the time being, they'd decided to go with Cassiel's plan. They would continue to Brookfield as they'd been doing. Only with one or two minor adjustments to the route.

"What about Clever's Pass?" Tanya was saying. "Even in the summer, it's almost always deserted. If we're really trying to stay under the radar, that would be our best bet."

Cassiel frowned to himself, deep in thought. "It's a hard climb. Even under the best of circumstances. And the weather has been unseasonably cold. I'm not sure if—"

"We're not going to Clever's Pass," Katerina said quietly. The others looked up in surprise, their eyes flashing from her to Dylan then back to her. "We're not going anywhere. Not together."

They absorbed this for a moment.

Then Tanya shook her head. "Kat, if you're talking about splitting up, that's a *really* stupid idea—"

"We're not splitting up," Katerina replied firmly. "We're parting ways. I appreciate what you've all done for me, what you've been willing to risk—but I'm not. Willing to risk it, that is. I'm not willing to risk any of you."

Cassiel lifted his eyebrows in surprise, while Dylan turned away to the trees. Tanya, on the other hand, was outraged. And it was an emotion she seldom kept to herself.

“Well, fortunately, *Your Highness*, it’s not up to you. Right?” She looked around at the others for support. “We decided to embark upon this together. As a group. You can’t just—”

“I can, and I just did.” Katerina picked up her pack and swung it over her shoulders. “I won’t have any more blood on my hands. Especially that of the three of you. I simply can’t permit it.”

For the first time, Cassiel was looking at her with a hint of respect, but Tanya absolutely wasn’t having it. “Well, that’s total bull—”

“Where will you go?” Dylan interrupted quietly.

Katerina turned towards him, but before she could say a word Tanya leapt in between.

“Are you serious?” she hissed. “Dylan, you can’t possibly—”

“Where will you go?” he said again, eyes locked solely on the princess.

Katerina considered the question for the first time. Things were changing so quickly, she honestly hadn’t given it much thought. Not that she knew much about the mountain terrain anyway.

After a long moment, she simply gestured up the nearest hill.

“That way.”

Cassiel followed the gesture with a frown, Tanya cursed under the breath, but Dylan never broke her gaze. A faint look of amusement danced across his face, but he didn’t smile. He simply picked up his pack and slipped it over his shoulders.

“How strange.” He tilted his head towards the same hill. “As fate would have it, we’re heading ‘that way’ too.”



WHAT HAPPENED BACK in the clearing with the poster was supposed to have been a personal revelation. An impassioned stand after which Katerina struck out on her own forever. Exposed and defenseless against the dangers of the world, but with a clear conscience and unwavering beliefs.

It was not supposed to turn into a woodland game of hide and seek.

In the beginning, Katerina had thought they would just lose interest. That if she simply ignored them and continued on her own, they would



eventually realize she was serious, give up the ghost, and head back to their respective homes.

She'd done all she could to see it through.

She'd set out immediately without giving them time to pack up their things. She'd embarked upon a nonsensical course, darting through the trees in illogical zig-zags that left her feeling dizzy but satisfied she could not be followed. She'd even doubled back once or twice before abruptly changing direction. At the last moment, she headed for the mountains instead.

Why wasn't she surprised, then, when she heard three familiar voices ringing in the trees?

"I say good riddance," Tanya was saying loudly, pushing noisily through the branches, completely oblivious to the fact that she was snapping them back in Cassiel's face. "Sure, she might come off as sweet in the beginning, but the girl is a royal pain in the ass. *Plus*, she ruined breakfast."

Katerina snorted in laughter, then forced that smile into a scowl as she quickened her clumsy pace. Only a few seconds later, she heard the others. They weren't behind her, as she'd originally thought, but were walking side by side. Just about fifty yards to her right.

"I caught her rummaging through my pockets in the middle of the night," Cassiel added seriously. "Probably looking for money, the little thief."

For a second Katerina almost lost her composure entirely, ready to launch all her defenses. Then she glanced out of the corner of her eye, took one look at the innocent face, and remembered to hold her tongue. They weren't going to get her so easily.

Dylan had no stories to contribute. No slurs against her character, no baiting or lies. He kept mostly to himself and let the others do the talking. Opening his mouth only occasionally to remind them to slow their pace: "Apparently, we are to climb this mountain at the speed of a drunken child."

Katerina bit her lip to conceal a smile. She figured that last bit was for her.

And, so, it continued. When she hiked, they hiked. When she rested, they rested. When she got lost and took an hour-long detour to avoid a river they rolled their eyes, complained, but did the same.

Things remained fairly consistent until the four of them set up camp for the night. Two separate camps. Just a stone's throw away. But only one of them had a tent. And food. And a fire.

Katerina brought her arms up around her chest and shivered violently as she watched them jealously through the trees. How it was they'd gotten a fire going out of the wet wood, she had no idea. She'd been trying for the last forty minutes with no success, but Cassiel had basically just touched the thing and it had sprung to life. She'd finally given up and was leaning against the trunk of a tall tree. Clutching her cloak around her. Nothing but a single biscuit to her name.

*Just give it another night. They'll give up after another night and go home. Then you won't have to worry about them. Then they'll be safe.*

The thought comforted her and terrified her all at the same time. Yes, she wanted them to be safe, but she couldn't imagine what it would be like when they were actually gone. Her mind flashed back to how she'd felt that first night, running away from the palace, completely alone in the trees, and she stifled a shudder. She may be freezing, and starving, and dying of thirst, but she was taking a considerable amount of comfort just in the sight of their tent. To have it all taken away?

*It's what YOU wanted. It's what YOU insisted upon. Get on board.*

With the world's quietest sigh, she curled up in a little ball on the ground and forced herself to close her eyes. If she could make it through the chilly night to morning without losing any of her toes, she'd count it as a success. And if she had one more night's security, knowing that people who cared about her were close by...she might as well enjoy it while she could.

And so, with the sounds of a distant fire crackling in her ears, she drifted off into the world's most troubled sleep. At least, that's what she tried to do.

Three hours later, she was still awake.

The fire next door had long since died, and there were no sounds coming from the tent. The others were no doubt fast asleep, but the icy mountain chill was making that virtually impossible. She sucked a freezing breath through her teeth and huddled down as far as she could in her cloak. It was fine while she was up and moving about but wasn't designed to act as a blan-

ket. Even now, it had accumulated so much water that she was thinking of casting it off entirely.

A sudden noise in the trees made her sit up with a start. Her eyes widened with fear as she looked around, while her trembling fingers groped around blindly for a rock or a stick. Anything she could use as a weapon. The higher up they'd climbed into the mountains, the more tracks they'd stumbled across from nature's finest predators. Wolves, cougars, and bears. She wouldn't be at all surprised if one had happened upon her in the night, prowling about for an easy snack.

"Hello?" she whispered, hardly daring to speak.

There was another noise. Much closer than the first. She carefully lifted the rock above her head, then froze perfectly still. Too frightened to move. A final twig snapped, and she almost fainted right then and there.

"No need for the rock. I surrender."

It fell from her hands as her body wilted with an exhausted sigh. A second later, Dylan stepped through the trees. He was carrying a flagon of water and a heavy blanket.

"I thought you were a bear," she confessed weakly, bringing her knees up to her chest.

His eyes made a quick study before twinkling with his signature smile. "Not a bear. A wolf, remember?"

She was too cold to even laugh at the joke, and he settled down beside her. A second later, he'd spread the blanket across the two of them and pressed the water into her hand. When she looked up at him, he ignored her with a dismissive shrug.

"I'm cold."

Her icy lips twitched up into a smile. *Right. I bet you are.*

A second after that, he leaned back against the tree. Unlike her, who'd had to fidget and adjust for a small eternity before she could get comfortable, he looked as natural as could be. His eyes were closed, and one arm was slightly extended. A silent invitation for her to come inside.

An hour earlier, she might have refused. Now, bordering on the fringes of frostbite, she no longer had that kind of pride.

Without a word, she shifted closer and nestled down into his arms. He smelled of leather and pine, and with a contented sigh she lay her head up-

on his chest and closed her eyes. Both arms wrapped instantly around her, and the heat from his skin seeped into her own. The sound of his steady heartbeat was like a drug, lulling her into a hypnotic sleep, but before she closed her eyes for good she tilted her head and asked him one final thing. "Why are you always saving me?"

His arms tightened as he glanced down with a smile. "Bad habit."

She absorbed this for a moment, blinking against the heavy fatigue. Then she lifted her chin again, peering up at him under the light of the moon. "The other night...why did you tell me to go to bed?"

It wasn't his fault that she could feel the sudden hitch in his breathing. That she felt the way his pulse hammered and his heart skipped a beat. It was quiet for a moment, before he gave an even quieter reply.

"I told you to go to bed because the day was over. I told you to go to bed because we had a long day ahead of us."

His tone ended the conversation, and she put the rest of her questions away for the time being. Her head dropped back against his chest, and before she knew it she was drifting off into a dreamless sleep.

She almost didn't hear him say the last part. She was almost too far gone.

"I told you to go to bed." The wind swept down upon them, and his arms tightened around her again. "I didn't say I didn't want to go with you."



## Chapter 4

Katerina opened her eyes the next morning, shocked to discover she was warm. The sun was out, and she was still cradled snugly against Dylan's chest. Her body rose and fell with his steady breathing, and every now and then one of his fingers would twitch in a dream.

A secret smile curled up the side of her face, and she cuddled in closer. Over the last several weeks the two of them had spent many nights together, but there had never been anything like this.

*Especially after that kiss. Especially after what he said last night.*

The smile grew brighter as she watched his fingers, fighting imaginary demons and monsters in his sleep. Despite the rough exterior and the 'Get lost' attitude, there were times he reminded her of a child. Brimming with energy. Searching for adventure. Sparkling eyes fixed on the horizon.

*He probably thinks I didn't hear. He probably thought I was asleep already.*

But the words were burned forever into her mind. They'd electrified her body and kept her awake long after he'd passed out himself. "I told you to go to bed...I didn't say I didn't want to go with you." After getting over the initial shock, the initial flattery, the initial cheek-blazing blush that immediately followed, Katerina did her best to consider the possibility from all sides.

Was that something she wanted? Did she even care about him like that? When two people were joined at the hip, living each day on the edge of a knife, it was hard to tell one way or another.

What feelings were real? How deep did they run? Did Dylan feel any of them, too?

The smile faded a little as she considered this.

It had only taken a few days on the road for her to realize that the man eclipsed her in terms of experience. A dozen pairs of lusty eyes followed wherever he went, a dozen lusty stories were attached to every town, and it wasn't like he exactly shied away from the attention. He did when he was

with her, of course, but the man obviously had game. And obviously enjoyed the company of women.

A night spent in her bed might be nothing more than casual for him. A way to pass the time and keep warm on the cold forest nights. No feelings involved whatsoever.

*But it can't just be that, can it? Otherwise, why would he have sent me away? Why would he have stopped our kiss?* Another thought occurred to her, and she froze. *Why the heck am I even thinking about all this, when my homicidal brother just put a price on my head?!*

He shifted suddenly beneath her, tightening his arms like she was some teddy bear, before his eyes fluttered open and shut. They focused slowly on the brilliant sunrise, drifting down to the girl in his arms. She was staring back up at him with a little smile.

“Good morning.”

His lips twitched up, and he made no move to release her. “Morning. You still have all your toes?”

She rolled her eyes but wriggled them just to be sure. “Ten fingers, ten toes. All in all, I’d rate the night as a huge success.”

He chuckled quietly and stretched out his long legs. She might be hyper-aware of the fact that their bodies were pressed up against each other, but he didn’t seem to notice. One hand stayed pressed against her lower back as the other rummaged around and produced the flagon of water.

“You should drink something.” It wasn’t a suggestion, but a good-natured command. “You didn’t have enough yesterday, and the last thing you want up here is to get dehydrated.”

She unscrewed the cap carefully, peeking up occasionally through her lashes. “How do you know how much water I drank yesterday?”

“...lucky guess.”

A little grin broke through, in spite of her best efforts, and she ‘accidentally’ spilled some on his stomach as she was screwing back on the cap. He tensed immediately, then scowled, then grinned, then sprayed her face with a handful of droplets.

*Rangers can also be playful. Good to know.*

They lay there for a while longer, passing the water back and forth, each secretly unwilling to let the other go, before the sounds from the camp next

door started filtering through the trees. They glanced over at the same time, staring blankly through the tall redwoods, then dropped their heads with an identical sigh. Their brief respite was over. Time to get back to the real world.

“So, what’s it going to be, princess?” Dylan asked as they finally untangled themselves, sitting up together and gazing out over the magnificent vista beyond. “Have you come to your senses, or are we going to keep playing follow-the-leader all over these hills?”

Katerina’s eyes flickered over to the tent. Then to the breakfast fire crackling merrily in front of it. Then to the people gathered around that fire. She stared at them for a moment, taking in every single detail, and then the strangest thing happened. Along with the nauseating fear, and the worry, and the sense of doom that had been plaguing her since the moment she saw that poster, she began to feel the stirrings of something else, too. Something that felt a bit like hope.

“I think we’d better stick together,” she said casually. “You three obviously need me. It’s a miracle you lasted even the night.”

Dylan nodded with a thoughtful frown, acting like it didn’t bother him either way. The two of them quickly folded up the blanket and started heading back to the others. They’d almost made it all the way, when she heard him mutter under his breath. “Heaven forbid we pick a single direction and stick with it for the rest of the day...”

She smacked him as hard as she could, right in the center of the back.

“You just couldn’t leave it alone, could you?” she demanded. “You just couldn’t let this be one of those happy moments, and leave it at that?”

He kept walking with a little smile. “Heaven forbid we learn how to start a fire...”



THE OTHERS HANDLED Katerina’s return to the fold with a lot more grace. Tanya caught her in a suffocating bear hug, then demanded she sample whatever was smoking above the flames. Even Cassiel, with whom she hadn’t really bonded, gave her a one-armed hug before returning to his seat on the other side of the fire. She stared after him in surprise, wondering if

she was ever going to figure out what was going on inside that capricious head of his.

They had been in the middle of an intense discussion before she arrived. Still deliberating as to the wisest route to Brookfield Hall. Apparently, none of them thought her little rebellion would last very long, and they wanted to be prepared the moment she came back.

“I still say that Clever’s Pass is the best way to go.” Tanya shielded her eyes and squinted with great authority towards the mountains in the distance. “I know it’s not the easiest climb in the world, but I think we’ve proven ourselves by now, haven’t we?”

Dylan’s eyes flickered from the smoking caldron to the half-capsized tent, but he pursed his lips and said nothing. Instead, he turned to Cassiel. His reluctant voice of reason.

“It’s a double-edged sword,” the fae said thoughtfully. “It’s a dangerous path, but that might mean it’s the safest for people in our position to travel. The prince must have figured out by now that there are people out there working to keep the princess alive. He can’t imagine we would risk her life by taking her somewhere like that.”

Katerina shivered discreetly at the words ‘somewhere like that.’ If it was as dangerous as they were making it out to be shouldn’t they, too, be avoiding it at all costs?

“What do you think?” she asked Dylan quietly. The others could input all they wanted, but she wouldn’t go along with a plan until she heard it from his own mouth.

He considered the question for a long time, glancing up occasionally at the snowy peaks in the distance. When he finally answered, it was clear he was searching for the lesser of two evils.

“It’s cold,” he murmured, sticking his hands in his pockets as the icy wind swept his hair off his face. “It shouldn’t be so cold this time of year.”

Cassiel nodded slowly. Troubled by the same thing.

“Still, I think we should try it.” His hand closed around the poster; he’d taken it with him before running off after Katerina in the woods. “I wouldn’t have thought we’d still be seeing guards so far north, but here they are. Clever’s Pass might be the only chance we have to lose them.”



“So, it’s decided.” Tanya picked up her pack with a cheerful smile, unwilling to let even the worst of circumstances get her down. “Off to a frozen wasteland of death.”

There was a heavy pause.

“Yeah...something like that.”

The others gave her a long look, slowly following suit. They packed up the rest of the camp, scarfed down a quick bite of breakfast, and stamped out what remained of the fire.

Less than ten minutes later they were all standing in a line, staring out at the frozen mountains beyond.

They lingered there a moment, trying to make peace with the thought, before Dylan cocked his head and they started marching straight towards the summit.

He went out in front, his sharp eyes missing not a single detail as they made their way over the rugged terrain. Katerina followed just after, a great deal more scared than she was letting on but determined to keep pace. Cassiel was just a step behind. Tall and graceful. And wary. Keeping his eyes on the trees, as if at any moment a new danger might come leaping out. Tanya brought up the rear, humming quietly under her breath and pausing now and then to pick a stray flower.

They were an unusual group, but a determined one. The whimsical music and daisy chains certainly didn’t help. The fae tolerated them for as long as he could before glaring over his shoulder.

“You were living as a goblin too long...”



IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG to get to the mountains. Another day hiking through the tall grass, and another night camping amongst the heather, and they were already there. What *did* take long, was getting through the mountains. After just a few hours of struggling through the snow, in clothes not at all suited, Katerina was beginning to doubt they'd ever make it to the other side.

“This...was maybe a bad idea.”

A thick blanket of snow covered the ground, hiding dips and ravines and making everything look deceptively level. Every few minutes or so, one of them would sink into a waist-deep drift and need to be fished out by the others. Every few minutes or so, they would need to stop and shake a heavy coating of powder from their clothes. Fingers stiffened and cracked. Momentum stalled and grew sluggish. And conversations were soon reduced to the quickest grunt or shake of the head as they tried to conserve their energy for what was yet to come.

It was bad enough for Katerina, who had next to no experience and whose skinny body offered little protection from the cold. But poor Tanya had it even worse. The girl was scarcely taller than the goblin she'd been impersonating. Just a little over five feet. While the snow came up to the rest of their chests, it was coming up to her chin.

"I'm serious." The tiny girl pulled out a blade and started hacking furiously at the ice bank in front of her, trying to clear a path. "Next time I have a 'great idea,' punch me in the mouth."

"Duly noted."

She glanced up with a scowl as Cassiel swept past her. But while he might have been teasing, he was not unkind. Before she could take another step, he reached down and lifted her clear out of the snow, setting her on a firmer bit of ice on the other side of the embankment.

"Pointy-eared little troll..." Tanya muttered.

"You're welcome." Cass nodded once.

Katerina tried to smile, but her lips had hardened into a pale, thin line. Every breath was agony, and every step felt as though it might be the last one. Back in the forest, they'd climbed over two or three mountains every day. It was a grueling pace, but at least it was possible. But this?

The sun was starting to slip lower in the sky, and they hadn't even reached the first alpine peak. At this rate, there was little chance of them making it before nightfall. And even then, where in the world were they supposed to pitch the tent?

"Thinking warm thoughts?"

She glanced to the side and saw Dylan wading towards her through the snow. The tops of his cheeks were flushed with exertion, but the rest of him was pale white. The rest of him that she could see, at least. He'd covered his

head in a scarf so that only a thin band revealing his eyes was visible. The brows above them had been coated white, making him look like a wizard in training.

“Does that ever work for you?” she panted back. “Thinking warm thoughts?” In her mind, it seemed almost spiteful. Why taunt herself when it felt like she would never be warm again?

She couldn't see much of his face, but she could have sworn he smiled.

“Don't tell me that you lose your sense of humor in the cold. I never would have suggested this place if I'd known. I would have insisted we travel by way of the beach.”

She started to laugh, but miscalculated a step, and went tumbling head first straight into a high snow bank. Her arms flew up as she prepared to get a bloody mouthful of ice but a hand shot out at the last second, grabbing the back of her cloak and pulling her to firmer ground.

“No need to be so dramatic, princess.” His eyes twinkled as he brushed a layer of frozen sleet off her back. “I'm already paying attention to you.”

She wanted to punch him, but it would take too much energy. She wanted to scramble up onto his back and get out of the snow, but it struck her that might not be entirely fair. Instead, she gestured to Tanya, turning the spotlight away from herself.

“Why doesn't she just shift into someone taller?” she asked curiously. “Or into something with wings—avoid the climb altogether.”

Dylan followed her gaze, watching the tiny girl struggle with an almost brotherly concern, before forcing it quickly from his eyes. “It takes an absurd amount of energy to shift into another sentient being. I'm guessing she doesn't have that kind of energy right now. And as for something that flies...” He trailed off, considering it for the first time. “I've heard rumors of that happening. Of people shifting into giant birds, or people with wings. But it's almost impossible. Especially for someone of Tanya's age. Give her fifty years or so...*maybe*. But not now. Certainly not in this place.”

“No problem,” Katerina panted. “I'm sure we'll still be here in fifty years.” Dylan shot her a sideways grin as she tripped once more. “On that note, why *did* you suggest this place?”

His smile faded as he glanced warily up at the sky. “I'm beginning to wonder that myself.”

As if on cue the clouds suddenly darkened, and a thick layer of snow began to fall. There was a series of muffled shouts and exclamations before the four of them clambered under the jagged edge of a snow-covered boulder and huddled together, staring miserably at the stormy skies.

“This shouldn’t be happening,” Cassiel said softly. It wasn’t a complaint, it was merely a contemplation. One that sent chills running down Katerina’s spine. “Not here. Not in the summer.”

Dylan’s face tightened, but he nodded. He’d clearly been thinking the same thing all day. “I know.”

The sky above them screamed and roared. Daring them to keep talking about what should and shouldn’t be. It looked as though the entire world was ripping apart. One seam at a time.

“In almost five hundred years, it’s never—”

“I know.”

The wind picked up speed, and the four of them huddled closer together. Without seeming to realize it, they all had a hand on each other. A fistful of jacket. The side of a sleeve. As the world around them fell apart, it seemed the only way to keep themselves together.

“Should we go back?” Tanya asked quietly. Her entire body was shaking, but she gazed at the storm with steady eyes. “Head out the way we came in? Wait for the storm to pass?”

Dylan nodded slowly, and Katerina sighed in relief. At this point, what was the alternative?

“We could certainly try.” Cassiel’s bright eyes squinted hard against the wind, gazing out in the opposite direction. “Take the lower trail. The one that dips down by the—”

It might have been a good idea. It might have been their very salvation. But they would never know. At that very moment, the clouds ripped open with a flash of blinding light.

*WHAT THE—?!*

The princess let out a piercing scream as a giant bolt of lightning sliced through the center of the sky, striking a mountain cliff behind them. A curved, dome-like peak they’d passed under less than an hour before. There was a deafening crash followed by an ominous rumble, and then, for a split-second, the entire world seemed to stand still.

The four friends stared up in terror. Not daring to move. Not daring to breathe.

*Please let it be okay. Please let it be okay.*

Katerina took a step closer to Dylan as everything around them went silent. The dizzying flurries. The thundering clouds. Even the storm itself seemed to be waiting for something.

For a suspended moment, nothing happened. Then the entire mountain began to give way.

Giant slabs of solid ice broke off the top. Thousands of tons of sleet and snow fell in a morbidly beautiful cascade towards the earth. They hit the ground with a noise that shattered Katerina's eardrums and rattled her teeth. Then the four of them watched, in what felt like slow motion, as the entire mountain of furious, icy death came flying their way.

*This is it. This is how we'll die.*

The princess pulled in her breath for another scream, but there wasn't time. Before she could inhale, a strong hand caught her by the waist and shoved her down against the boulder. Her teeth sank into her tongue and a burst of blood pooled in her mouth. She only barely had time to roll onto her back before Dylan came down on top of her.

His eyes were frantic, and his skin was pale white. The scarf he'd been using to protect himself flew off in the wind as he lowered his face to hers, speaking directly into her ear.

"Just take a breath. I've got you."

How could he be so calm? In just seconds, the entire canyon would be covered in a suffocating layer of snow, and the four friends would be buried right along with it.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cassiel pull Tanya down beside them. The two of them were crouched in the far corner beneath the dome of rock, holding onto each other for dear life in the precious few seconds that remained. Katerina looked at each one in turn, her ears ringing with the screaming wind, before turning back to Dylan.

Their eyes met, and for the second time in just a few seconds the world stood still.

She didn't think she'd ever be able to describe what passed between them in that frozen moment. There were worlds lost, dreams ended, and

lives that would never be shared. But at the same time there was a strange sort of peace. A feeling of tranquility that spread through her, making her entire body go still.

With a shaking hand, she reached up and brushed a frozen lock of hair away from his eyes; the rest was dancing wildly in the wind. Her fingers lingered on his face, and when their eyes locked again the princess and the ranger shared the world's most unlikely of smiles.

Then the ice struck, and the entire world went dark.

There was no more smiling after that.



## Chapter 5

It started as a dull ringing in her ears. That's the first clue Katerina had that told her she wasn't dead, but that some small part of her was still clinging to life. The ringing got louder and louder as she lay, perfectly suspended, in the snow.

*It seems unfair,* she thought, encased in her icy coffin, *that I would survive the initial blow, only to wake then have to suffocate. Why couldn't I have just died instantly? I bet the others got to.*

Not that she needed to breathe. Not that she felt particularly cold. It was like her body had gone into stasis, a frosty hibernation. She felt neither hurried, nor impatient. Neither worried, nor alarmed. She was simply there. But as the ringing in her ears intensified, she was beginning to realize she wasn't the only one...

Ringings became vibrations. Vibrations became sound. Sound slowly became words.

But they weren't words she was able to recognize.

"Ka-nu eer-me?!"

She tried to blink but found that she didn't need to do that either. Instead, she simply gazed up into the abyss, listening curiously as her ears came back to life. Someone was shouting. Someone seemed very anxious indeed. She just couldn't get it to make sense.

"Ang-on!"

The world was getting lighter. A great weight was lifting off her chest. One she hadn't realized was there in the first place. First the black lightened to grey, then the grey was tinged with dots of white. Those dots got brighter and brighter until they were burning into Katerina's eyes.

A sharp pain burst through her chest, followed by a rush of cold as the last of the snow cleared away and she found herself looking up into Dylan's eyes.

"Honey?!"

*Honey? Crap—maybe I'm dead after all.*

The world blinked back into focus just as he threw his body into the snow. His hands may have been urgent, but they handled her like she was made of glass as he swept her legs out from under her and fished her up out of the deep ravine.

She tried to help. She tried to get a foothold on the icy bank, or at least wrap her tired arms around his neck. But it was no use. He may have brought her back up to the land of the living, but a part of her was still down there. Hibernating in the ice.

"I can't believe it!" The second they were back on solid ground, he embraced her without a second thought. "You're alive!"

*That's debatable...*

Katerina blinked slowly. Allowing herself to be fawned over. Allowing herself to be held. The world was moving a bit too fast for her to keep up with, and the most she was able to do was simply lay there and wait to catch up. It took her a full minute to realize that Dylan was naked.

"Why aren't you wearing any pants?"

They were the first words she'd said since resurrecting and, in hindsight, she felt as though they should have been more significant. Wiser. Like her near-death experience had prompted her to discover some deeper meaning. But nope. He was naked, and she wanted to know why.

He glanced down self-consciously and quickly shifted her to the side, grasping for his clothes while keeping a firm hand on her. "I had to shift to get you out of there," he mumbled, yanking his pants up around his waist. "Wolves dig faster than people."

Sure enough, there were giant claw marks surrounding the hole she'd just come out of. A frantic display of both raw power and sheer panic had broken her free of the ice. It was a combination she still saw shining in his eyes as he gazed down at her, cradling her gently in his lap.

"Are you all right? How are you feeling?"

Her eyes locked onto his lips, still trying to slow things down. She felt like there was a question in there somewhere, but she was too dazed to hear it. He seemed to sense her plight and leaned immediately closer, speaking slowly in soft, gentle tones.

"What hurts?"



This time, the question got through. She considered it, thoughtfully stretching out each limb while her cheek rested lightly against his bare chest. There should have been breaks. There should have been sprains. There should have been massive internal bleeding. But, strangely enough, minus an unprecedented level of disorientation, she seemed to be all right.

“Um...nothing.” She could hardly believe it herself. “Is that bad?”

She wasn't paralyzed, was she? She'd actually moved all those limbs she'd stretched, right?

“It's a miracle,” Dylan murmured in amazement. He helped her into a delicate sitting position, then ran his hands gently over both arms, both legs. Down her sides, up her back. Rotating her head back and forth as he checked her pupils. Nothing. She was just fine. “A freakin' miracle.”

His own salvation had not been quite so astounding. The entire left side of his face had been torn open, like he'd been thrown into a jagged wall. There were hundreds of cuts and scrapes and abrasions covering every inch of visible skin and, judging by the tender way he was handling his shoulder, the thing had been ripped clean out of its socket.

But he was alive. They both were. At least for the time being.

*But what about the others?*

The second she thought the words, they heard a muffled groan. A hand popped out of the ice, followed immediately by a head of cinnamon hair.

“Tanya!”

Dylan propped Katerina gently on the snow and raced over to help. The tiny girl wrapped her arms around his neck, and then screamed in pain as her legs were tugged free of the ice.

“My knee,” she panted, doubled over at the waist. “I think I broke it.”

“We'll fix it,” Dylan assured her quickly, wrapping his belt around it as a temporary brace before packing that brace with snow. The cold would numb her until other arrangements were made. In a flash, he made a cursory check for any other damages, then took her face firmly in his hands. “It's just a knee—we'll fix it. But Tanya, right now, I need you to think. Where's Cassiel?”

Katerina's head whipped around, frantically scanning the surrounding landscape. There wasn't much to go on. The entire world had been wiped

clean, blanketed in a fresh layer of dazzling white snow. There wasn't a face in sight.

"CASS!" she shouted at the top of her lungs.

Nothing.

Dylan clearly wanted to be shouting, too. In fact, a part of him was in a full-on panic. His best friend was missing, with limited air, and he hadn't the faintest idea where to start looking for him. The only thing he had to go off was a single witness. One who was half-blinded by pain.

"Tanya, please," he begged, "focus for me. You were with him last. Both of you were braced against the back of the cave. What happened next? Did you see what happened?"

Her head slowly lifted as she looked back at the boulder—buried in over twenty feet of ice. An almost dreamy look flitted across her face as she pulled the memories deep from within her dizzy subconscious, dragging them forth into the light.

"He never left..."

Dylan shook her shoulders. A little harder than he meant.

"What does that mean?"

She blinked quickly back to the present, trying desperately to summon her wits. "He shielded me from the worst of it, then got thrown into the ceiling when the ground shook. I was thrown clear, but the whole thing got buried after that. He couldn't have left."

That was all Dylan needed to hear. A second later, he was tearing towards the boulder, the very top of which was only barely visible over the sea of white. The air around him shimmered, and a second later a giant wolf was standing in his place, digging frantically through the snow.

Katerina covered her mouth as icy tears slipped down her face, while Tanya dragged herself closer, her dilated eyes locked fiercely upon the ever-growing hole. When it got big enough, Dylan shifted back into a man and slipped inside, falling noiselessly into the abyss. No idea whether his friend was even alive to save. No idea of how he was going to get back out.

"Dylan!" Katerina shouted, even though she knew it was useless. He was down there already, there was nothing more to be done. Still, that didn't stop her and Tanya from shouting at the top of their lungs.

"Dylan!"

“Cass!”

They waited for what felt like an eternity, each second more excruciating than the next, then Katerina sucked in a breath as a sudden movement caught her eye.

“THERE!”

An explosion of ice burst into the air, and the next second two heads of hair popped out of the snow. One was conscious and moving. The other was not.

The princess scrambled to her feet, shocked that her legs were still working. Fast as she could, she made her way across the ice and fell to Dylan's side, helping him drag the sleeping fae out of the darkness and into the light.

It was then that she paused, staring down in horror.

Cassiel had been perfectly cordial to her in the beginning, but since finding out that she was a Damaris that spirit had significantly cooled. He was still polite to a fault, but there was a distance between them that couldn't be breached. A civility that never seemed to extend to friendship. It was his choice, not hers, but under the circumstances she didn't see what could be done.

Because the two didn't talk much, she'd watched him instead.

Over the course of the last week, she'd seen him laughing and relaxed. She'd seen him tired, but patient. Wary, but charming. She'd seen Dylan, the strongest man she'd ever met, lean on him many times. He was as beautiful as he was strong. As intimidating as he could be kind. She'd seen a hundred different emotions, and a hundred different faces.

But never would she have imagined he could look like this.

Those beautiful eyes of his were closed. That invincible body was helpless and broken, as vulnerable as a little child. A dark cloud of bruises had laced its way over his fair skin, and although she couldn't see where it was coming from his silver shirt was stained with blood. He was breathing, faintly, but every breath seemed to come with the greatest effort, and when Dylan lowered an ear to his chest for a better listen, his face paled with fear.

“Cass.” He shook him very gently, careful not to disturb his spine. “Cass. Wake up.”

The girls huddled closer together as Cassiel lay perfectly still upon the snow. The tranquil look on his face stood in sharp contrast to the brutal devastation of the rest of his body, and even in the few seconds he'd been lying there that stain of blood had spread to the surrounding snow.

"What's wrong with him?" Tanya whispered, staring down with grief-stricken eyes. The two might delight in tormenting the other, but they'd grown closer than either was prepared to admit. In spite of her shattered knee she knelt down in the snow, gently taking his hand.

"Internal bleeding." Dylan looked like he could hardly say the words. "Most of his ribs are fractured; it sounds like one of them pierced his lungs. I don't..." He trailed off helplessly, trembling slightly with the cold. "I don't know what to do."

For a moment, everyone was silent. Then Katerina whipped off her cloak and lay it across the fae. Her hand reached out to Dylan, while she kept her eyes fixed on Cassiel's face.

"Give me your knife."

Dylan froze for a moment in surprise, then his face paled in horror. "Kat, you're not going to kill him! We can think of another way! There has to be something we can—"

"I'm not going to kill him," she said calmly, never taking her eyes off his face. "I'm going to save him. And to do that, I need your knife."

About five years ago, the palace had emptied as the royal family embarked upon their annual hunt. Normally, when hunting, the royal family extended only to the men. The king and the prince would set off with a contingent of favorite courtiers and guards, while Katerina and the rest of the women were left at home. But five years ago, after weeks of begging, the princess had finally been allowed to come along.

She remembered how excited she'd been as the grooms saddled up her horse and she rode out with the rest of the men into the forest. She remembered how exhilarating it had been to gallop full speed through the woods. The wind in her hair. The sun in her eyes. Leading the charge.

She remembered how abruptly terrified she'd been when one of the men suddenly fell off his horse and tumbled headfirst into the ravine.

The entire party had come to a screeching halt. People were shouting. The man was bleeding uncontrollably. The doctor had been left behind at

the palace. For what felt like a small eternity, the man lay dying on the ground while everyone else anxiously hovered, wringing their hands helplessly as they desperately debated what to do. Then one man stepped forward. A young lieutenant, new to the palace, that Katerina had seen only a few times before.

Unlike the panicked people around him, this man kept his head. With nothing more than skilled efficiency, he knelt to the ground and tore open the man's shirt. A second later, he slipped his knife strategically between his ribs. The king had shouted. Katerina clapped her hand over her eyes.

But then the strangest thing happened. The man on the ground woke up.

"Your knife, Dylan," Katerina said again, sweeping her hair into an efficient knot behind her head. "He's running out of time."

After a moment of profound hesitation, Dylan reached into his belt and pulled out his trusted blade. He turned it over nervously in his hands before placing it cautiously in hers. She took it without looking and rolled up the hem of Cassiel's shirt.

His injuries were even worse up close.

By the looks of things, he'd been literally crushed against the wall of the cave. The jagged rocks had lacerated wide gashes of skin, but it was the internal damage that was the most pressing. It was there that Katerina focused her attention.

With the utmost care, she moved her fingers up the edge of his ribcage. Counting silently as she went. Mimicking the same motions she'd seen the lieutenant do all those years ago. When she reached the proper place, she pulled in a deep breath and pressed the tip of the blade to his skin.

...which is right when all hell broke loose.

"Are you crazy?!" Tanya shouted. At the same time, Dylan's hand shot out involuntarily and grabbed her by the wrist, stopping the blade in its tracks.

As she looked up at them slowly, shaken to the core, she was suddenly reminded that the four of them hadn't known each other very long. They had bonded as well as possible under the circumstances, but in the grand scheme of things they were still relative strangers.

And strangers didn't let strangers go poking their friends with knives.

"I can't..." Dylan's voice shook as he stared down at Cassiel's face. His pale skin was now tinted with the faintest traces of blue. "I can't let you..."

It was a turning point. The second she was needed the scared little princess disappeared, and a fearless young woman rose up in her place. Like flipping a switch all the tension left Katerina's body, and she gazed steadily into his eyes. Her panic was replaced with sympathy. The wild nerves gave way to calm assurance. A royal authority that was impossible to ignore.

"*Dylan.*" Her hands were sure, and her voice was steady. "Trust me."

Their eyes locked again, and he pulled in another deep breath. He had no reason to do so. In fact, he had every reason *not* to. But, for whatever reason...he did.

A second later, he released her wrist. A second after that, the blade slid into Cassiel's chest.

There was a rush of blood, followed by painful moan. Another rush of blood, and there was a sudden gasp as the pressure released and Cassiel was able to pull in a breath of air. His eyes shot open a moment later, flying around wildly before coming to rest on the girl kneeling in front of him.

"You..." he gasped weakly, hands coming up to his chest. "What are you..."

"It's all right." Dylan knelt quickly beside him, slipping a hand behind his head as he placed pressure against the wound. "You couldn't breathe, but Kat...she helped you."

There was a newfound deference in the way he said the words, and his eyes rested upon her like it was a favor he would not soon forget.

As for Cassiel, it was hard to tell how much he was absorbing and how much was lost in shock. His eyes travelled to Katerina when Dylan said her name, then returned almost immediately to the gaping hole in his chest. They widened slightly, tight with pain, but only a moment after that they came to rest upon something else. A trivial detail, but one that had a lasting effect.

"You gave me your cloak."

The others glanced down in surprise. Katerina had completely forgotten about the gesture. It had been pure instinct. To protect the fallen. To safeguard the weak. She hadn't thought anything of it until she saw the look of wonder in Cassiel's dark eyes.

“Of course I did,” she answered self-consciously. “You’d do the same for me.”

Maybe that was true. Maybe not. But one thing was for sure. The fae was looking at the princess as if he’d never really seen her before that day.

Of course, their resident shape shifter couldn’t help but shatter the touching moment.

“So, what now?”

Since it was clear that their fourth member would survive the day, she had turned her focus to more immediate problems. They were still stranded in the middle of nowhere, in below-freezing temperatures, with a crush victim and a girl with a broken leg. Where did that leave them?

Dylan wiped his dagger on the fallen snow before pushing to his feet. His ice-blue eyes pierced through the stormy clouds with fresh determination as he glared up at the sky.

“Now we get off this bloody mountain.”



## Chapter 6

One of the strange things about travelling around with a ranger is that you don't need a map. Dylan *was* the map. Every step the others took for granted, every passing landmark, they were ingrained in his very bones. So, when Dylan was faced with the impossible question of how to get them off the stormy mountain, he answered the only way he knew how.

"We can't go forward, and we can't go back. But we can go around." He turned suddenly towards the east, a direction they'd been moving parallel to thus far. "Redfern Peak. If we can make it that far, we can bypass the worst of the storm and come down on the other side of the mountain."

"Redfern *Peak*?" Katerina repeated, stressing the last word. The snow around them was already stained with blood. Did he really think they'd be scaling mountains anytime soon?

Dylan read her concerns and answered them with quick assurance. "We're already at the top of the peak. We're not going to be hiking uphill anymore." He hesitated suddenly, glancing down at his friend. "But it is a tricky climb down..."

Cassiel paled slightly at the thought but put a bracing hand against his chest and pushed shakily to his feet. Fae didn't heal the same way mortals did. They had a higher tolerance for pain and a greater natural endurance. As long as his strength held, he could make it to the peak. What happened when he got there, however, would be anyone's guess.

Dylan's lips twitched up in the faintest of smiles as he looked his friend up and down. "You up for something like that?"

Even bloodied and broken, Cassiel still managed to look so haughty it was all Katerina could do not to laugh. "You insult me," he scoffed. "I'll manage it better than you."

"I was just asking—"

"Put on some bloody pants, my friend."

For the second time, Dylan tightened the cloak that was wrapped around his naked body and hurried back to the boulder to recover the



clothes he'd lost as a wolf. His ability to shift might have saved the day, but it left the rules of propriety far behind them.

Katerina cast a quick glance at the others before hurrying after him.

What she was going to say, she didn't know. What there *was* to say, she had no idea. But with the world spinning past them at speeds too fast to control, she needed something steady. "So...Redfern Peak, huh?"

He glanced over his shoulder, his shirt halfway above his head. "Princess, if you'd like to see me naked, all you have to do is ask. I am a loyal subject, after all."

*Right. She could just picture this guy sitting down to pay his taxes.*

She tried valiantly to smile but found herself quite at the mercy of her emotions. Instead of flashing a conspiratorial grin, as she'd intended, her eyes filled with sudden tears. Each one of them freezing before they could make it even halfway down her face.

"Kat?"

Dylan glanced back again, waiting for some sort of response, then stopped what he was doing the second he saw her face. The shirt was forgotten. The girl became his immediate priority.

"Hey." He gathered her up in his arms, ignoring the cold, ignoring the pain. Ignoring everything except her tears. "Honey, please don't cry. It's all right."

*Honey, again. The man uses pet names when he's nervous.*

"I'm sorry." She wiped her face, embarrassed, trying to get herself under control, but it wasn't the easiest thing to do. "I just can't believe what just...I mean, one second we were just standing there, and then..." A belated shiver shook her entire body as she pulled in a trembling breath. "When I woke up in the snow...I thought maybe I was dead."

Saying the words aloud didn't help like she thought it would. In fact, it made everything much, much worse. How was this her life? How were these her problems? Where was her palace, her horse, her bed, and her friends? Why the hell was she standing on this frozen mountain?

Dylan froze for a moment, then his arms tightened. "I know," he soothed quietly, stroking her fiery hair with one hand, while the other held her tight against his chest. "I did, too."

His heartbeat was faster than normal. She could feel it even through her clothes. Probably from the cold, the pain, and the adrenaline. He was still bleeding freely down his neck.

“But we’re all okay.” He clung to the words like a life raft. A man desperate to keep his head above the waves. But it wasn’t enough just to save himself. He wouldn’t stop until he’d saved her as well. “Hey! A *mountain* fell, and we’re still standing. That counts for something, right?”

Yep, those things didn’t sound any better when they were said out loud. But his smile was contagious. It wasn’t long before the tears stopped, and her face relaxed into a reluctant grin.

“We’re okay,” he said again. Firm, this time. As if he was convincing himself as well. “It’s over now. It’s over, and we’re all going to be okay. I promise.”

They were kind words, but Katerina couldn’t see how they could possibly be true. The four of them were stuck at the top of the world with no food, no shelter, massive injuries, and half the royal army on their trail. Their original plan to stay off the grid had just been thwarted by a fucking avalanche, and the dark storm above them was churning with an almost unnatural momentum.

Still...it was easier to lie.

“Yeah,” she whispered softly, pressing her face into his skin, “I know.”

That was the last either of them spoke for a long time. Flurries of ice and snow danced around them. Swirling clouds of white, with occasional crimson stains. It tangled their hair and caught in their lashes. Like being trapped in a beautiful but deadly snow globe. For a while, they just stood there. For a while, it was quiet. And for a fleeting moment, they were able to find some peace.

Neither one of them was used to such dependence. Neither one of them was used to the quiet comfort of placing themselves in someone else’s arms. But for a split-second, standing there in the swirling snow, they let themselves succumb and simply held each other. Skin to skin. Cheek to cheek. Just two people standing at the top of the world, waiting for whatever came next.

“If you two are finished groping, let me remind you...*I broke my freakin’ leg.*”

Correct that. Four people.

And apparently the others were tired of waiting.

Dylan's shoulders stiffened, and he pressed his forehead against Katerina's hair with the softest sigh. He didn't believe his quiet reassurances any more than she did. But what else could they do but say them? What else could they do but make promises they might never be able to keep?

He held her another moment before pulling back to study her face with a forced smile. "So...you have anything you want to tell me?"

She stared back in surprise, blinking in the cold. "Like what?"

The smile grew genuine as flicker of curiosity danced through his eyes. "Like how you were able to survive a glacial avalanche without even a scratch?"

*Oh...that.*

Her lips parted uncertainly to answer, but there was nothing to say. It was a damn good question. A question that would no doubt haunt her every step in the days to come. But for right now, they had bigger things to worry about. For right now, it was a question for another time.

"Just lucky, I guess."

A flash of lightning ripped through the sky, and for a moment they froze perfectly still.

"*Yeah.*" Dylan laughed humorlessly as his eyes drifted up to the darkening clouds, growing more and more worried with each passing moment. "If there's one thing we are...it's lucky."



IT WAS ONE THING TO verbally commit to reaching a hypothetical peak. It was another thing entirely to get there. Especially after just having dug your way out of an avalanche.

The journey was as backbreaking as it was brutal.

Out of the four friends, only two could walk. One of the remaining two had a severe concussion and a dislocated shoulder, while the other had about ninety pounds to her name and was doing her very best to drag a shape shifter through the piling snow.

“How you doing, Tanya?” Dylan called after about thirty minutes of silence. The others were keeping quiet to preserve what little energy they had left, but he seemed determined not only to lead the way but to rally on the others as well. “Is that brace holding up?”

Tanya’s delicate little pixie face twisted with dark sarcasm. “Oh, it’s just *great*. You know, some people with shattered bones might prefer an *actual* brace, but not me. I always go for a belt.”

The leather strap around her knee had begun leaking over with blood. Still, she shuffled onwards. Clinging to the side of Katerina’s neck for support.

“That’s the spirit.”

He said nothing to encourage the fae. There was a good chance Cassiel would punch him in the face if he tried. But he kept a firm arm wrapped around him every step of the way, taking almost all his weight as the haggard foursome made their way slowly to the peak.

Hours passed. Each one stretching into the next. The storm raged on, beating down upon the four weary travelers trudging painfully across the frozen plain.

It wasn’t long before Tanya called for a break. Katerina called for one not long after. Cassiel would rather die than show a hint of weakness, but when it became clear that he’d lost more blood than he had left Dylan called for one himself, and the four of them collapsed upon the snow.

“Not exactly what you had in mind, huh?” Dylan shot Cassiel a quick grin, taking the opportunity to examine him in the process. “When I came and got you from the hotel?”

The fae’s already-pale skin had not a hint of color left. The ghostly alabaster stood in sharp contrast to the darkness of his eyes. Eyes that were still bright, despite being on the verge of defeat. “Which time?” he asked hoarsely, coughing halfway through. A faint smear of blood appeared on his lips, but he was determined to ignore it. “In Cambria? In Minsk? Or just a few days ago when you uprooted my life of whiskey and women and forced me to come on this little quest?”

The ranger sensed a trap and answered accordingly, unwilling to commit either way. “Both. None. All of the above.”

The ghost of a grin flashed across Cassiel's face as he leaned back in the snow, stretching his legs painfully out in front of him. "Who needs whiskey? Or sex? Hand to the heart, I'd rather be here with you guys. Bleeding out on this god-forsaken rock."

Dylan nodded thoughtfully. "I'd rather you were here, too. It makes me look a lot more capable when you're all broken and pathetic."

"Can you hand me that knife?"

"This?" Dylan reached automatically for the blade, then froze suddenly, sliding it discreetly out of reach. "Uh, no. I don't think I will..."

Meanwhile, Tanya was too caught up in her own problems to worry much about anyone around her. "Is there any way we can make a fire?"

The men stopped threatening each other and stared down at her with matching looks of sympathy. Over the course of their travels, they'd broken countless bones themselves. They knew exactly how she was feeling. But, in this situation, there was nothing they could do to help.

"There isn't anything here to burn," Dylan said apologetically.

"What about your pants? You're never wearing them anyway."

Dylan's eyes narrowed, ready with a sarcastic reply, but Katerina was quick to intervene.

"What if we just set up camp for the night?"

The others looked at her in surprise. They hadn't considered this as an option. And, although the instinct was to reject the notion as long as the sun was still hanging in the sky, the suggestion made a good deal of sense. There was nothing but miles of snow as far as the eye could see. They were unlikely to come across anything they could use as shelter. And even the best of rangers could only go so long without a single landmark, before needing to rely upon the stars.

Not to mention, half their party was teetering on the edge of consciousness and sleep.

"Right here?" Dylan asked, but only out of habit. The more he looked around, the more he could see no better alternative. "It will be cold. *Very* cold, once the sun goes down. There's nothing we can use to block the wind."

“It’s going to be cold anyway,” Tanya replied, already yanking out a weathered blanket that had been strapped to her back. “Might as well get used to it.”

Dylan considered it for another second, then nodded swiftly. Much to the relief of his companions, he removed the four tent pegs that were sheathed in his belt and tossed them on the snow in the middle of their little circle. They could rest. They had certainly earned it.

It took everyone gathered a full minute to realize the obvious question. “Where’s the tent?”

Dylan looked at Tanya. Tanya looked at Katerina. Katerina looked at Cassiel. And Cassiel stared back the way they’d just come.

“It was in my pack.”

The pack that had been ripped from off him earlier that afternoon when an avalanche almost took his life. The pack that was buried beneath a mountain of snow.

For a moment, all was quiet. Then the fae pushed theatrically to his feet.

“No worries, I’ll just run back and get it.”

It was exactly what they needed to break the ice. Dylan stood up with a grin and helped him lie back down, checking briefly over his injuries in the process. Tanya snickered, and fished her trusty flask from her boot—one of the only things to have survived the storm. Katerina took the first gulp and felt it warm through her entire body, passing it on to Cassiel—who accepted it with a rare smile. The smile was returned with a tentative one of her own.

“So,” Tanya started, squinting around the desolate landscape before her eyes came to rest on the solitary blanket, lying in the snow, “what are we going to do?”

All eyes turned to Dylan, who merely shrugged with a twinkling smile. “We’ll improvise.”



LESS THAN TEN MINUTES later the four of them were lying on the ground, feeling somehow more uncertain than they had at any point during

the storm. For the last few days they'd slept in closer quarters than this, but without the walls of the tent lending an air of acceptability the whole concept felt entirely different. It felt personal. Exposed.

It happened slowly. A hand here. An arm there. Legs wrapped around legs. Shifting casually closer to claim space beneath the same blanket. Anything for a little shared warmth. Anything to get away from the ghastly cold. With an eventual sigh Cassiel wrapped his arms around Tanya, holding the shifter protectively against his chest. She opened her mouth to instinctively protest, but he was incredibly delicate with her leg. So much so, that only a few seconds later she found herself cuddling closer. Lifting his arm and wrapping it around her shaking shoulders. Nestling as far back as was possible without getting blood on her clothes.

Kat watched them for a moment, then felt Dylan tense beside her. Braving the icy winds, she chanced a look over her shoulder to see his eyes glittering down at her in the dark.

They'd slept together like this once before. Why not do it again?

He got a little closer. Then so did she. Inch by inch, they moved together. Breath by silent breath. As the wind shrieked and screamed around them his arm circled around her waist, covering her with his heavy cloak in the process. Her back pressed up against his chest. Her slender legs tangled with his. At one point, there was a soft coughing sound as he spat out a mouthful of her crimson hair. She glanced guiltily over her shoulder, but he flashed her a boyish grin.

It was too dark to see much of anything, and the storm was too loud to hear. But they could still feel. Every warm breath against the back of her neck. Every steady beat of his heart. Every nervous twitch of his fingers as they buried tentatively in the folds of her dress, trying to stay warm.

It was intimate. It was public. And, given the combination, it was probably not their first choice. But in the end, the storm took that choice away from all of them. By the time exhaustion set in and sleep finally overtook them, the entire foursome was somehow intertwined.

Tanya's fingers were tucked into Katerina's sleeves. Cassiel had a secure grasp on them both. Katerina's fiery hair was flung across everyone present, and Dylan had stretched out his arm to grab the edge of Cassiel's cloak in his sleep—holding the entire group together.

They were still sleeping like that when the sun came up the next morning, reflecting off the frozen landscape in a dazzling array of blinding light.

The storm was over. The dawn had come.

Katerina was the first to wake up. Her eyes fluttered open, squinting groggily at the snowy plains. For a moment, she forgot entirely where she was. Then the events of the previous day came flooding back to her, and she felt Dylan's arm squeezing around her ribcage.

Her breath caught in her chest, and she froze perfectly still. Taking a silent moment to immortalize the scene in front of her. Never in her life would she have imagined such a diverse group of people. Never in her life would she have imagined that she might be one of them. That they would unite themselves to a common goal. That they would end up here. Together.

In a strange way, she found herself almost grateful for everything that had happened. As painful as it was, as downright devastating...it had led her to this very moment.

Then Tanya stretched out her arms with a sleepy yawn, smacking everyone in sight, and Cassiel jerked awake with a silent gasp. His lovely face tightened with exquisite pain as he looked down at the fresh stain of blood blossoming over his shirt. But instead of being angry, the way Katerina feared he might, he turned back to Tanya with an affectionate grin. Affectionate *and* exasperated, all at the same time.

Although the entire incident had happened without a sound Dylan's pulse quickened, and Katerina felt a hitch in his breathing. A second later he was awake as well, catching his friend's gaze with quiet concern, a worried question in his eyes. Cassiel rolled his eyes and gestured to Tanya, gently unwinding his legs from her own. There was another wince, followed by another silent profanity, but all in all he looked much better than he had the day before.

"Kat," Dylan whispered in her ear. Reluctant to wake her, but even more reluctant to keep her out in the open for even a second longer than he had to. "Sweetie, you need to—"

"I'm awake," she said quickly, squirming around to greet him head-on. Big mistake.



He was much closer than she'd anticipated, and the second she turned around the two of them were nose to nose. Close enough to see every fleck of color in his eyes. Almost kissing.

He glanced up in surprise, then the corners of his lips twitched up as he tilted his head with a crooked smile. "Good morning."

A guilty blush spread across her cheeks as she scooted back into Tanya.

"M-morning," she stammered, painfully aware that Cassiel was only a few feet away. "Sorry, I didn't—"

"For shit's sake!"

There was a chorus of hacking coughs as Tanya fought her way through the princess' wavy hair, battling to the surface with a look of great resentment. She took a moment to get her bearings, but the second her eyes met Katerina's they narrowed with a not-so-subtle threat.

"Control that mane of yours, or I'm cutting it off."

Just like that, they came to the end of what had been a truly bizarre yet oddly tender night.

As the four of them set off once more towards the peak, stiff from the cold and wishing very much that they'd had something to eat for breakfast, they found themselves avoiding each other's eyes. Tanya couldn't help but blush every time she glanced over at Cassiel. Cassiel looked highly disconcerted to have fallen asleep with a threesome not of his choosing but seemed strangely touched by it as well. Katerina was filing everything away in her mind for later analysis. And Dylan?

As usual, Dylan was keeping his thoughts to himself.

But there was an extra spring in his step as the four of them set off over the snow. An extra twinkle in his eyes as he stuffed his hands deep in his pockets, whistling to himself with a little smile.



## Chapter 7

Things were never quite the same after that morning.

It was a turning point. One that marked the beginnings of a new chapter. And while no one said it directly, everyone sensed the intangible shift. Like they'd all strayed across the same invisible line. And once crossed, there was no going back.

Not that anyone of them would want to. Quite the contrary.

They may have been limping, bloodied and broken across a frozen tundra, but Katerina could have sworn they were almost having a bit of fun.

“—at which point, I asked the proprietor to move me to a suite on the other side of the building. At least until they'd contained the beast and what was left of its hatchlings.”

Katerina and Tanya were in stitches. Holding onto their sides, the pain was temporarily forgotten, and they plowed their way through the snow. Storytime was upon them. And Cassiel was so regal and refined, it was easy to forget that half of what he said was absolutely ridiculous.

“Enough—seriously!” Tanya doubled over at the waist and put her hands on her knees, laughing hysterically and flinching in pain at the same time. “I can't breathe!”

From what Katerina knew of the fae, they were supposed to be a reserved, dignified race of people. Older than men and gifted with immortality, they were said to have come from the magic of the stars. Children of nature who kept to themselves and took great care to avoid the toxic spread of cities and the troublesome affairs of men.

That's what she'd *heard*. Cassiel was a slightly different story.

*...until the hatchlings were contained...*

“Seven hells.” Tanya grinned, still trying to compose herself as Cassiel swept past them with Dylan—looking like, for the life of him, he didn't understand what was possibly so funny. “How does he say crap like that, but still manage to come off like the prince of the forest creatures?”

Katerina stared after them with an incredulous smile. "I think it's because he *is* the prince of the forest creatures."

"I keep forgetting about that." The shifter paused, reevaluating for a moment, before continuing across the icy plain. There were landmarks in the distance now. A scattering of trees announced by the gradual thawing of snow. "Well, if that's the case, then how the heck did he end up bromancing around the five kingdoms with wolf-boy over there?"

Katerina shook her head curiously. Suddenly very eager to hear the answer to that herself. It certainly wasn't a likely pairing. A ranger and a fae. There was obvious affection there, buried *deep* down amidst a complicated history, but half the time she was surprised they hadn't killed each other years ago. Case in point. A few yards ahead of them, the men were lost to their own argument.

"The *beast*," Dylan scoffed, shaking his head with a grin. "The thing was a puppy."

His best friend might be on mile twelve with severe blood loss and a broken rib cage, but that didn't mean the two weren't still going blow for blow. Cassiel shot him a side-glare but seemed to expect nothing less. At any rate, he was more than up for the challenge.

"That just proves you were too drunk to remember what happened. The thing was more like an armored porpoise than anything else. It *swam* in with the tide."

Dylan shrugged dismissively. Enjoying himself far too much to be bothered with things like facts. "Some kind of aquatic puppy, then. The kind with gills."

"For bloody sake. Why do I even try with you—"

"It didn't help matters that you were wearing a dress."

"It *wasn't* a dress!" Cassiel threw up his hands in exasperation, ignoring the fresh stain of blood that followed. "For the last time—it was a ceremonial robe! Presented to me by the high chancellor of...*why are you smiling?!*"

"I missed you."

There was a brief pause, followed by a scathing glare.

"Screw off, Dylan."

Another pause. Then the fae shot him a look.

"...I missed you, too."

The girls shared a look. Thinking the same thing with a mischievous smile.

*Bromance.*

There weren't many provisions that had made it through the storm. More precisely, the gang had been left with nothing but a coat, a blanket, and a pile of tent pegs to a nonexistent tent. Tanya's lucky flask had long since been drained, and the fact that they were all walking around with half the usual blood and nothing but whiskey on an empty stomach was starting to catch up with them.

Katerina skipped lightly ahead and linked her arm through Dylan's with a playful smile. "So...this *wolf* thing..."

Dylan shifted uneasily as Cassiel's eyes danced with a wicked grin.

"You mean, his canine problem?"

There was a beat of silence before Dylan gave his friend a humorless smile. "Cass, why don't you make sure Tanya's doing okay."

Cassiel started to refuse, but it wasn't exactly phrased as a question, and the look on Dylan's face was hard to ignore. Acting as though it was his idea to begin with, the fae swept gracefully back through the snow, leaving Dylan alone with the princess. Looking as nervous as she'd ever seen.

"My...wolf thing?" His lips twitched up, as though the phrasing amused him, before the smile gave way to nerves. "What about it?"

Katerina's mind raced as she wondered where to start.

Why hadn't he told her about it from the beginning? If they hadn't run into trouble, would it still be a secret? What the hell else was he keeping from her and, perhaps, most importantly—

"What's it like having claws?"

Dylan looked down at her in shock. She bit her lip and kept her eyes on the snow. *I'll admit...it wasn't my BEST question.*

"Claws?" It looked as though he was having a hard time deciding whether to laugh or simply stand there, aghast. "Are you...is that seriously your question?"

Instead of trying to get out of the hole, Katerina dug herself in further. "Well, I was going to ask what it was like having a tail, but it seemed somehow inappropriate."

This time, the laughter won out. A short burst echoed over the sparkling snow, vanishing tensions and lifting the hearts of everyone around him. She wondered if he knew he was able to do that. A second later, he turned to her again—an incredulous sort of wonder dancing in his eyes.

“How the heck are you a Damaris?”

The question caught her completely off guard. Just as much as her question had caught him.

It wasn't said with any sort of blame or malice. To be perfectly honest, there was a good chance he meant it to be rhetorical. But she felt the need to answer nonetheless. A need to defend the blood running through her veins. The same blood she was secretly coming to despise.

“Things weren't always...” She trailed off suddenly, staring out over the snow. “My father did some things he came to regret, but in the end he wasn't...” Again, she trailed off. Well aware that Dylan's piercing eyes were following her every move. “What I mean to say is—”

“I'm not asking you to hate your father,” he said quietly.

Her eyes widened as she stared up at him in surprise. Her father had committed some of the greatest atrocities the world had ever seen. He'd hunted down the supernatural community to the point of extinction, and that community included Dylan. If there was anyone who deserved all that hatred—it was him. “You're not?”

Their eyes met, and a peculiar expression flickered across Dylan's face. One that settled into a sad, almost nostalgic smile. “He *died*, Kat. He was your father, and he died. That changes things.”

It looked like there was more he wanted to say. It looked like the words were on the very tip of his tongue. But a second later, he was pacing through the snow once more.

“At least, it's supposed to...”



IT TOOK ANOTHER THREE hours to reach the peak. Another three hours but, given the state they were in, it felt like a small eternity. By the time they finally got there, even Dylan, who'd been doing his best to lift

spirits, had settled into a quiet kind of gloom. Granted, it was a gloom that began shortly after he and Katerina exchanged words about her family.

“So, this is it?” Tanya shielded her eyes as she gazed out over the rocky cliff, taking in the extraordinary sunset painted across the horizon. “Doesn’t look like much.”

Cassiel nudged her playfully. “Some people would say the same thing about you.”

It was true. The fae might look like some old world hero brought back to life, but no one would have expected so much from Tanya. Orphaned shape-shifters didn’t really have much in terms of reputation, and the poor girl was nothing more than a waif.

But she’d survived an avalanche and trekked across the tundra. All on a broken leg.

“Well, those people are idiots,” she snapped though, secretly, she looked rather pleased. “I’m a golden god. A champion amongst men. Mere flesh wounds cannot stop me—”

“That’s good to know.” Dylan came up behind them without cracking a smile. “Because it’s a hard climb. And we’ve got to get going if we’re going to make it down before nightfall.”

For the first time, Tanya lowered her gaze to look *down* the cliff. Her bravado faded.

“Can’t you guys just lower me to the bottom with a rope?”

Cassiel snorted and walked away, as Dylan’s eyes lightened with that signature sarcasm. “The rope that we don’t have? The rope that got lost with your pack?”

“Which got lost in a freakin’ *avalanche*—”

“I’m not blaming you. I’m saying we don’t have any rope.”

“Well, you’re a bloomin’ *ranger!*” she retorted. “Give you a toothpick and a pocket watch, and you’ll build a bloody colosseum! Can’t you figure something out for *rope?*”

There was a pause.

“...you have a highly romanticized version of my profession.”

Katerina came to stand in between them, peering cautiously over the edge. Sure enough, the cliff dropped down as far as the eye could see. Huge, jagged slabs of rock that clung together with no particular rhyme or reason,

vanishing ominously into the mist. A mist that was already creeping up the granite mountain. Higher and higher as the sun began to fall.

"Dylan's right. We've got to hurry." She said the words only because she had to. In truth, she had no idea how the hell she was going to follow through. "The last thing we want is to get stuck halfway down with no torches when it suddenly gets dark."

The others glanced quickly over the side, thought better of it, then began securing their things. There wasn't much, but whatever they had was strapped firmly into their clothing. Katerina was just tightening the laces of her shoes when Dylan knelt beside her—under the guise of tightening his own. Their eyes met, and he flashed her the hint of a smile.

"You ever done something like this before?"

The princess blanched, then stalled for time. Looking deliberately down at her shoes. "Like this? Oh, sure. Loads of times."

This was coming from a girl too terrified of heights to jump off the one-story stable roof with the rest of her friends. She'd had to shimmy back across the tiles and take the stairs.

Dylan pursed his lips and nodded, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground. "Lots of rock-climbing days back at the castle, huh?"

"Oh yeah." Katerina paled even whiter, glancing once more into the plummeting abyss. "We earned merit badges and everything—"

"Don't do that," he said suddenly.

She looked up with a start, to see that he was standing right in front of her, his body angled strategically between herself and the cliff. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't see the terror that waited just beyond. All she could see was that steady smile, those sparkling eyes.

"Don't look down. Always look at your hands." He spoke with the calm assurance of one who had done this kind of thing many times before. "You need to take a climb like this in pieces. One foot at a time. One hand after another. Break it down, and it'll be over before you know it."

She nodded swiftly, trying to project a lot more confidence than she actually felt. "Don't look down," she repeated, almost to herself. A torrent of wind whistled past her ears, streaming up over the side of the cliff. "Don't look down at the deadly, hundred-foot drop."

A wave of nausea started churning in her stomach, but before she could begin to properly panic a pair of warm hands closed around her own.

“The drop won’t be beneath you,” he said simply. “I will.”

It was a testament to how much faith she had in his abilities that she was able to take some small degree of comfort in the words. But it was marginal at best. Yes, he might be climbing right below her. But didn’t that just mean that she was going to take him down, too?

“You don’t have to do that,” she said half-heartedly. “Seriously, I should probably be the one to go first. That way, I can’t cause any collateral damage.”

“Not a chance.” The words were firm, but he said them lightly. “Your safety is the highest priority here. And, at any rate, I fought hard for that spot.”

Between the wind screeching in her ears, and the butterflies pounding away in her stomach, she was having a hard time keeping up with the conversation. But that last part struck her as a bit odd and she looked up in confusion, staring blankly at his enigmatic face.

“I don’t understand.” She shook her head, trying to get a cue from his expression. “You fought hard to climb down beneath me?”

For a split second, there was a crack in the façade. For a split-second, a mischievous grin broke through that unshakable air of calm.

“It might have something to do with the fact that you’re wearing a dress.”

Katerina blinked at him. Then blinked down at her dress. By the time it registered, and her mouth fell open with indignant rage, he was already moving away to give the others their instructions, glancing over his shoulder only once to shoot her a secret wink.

*Absolutely shameless.*

The plan was simple. Cassiel was going down first. As damaged as he might be, this sort of thing still came very naturally to him; As Dylan put it, if any of them were to slip they could use him to break the fall. Tanya was going to go next. Taking things as slowly as she needed to since she was only working with three limbs. Dylan was after Tanya, and Katerina would go last.



In a lot of ways, it was terrifying. *I could always just wait until they're all over the side, then take off running in the opposite direction. Pray to the gods of karma to send me some stairs.* But, in a lot more ways, it was oddly comforting as well. *They're all in this with me. We're all doing it together.*

Cassiel leapt over the side with no warning or preamble. Fractured ribcage or not, the man was born for this sort of adventure. Dylan shouted at him to watch his pace—an ironic warning to go slower than he was accustomed—before Tanya saluted them with a tight grin and vanished as well.

Just a few seconds later, it was just Dylan and Katerina. Standing together at the top of the cliff.

*This is a bad idea, a really BAD idea. Of all the bad ideas we've had so far, this has to be the worst one.*

“Shall we?”

She looked up from her fatalistic trance to see Dylan offering his hand. The blinding sunset was behind him, and for a second she completely forgot to be afraid.

*It's a bad idea...but he'll be with me.*

He flashed her an easy smile, gesturing gallantly to the edge of the cliff. It was a bizarrely chivalrous gesture, one that reminded her suddenly of the many handsome lords who'd helped her in and out of carriages, extending their arms with a charming smile.

“We shall.”

Their eyes met for a fleeting moment. For a fleeting moment, time stood still. Then, without a word of warning, he leaned down and surprised her with a kiss. A kiss so sudden and passionate, it took her breath away. She was still recovering when he pulled back a second later.

He flashed her a smile. Gave her a little wink. Then leapt over the side of the cliff.

A second after that...she followed.



WHEN KATERINA LOOKED back later, trying to be as objective as she could, she still had no earthly idea how she'd managed the climb down Red-

fern Peak. It was worse than anything she could have possibly imagined. A literal nightmare come to life, pushing her to every emotional, physical, and psychological limit. Then it pushed her some more.

“You’re doing great, Kat. Watch your grip.”

She might be a princess with no experience in the ways of the world, tragically combined with no upper body strength, but even she was impressed that she hadn’t yet tumbled off the cliff to face her inevitable doom. They’d been going at it for a little over twenty minutes and, according to Dylan, they were more than halfway down.

The end was almost in sight.

Of course, he’d been saying that for the last ten minutes. She was beginning to suspect him.

“Let me guess,” she panted. “We’re almost to the bottom, right? No need to lose hope?”

She didn’t need to see his face to tell he was smiling. And she didn’t need to see his eyes to spot the obvious lie. “That’s right. Any minute now. Just keep on going. Slow and careful.”

Thus far, she had stuck to his advice as well as she could. There had only been two times when she’d chanced a peek down into the ravine. The first time, she’d been met with a scathing glare and a twirl of Dylan’s fingers—telling her to turn back around. The second time, she’d seen that his arms were shaking almost as much as her own.

When she tried a third time, not much had changed.

She couldn’t see the others anymore. They were too far down in the mist. But she hadn’t heard any screams yet, and she was taking that as a good sign. In fact, the only indication she’d had to know the others were struggling was the faint smear of blood she’d seen on one of the footholds a while back. Whether it was from Cassiel, or Dylan, or Tanya—she didn’t know.

“So...tell me about life in the castle.”

She startled in surprise, and almost lost her hold on the rocks. Fortunately, Dylan had been impeccable thus far, pointing out where to put her hands and feet, and she was able to get her grip almost instantaneously. “Excuse me?”

If he was straining, and by now he had to be, she'd never have been able to tell from the sound of his voice. It was just as calm as ever. Hardly even out of breath.

"You know...the balls, the gossip, the epic croquet matches. Tell me about it."

The world's most unlikely smile crept up the side of her face. "You want to know about the castle gossip, do you? Dylan Aires wants the inside scoop?"

"I'm dying to know."

She snorted under her breath. *I'll bet. Dying to distract me is more like it.* Still, it was a good strategy and she wracked her brain for something entertaining, trying to play along. "Well...there was the time that Lady Marchel drank too much wine at dinner and face-planted right in the middle of the cheese course. I was just two seats down. It wasn't pretty."

A soft echo of laughter drifted up from the rocks below. "I'll bet. What else?"

"Hmm..." She thought about it, forgetting entirely about her shaking arms, and aching fingers, and the deadly drop below. A second later, her face lit up with a happy memory. "A few years ago, at Christmas, Kailas and I decided to play a prank on our new tutor. You see, the man had a terrible fear of spiders, so on the night of the big feast, we snuck into his chambers and..."

She trailed off. Remembering each moment in excruciating detail. Remembering the exact look of breathless excitement that had lit up her brother's mischievous face.

Talking about Kailas was painful. She'd have to avoid doing it in the future.

"What else?" Dylan was careful not to let the quiet go on too long. As usual, he seemed to have a better read on her thoughts than she did. "What about suitors, marriage proposals—that sort of thing. You're eighteen years old. You must have had a lot of those."

By this point, Katerina was having trouble keeping it all straight. Was he still trying to distract her from the climb? Was he trying to move the conversation away from Kailas? Or was he asking about potential suitors, because the two of them had recently shared a perfect sunset kiss?

“There have been a few...” she answered coyly.

*That* produced a reaction. He might have been trying to distract her before, but it was clear from his sudden shift in tone that he was far more interested in the conversation than he’d let on.

“Oh, *really*.” For a moment, she was half-convinced he was going to double back and join her, if only to interrogate her more thoroughly. “Do tell.”

She bit down on her lip with a smile, cautiously navigating a dangerous foothold. “Let me give you a lesson in manners, Dylan Aires: a lady never tells.”

There was a moment of silence. One in which both parties silently wondered what to say.

“Yeah...tell me anyway.”

Katerina couldn’t help but laugh. Direct as always. A man as straightforward and candid as Dylan would never make it in a royal court.

“Well, first there was Henry, the Duke of Allouve.”

“...sounds like a prick.”

“Then there was Alexi, Crown Prince of the Northern Realm.”

“...I always thought he was a woman.”

“But the one who was most persistent would have to be Matthew Lansbury, a knight in my father’s kingdom. We grew up together.”

“Lansbury...” There was a thoughtful pause as Dylan tried to place the name. “You mean from Esterworth Castle? Carl Lansbury’s son?”

For the fourth time, Katerina glanced down. This time with a bit of a frown.

“How did you know that?”

There was an infinitesimal pause before that abrasive wall came back up.

“I’m not a peasant, you know. Some of us make it a point to keep up with the ins and outs of the monarchy. Especially when they’re usually the people trying to kill us...”

*Nice try. But you’re not throwing me off that easily.*

“I’m serious,” she insisted. “How would you know that?”

“Why would you want to date his son—that’s the real question.”

“Who said I did? I said he’s been persistent, that’s all.” By now, she had stopped and was staring down at him with a glare. He was staring right back up, just as defiant. “And just for the record, you’ve been persistent, too.”

His eyebrows lifted slowly, with a self-assuredness she couldn’t believe.

“You think this is persistent, what I’ve been doing? You think I’ve been giving this my all?”

Despite her precarious situation, she kept her cool. A feat she probably wouldn’t have been able to do before she left the castle. “I think you keep kissing me with no provocation, then shifting into a dog and refusing to talk about it.”

“...a wolf.”

“Whatever.”

He took a second to collect himself, ignoring the fact that he was dangling fifty feet above the ground, his lips twisted up into an arrogant smirk. “Honey, when I get persistent...IF I get persistent...you’ll be the first to know.”

A rush of blood heated her cheeks, but she kept her expression perfectly neutral. “Why does that sound like a threat?”

He laughed shortly, turning back to the rocks. “Because over half the people in this kingdom want to kill you right now. My guess is that everything sounds like a threat.”

*Why, that little—*

“Do you really have to do that?!” she demanded furiously, lowering herself down another foot and wedging her foot into the slick granite. “Do you really have to say it like that?”

He looked up in surprise, accustomed only to a rougher kind of play. “Like what?”

“Oh, for bloody sake, Dylan!” She finally lost her temper, kicking a handful of loose pebbles down at his face. “I’m clinging to the side of a cliff, like some arthritic mountain goat who got severely lost, and you try to cheer me up by saying—”

“I’m not trying to cheer you up,” he interrupted fiercely, blinking bits of stone and dust from his eyes. “It’s not my job to cheer you up. It’s my job to keep you safe, and to tell you the truth. Two things that have been severely lacking in your life as of late.”

“Oh, that’s great. Make fun of me.” She rolled her eyes, trying her best to secure a foothold that was a few inches beyond her reach. “The royal army turned against me—*ha, ha, ha*. My brother sent his giant dogs into the woods to kill me—*ha, ha, ha!*”

Dylan was unamused by her banter, and he kept his attention focused only on her hands. “Don’t try to stretch for that; find something closer.”

It went in one ear and out the other. She reached her arm precariously across the rock. “You want to know something? At least Kailas is upfront about it,” she continued, thinking about it for the first time. “He wants the throne, so he has to kill me. It’s pretty straightforward.”

“Kat, I’m serious—”

“Unlike you,” she was almost there now, her fingers gripping against the wet stone, “the *truth-telling ranger* who’s actually lied to me consistently since the moment we met—”

It happened before she realized it. Before she even had time to gasp. One second, she was holding onto the cliff like the others. The next, she was falling through the air.

The last thing she saw was the sky streaking out in front of her. A golden sunset stained with burnt crimson. Like blood dripping over a crown. The last sunset she’d ever see.



## Chapter 8

**I**t's funny, the things that come back to you in the end.

As she was falling, Katerina had a sudden memory of her first horse. A stallion so tall she'd had to walk up a stack of portable steps just to get on top of him. A second later, the face of her old piano teacher flashed before her eyes. A kind woman who'd slipped her secret sweets and candies whenever her governess wasn't looking. Then it was her mother.

This one was harder. No matter how many times she tried to picture the queen's exquisite face, she could never make it clear. She had a thousand memories, of course, but they tended to focus on a particular smell, a fleeting touch. The woman herself was always blurred.

But not today. Today, Katerina saw her in perfect clarity.

Fiery red hair. Stunning grey eyes. And a flawless, ivory-skinned face. A face that seemed destined to wear a crown. A face that looked remarkably like her own.

Funny, how those things come back to you. A moment before you'll never see them again.

"KAT!"

Her arms came up in slow motion. Her eyes fluttered shut. For a moment, all she felt was the wind in her hair and the cold chill of the mountain as she plummeted into the mist.

Then a hand caught her by the wrist. Snapping the bone in half.

A scream that was equal parts shock and pain ripped through her teeth as her body swung suddenly through the air, crashing into the jagged rocks once again. There was a moment where everything was lost to disorientation, and by the time she opened her eyes a strong arm had wrapped around her waist. Dylan was pinning her body to the mountain, using nothing but his own.

"Are you all right?!" he gasped, still reeling from the sight of it. "Katerina, are you all right?!"

She blinked a few times, very slowly. Her breath billowed out in a frosty cloud, and without thinking about it she pressed her forehead painfully against the rough stone.

“Honey, talk to me! Tell me that you’re all right!”

She could feel his heart pounding through his shirt. His arms were shaking from the stress of the climb and the weight of holding them both, but she didn’t worry for a second that she would fall. That fear was over. He had her now. She was safe.

“I’m all right,” she whispered. *He called me honey again.*

“Say it again,” he demanded. A part of him was dying to look her over and see for himself, but he was unable to move even an inch lest they both fall. “Kat, say it again. Convince me.”

She wanted to reassure him. She really did. But she was in a daze. With her mother’s face still twinkling before her eyes she twisted her head against the rock, staring at him in wonder. “You...you saved my life.”

It wasn’t the first time that it had happened, but it was no less staggering. The selfless way he’d thrown his body between her and the abyss. The complete lack of fear that propelled him forward. That moment of connection when their hands intertwined, when the terror subsided, and she knew, without a doubt, that she was going to live.

“You saved my life,” she said again, trying to reaffirm it to herself. He didn’t respond. He simply clung onto her in shock. Trying to slow things down. Trying to catch his breath. “Again.”

For a moment, all was silent. Then a tentative voice echoed up from the abyss.

“Actually...not so much.”

For the second time, Katerina stifled a little shriek. Dylan’s arm tightened around her in alarm before the two of them twisted around, staring, dumbstruck, at the ground below.

With an almost comedic synchronicity, Cassiel and Tanya lifted their hands in an apologetic wave. The evening breeze was blowing the mist away, and it was suddenly easy to see that they were within easy jumping distance of the ground. Dangling off the cliff just a few feet above their friends’ heads. Friends who were doing their very best not to smile.



Dylan's entire body wilted with a quiet curse as he pressed his face into the stone. "You've got to be bloody kidding me..."

"What was that?" Cassiel called cheerfully. His composure had lasted all of two seconds, and now he was grinning ear to ear. "It's crazy that I couldn't hear you, because you're actually *really close to the ground*."

Without another word, Dylan released his vise-like grip on Katerina. She landed lightly upon the forest floor, clutching her wrist and flushing seven shades of scarlet. Dylan landed beside her a second later, wearing a vicious scowl and refusing to look anyone in the eye.

"Not a word," he growled, knocking the fae hard in the shoulder as he swept past him into the trees. "Not a single word."

"Oh, I'd say the chances of that are pretty slim."

As for Tanya, it was taking everything she had not to recreate the epic moment right there on the spot. Only her broken leg kept her temporarily grounded. That, and the dark look of warning Katerina gave her the second she opened her mouth. In the end, she merely gestured to the trail.

"Well...shall we find somewhere to make camp?"

No one answered her. They all simply filed, one by one, into the forest. Some smiling, some glowering into the trees. Not one of them sparing a second glance at the mountain peak. Not one of them taking a single moment to acknowledge how much they'd risked, and how far they'd come.

*Not that any of us is likely to forget...*

Katerina lingered at the rear of the pack, stepping lightly over the blanket of pine needles and clutching discreetly at her fractured wrist. She hadn't even felt it in the moment. It hadn't been until the mist cleared and they'd landed that the stabbing pain broke through into reality.

It throbbed and ached as they wound their way through the emerald trees. The others might be used to such pain and such spectacle, but both were brand new for Katerina. Truth be told, she found herself a little overwhelmed. Sometimes staring up at the sun-streaked canopy, listening to the recurrent chorus of a thousand invisible birds. Sometimes marveling that she was even able to walk straight when one of her bones was cracked straight through the center. For a moment, she almost found herself wishing that her brother was there to see it for himself.

He'd always been the warrior, riding out into the sunrise, while she'd always been soft. The perfect little princess who stayed behind at the castle, sipping sparkling wine and sitting on silk cushions with her ladies. If only he could see her now. He wouldn't believe his eyes.

Then a twig snapped somewhere in the distance and she scurried back to the group.

*No...I'm very glad Kailas CANNOT see me right now.*

"How's the wrist?"

She glanced up in surprise to see Dylan standing right before her. Whether he'd abandoned his place in the front because he heard the noise as well, or if he'd simply been waiting for a chance to speak with her in private, she didn't know. As it stood, he was having trouble meeting her eyes.

"It's fine," she said quickly, stuffing it back into her sleeve and fighting the wince of pain that followed. "Just a little sore. No big deal."

He stared at her for a moment, delicately reaching for her hand. She immediately offered out the uninjured one and his lips twitched up with a faint grin as he reached for the other.

That grin was quick to fade.

"I'm sorry." He ran his fingers delicately over the skin as a look of true remorse clouded his handsome face. It was broken, all right. She could tell from the look in his eyes. "I thought we were so much higher...I never would have—"

"Would you stop?!" Katerina exclaimed. The words were a bit louder than she'd anticipated and the others stopped in their tracks, turning around curiously to listen in. "There was no way that you could have known, and that couldn't matter less! You risked *everything* to catch me! To *save* me!"

Tanya bit her lip with a mischievous grin. "From a deadly, ten-foot drop—"

"Shut up, Tanya!"

It would be a long time before Katerina was able to see the humor in the situation. And until such a time, she certainly wasn't going to let the others tease Dylan for a selfless act of sacrifice that most surely would have saved her life. Not if she could help it.

"I'm only agreeing with you," the shifter replied innocently.

“Well, stop.” The dainty princess mimicked a hand gesture she’d seen the men make a hundred times, then twirled her fingers and pointed the others back to the path. “Dylan saved me, and that’s the end of it. Now, let’s find a place to make camp.”

The others shared a quick grin as Dylan turned swiftly on his heel—eager to put as much distance between himself and the others as was humanly possible.

“I didn’t do anything,” he muttered as he headed off into the trees.

“Hey, that’s not true,” Cassiel called after him kindly. “You broke her wrist.”



NEEDLESS TO SAY, BY the time the sun had set and the need to find shelter for the night had become desperate the collective mood had not improved. Tanya and Cassiel were still silently delighting in what had to have looked like the most anti-climactic ‘rescue’ in the history of the world, Dylan was still mortified and appalled to have done it, and Katerina was still nursing her hurt wrist.

To make matters worse, it started to rain...

“Well, that’s just perfect,” Tanya narrated in a loud, pitiful voice. “They survived the harrowing climb down the peak, only to drown in a monsoon shortly to follow.”

“It came out of nowhere,” Cassiel said softly, gazing out with a slight frown at the torrential downpour soaking the forest. “There wasn’t a cloud in the sky.”

“As far as luck goes, you have to admit that it’s consistent,” Katerina said helpfully.

Dylan shot her a reluctant grin before handing his blade to Cassiel and lifting himself effortlessly up the trunk of the nearest tree. He vanished for a moment, using the higher vantage point to scan the surrounding area, jumping back down with a plan.

“There’s a small outcropping of rocks just half a mile east. Looks like they might provide a little shelter. Everything else around here is just trees.”

“Sounds good to me,” Katerina said with a shiver. At this point, anything that wasn’t just ‘standing out in the rain’ sounded good to her. Already, it had soaked through her clothes and was trickling in freezing little rivulets down her spine. The others concurred.

They picked up speed and reached the rocks in only a few minutes. Dylan was right. They curved in such a way as to provide a bit of shelter for those gathered underneath. The only problem was, they weren’t the only ones to have gathered.

At least ten other people were huddled beneath the giant stone seeking shelter from the rain. And ‘people’ was using the term rather loosely. Even from a distance, Katerina was able to see the telltale ears of a woodland sprite, as well as the sallow complexion of a rain-drenched vampire.

*Great...more vampires. And I'm the only one not covered in some degree with blood.*

The group pulled up short the second they saw the others, pausing with the caution of those who had the entire might of the royal army on their trail. For a minute, they all silently debated leaving. Then a flash of lightning shot through the sky, and they decided to take their chances.

With Dylan and Cassiel in the front they elbowed their way quickly to the back of the huddled masses, taking shelter in the back of the cave. They were clustered closely but casually, with one hand always at the ready. But Katerina wasn’t worried. Their standoffish position alone was meant to dissuade any well-meaning introductions.

Of course, that always seemed to work better in theory...

“Ben Gold.” A jovial man stuck his hand right under Dylan’s nose the second the four of them had claimed space beside the others. “Pleasure to meet you. Despite this awful rain.”

There was a slight pause, then Dylan accepted carefully. Instinctively wary of such an outgoing personality. “Riley O’Keathe, and these are my friends. And yeah,” he glanced up at the roiling clouds, “it’s a little intense. Came out of nowhere.”

When the man followed his gaze, he leaned in for a casual sniff. So quick and discreet that no one else realized he’d done it. Katerina watched closely as his face relaxed: the possible threat was immediately downgraded.

No, the man wasn't a shifter. No, he wasn't secretly armed with royal military supplies. Yes, there was a chance that he was exactly what he seemed.

A soggy old man. Taking shelter from the rain.

"Where are you from?" Dylan asked politely, shifting a little so the side of his face that had been torn up by the avalanche was hidden in shadows. "Is there a village nearby?"

Katerina fought back a grin. Of course, Dylan wasn't just being polite. Of course, he'd take advantage of every new introduction just to get the lay of the land. Always strategizing, that one.

"Not far." The man pointed out into the rain, squinting slightly, as though he could see it even through the trees. "If you keep following the river, it takes a turn about three miles down—"

"What about you, dear one?" Katerina jumped in her skin as another voice entered the conversation. One aimed solely at her. "Are you from the village as well?"

She looked down to see an old woman looking back up at her with a smile. A woman just as old as the man Dylan was talking to. Her first instinct was to protect her eyes, on the off chance she was a hag looking to claim them for shillings, but a second look calmed her nerves. No, this woman was no hag. In fact, everything about her looked reassuring. From her smile to her eyes, right down to the little flowers stuck in her lapel.

"No," Katerina said quickly, flashing an apologetic smile, "just passing through."

The woman nodded sagely, gazing out into the trees. "I'm passing through as well. The plan was to head west, to the Festival of Woodland Lights, but the weather has delayed me so much, I fear by the time I arrive the entire celebration will be over."

Katerina perked up eagerly. It wasn't often that she stumbled across a shared point of reference in the supernatural world. She was quite delighted to capitalize upon it now.

"The Festival of Woodland Lights?" she asked excitedly. "We were just there. I spent a—"

"—fortune on hotel bills." There was a gust of air as Cassiel swept suddenly in between them. His bright eyes locked on the woman, and a firm hand locked around Katerina's arm. "What do you want, witch?"

*What the—?!*

“Cass, don’t be rude!”

Katerina didn’t know what surprised her more: The cold bluntness from her impeccably-mannered friend, or the protective grip on her arm. But the woman didn’t seem at all perturbed. In fact, she seemed as though she was rather expecting it.

“He wasn’t, dear one.” She stepped back with a twinkling smile. “I am a witch. Gifted with a magic that would be only too obvious to a fae. I salute you, sir. For your instincts.”

Cassiel nodded curtly but didn’t relax his position. There was a natural animosity between those blessed with the magic of man and the magic of the stars. It was a centuries’-old tension, and by the looks of things it was still going strong today.

“What do you want?” he repeated bluntly. “Why are you speaking to her?”

A glimmer of frustration flashed in the witch’s eyes, and Katerina blushed apologetically. But despite the coldness of her reception, she maintained a steady smile.

“I was merely making conversation.” A flash of lightning ripped through the air as she raised her eyes to the storm. “We’re all stuck here for a while, right?”

The lightning flashed again, and the fae relaxed his grip. A second later, Tanya called for his attention and he moved away, casting a final look of warning over his shoulder.

Katerina watched him go before turning back to the old woman. “I’m so sorry,” she said quietly. “It was nothing personal, I promise you. We’ve all been travelling a very long way, and I’m afraid they’re a little on edge—”

“No need to apologize,” the witch dismissed her cheerfully. “I travel up and down this road quite often. A certain level of suspicion is to be expected.” Her eyes flickered back to the fae, returning to Katerina with a smile. “Especially from someone as old as him.”

The princess’ eyes lit with sudden curiosity as she followed the woman’s gaze. While she’d often wondered about the mysterious fourth member of their strange little alliance, she’d always been far too intimidated to ask. But maybe things had changed now. Since that night in the storm.

“At any rate, it’s best you lot stick together,” the witch concluded. “You can never be too careful in these parts.”

The words caught Katerina’s attention and she turned back in surprise. It was the exact same phrase Dylan had said to her back in the first village. The night he rescued her from the dwarves. A rush of warmth stirred in her chest, and she gave the woman a tentative smile.

“So why are you headed to the festival?” she asked politely.

It looked as though the witch had been waiting for her to ask. A look of extreme excitement came over her as she reached into her bag and pulled out a handful of multi-colored stones. The princess stared in open fascination. At a first glance, they didn’t appear at all out of the ordinary. But upon closer inspection, they seemed to have a life of their own. A few were even glowing.

“What are they?” she asked curiously, reaching out a tentative hand. The closer she got, the brighter they glowed. Her eyes fixed on a purple one at the end.

The witch smiled knowingly, rattling them quietly in her hand.

“They’re seeing stones. Drop them into water and they let you see anyone you like, even at a great distance. Only potent enough for two or three tries, but they always go over well at festivals.”

*Well, THAT’S certainly handy!*

She wondered if they really worked, or if they were just a hoax to scam tourists. She knew what Cassiel would probably say. Either way, they were hypnotically beautiful.

“Here. Take one.” The witch offered out the amethyst stone. The one that had caught Katerina’s eye. It glowed even brighter the closer it got to her skin, and the princess almost took it on the spot.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t,” she said quickly, regretting it all the while. “That’s a very sweet offer, but I don’t have any money to pay you, and...”

*...and my new friends would certainly not approve the idea of taking something for nothing.*

“Nonsense.” The witch pressed the stone into her hand. “Consider it a good luck gift. If this weather keeps up, we’re going to need all the luck we can get.”

She and Katerina shared a weary laugh but, as if on cue, the sudden downpour just as suddenly stopped. They looked up in wonder at the sky as the evening breeze blew away the last of the storm clouds, and the hint of a golden sunset flickered tentatively through the trees.

“Like I said,” the woman clapped her on the shoulder with a jovial smile, and gathered up her things, “good luck.”

“Yeah,” Katerina murmured, turning the stone over in her hand, “must be.”

Before she could say anything else, Dylan tapped her on the shoulder and cocked his head towards the trail. The rest of the people who had been gathered under the rocks had already begun to disperse, and Cassiel and Tanya were waiting on the forest path.

“Yeah, just a second.” She slipped the stone into her pocket and turned quickly back to the friendly witch. “Well, it was nice meeting you, and thank you so much—”

But the woman was already gone. Lost in the bustle of the departing crowd. Katerina scanned around for a second, hoping to catch a glimpse of her threadbare dress or the greying, grizzled hair, but then Dylan called to her again and she headed out with the others.

The mood was significantly lighter now that the sun had returned. Between that, and the fact that they were soon going to turn in for the night, everyone’s spirits were running very high.

So why did Katerina have a nagging feeling in the pit of her stomach? Why the strange hesitation gnawing away at her?

She smiled along with the others, laughing robotically at a random joke, but a second before they rounded the corner she turned and looked back at the rain-soaked little cave one last time.

The witch wasn’t there. Not that she’d really expected her to be. All that remained was a pitch-black raven, perched upon a rock. The bird cocked its head the moment it saw her, watching her closely out of one eye. At the same time an inexplicable shiver rippled up the princess’ arms, and she tightened her cloak instinctively around her.

A second later, the bird took flight. Katerina rounded the corner. The laughter continued as she and her friends tried to find a place dry enough that they could camp.



But she couldn't seem to shake that feeling. It followed her far into the night.



## Chapter 9

Whenever the gang kept watch during the night, Katerina was always suspiciously left out of the rotation. It wasn't so much that they didn't trust her to spot danger, it was the question of what would happen if she did. The girl was sweet, but she didn't know how to fight. She was observant but hadn't been trained to know what to look for. And while her safety was the entire point of their little consortium, it didn't make much sense to let the others sleep while she kept a lookout.

In the beginning, she'd felt embarrassed to be left behind. Their second night together, when Cassiel had fought off a prowling cougar, she'd felt intensely relieved to have been safe in her bed the entire time. That night, she was beginning to feel restless, but it didn't have anything to do with not being chosen to keep watch. It was that same feeling again. The instinctual unease that had come over her the second she saw the raven.

She gazed up at the canopy of trees. Every now and then, between the branches, you were able to see the light of a star. A little speck of diamond dust, sprinkled across a shadowy blanket. She stared at each one in turn, breathing softly.

Back at the castle, it had been hard to see the stars. A steady rotation of guards, armed with blades and torches, constantly patrolled the perimeter, often stationing themselves directly below her window. The fire lit the night sky and made it difficult to see what might be shining above.

But it wasn't like that out here. Out here there wasn't a single ray of light, save for the dying embers of the fire and the silver of the moon. In the beginning, it had frightened her. Now, it was like a soothing balm. A peaceful sedative; one she found herself looking up at many times.

A slender arm flung suddenly across her neck, and she glanced down with a grin. Tanya wasn't the easiest sleeping companion but, despite her endless array of elbows and kicks, Katerina wouldn't have traded it for the world. Unlike the friends she'd had back at home, unlike even her beloved ladies—sworn to forever serve her—these people sleeping with her beneath

the stars were different. They had the potential to become something more. To become family.

Tanya flipped again, striking the princess carelessly across the face.

*...even if they leave a few scars along the way.*

She grinned again and pushed herself up onto her elbows, letting her eyes slowly adjust to the darkness of the night. Another hand tightened automatically upon the edge of her cloak, and she glanced down to see that Cassiel had kept a careful grip on her, even in his sleep.

She pondered this as she gazed at his lovely face, flickering in the light of the dying fire.

He was a difficult person to figure out. When she'd first met him she'd written him off as nothing more than a frivolous playboy, too pretty for his own good. When he'd thrown that first punch at Dylan, she'd wondered at their history. When he'd walked away from his luxurious life without a second thought, to commit himself to their cause, she'd wondered at his character. And when he'd instinctively grabbed her, pulling her protectively away from a person he deemed a threat, she wondered what had changed.

Dylan had said he was one of the High Born. The closest thing the fae had to royalty. What she knew of the High Born was both tragic and brief. Dylan had also said he had a strong sense of honor, buried beneath that hard shell. It was something that was getting easier and easier to believe. The more time they spent together. The more those walls began to chip away.

She eased carefully out of his grip. Slow enough not to wake him. Tanya was a lot easier to evade, and a second later the princess was standing on her own two feet. There was one person missing from their party. But she had a pretty good idea how to find him.



“I’M RUNNING AWAY...”

The campfire was long behind her as she made her way through the woods. Hardly noticing which way she was moving as she twisted and turned through the dark trees.

“Back to the castle to face the music...”

There wasn't a sound in the forest around her. Just the occasional coo of a sleeping bird, or the rustle of leaves as a lingering breeze danced through the branches.

"Maybe I'll stop and see Bernie along the way. See if I can get some more of that soup—"

A hand flashed out of nowhere, spinning her around in her tracks.

"You think you're so clever, don't you?"

Her face warmed with an automatic smile as he stepped out of the trees. A smile that was reflected back at her tenfold. But they only ever lasted a moment. A second later, she twisted out of his grasp with a coy grin, swishing her dress back and forth as she pretended to consider. "Yes, I'd have to say that I am. I figured out that you're a shifter, didn't I?"

He pursed his lips. "You figured it out *after* I changed into a giant wolf...but, yeah. We'll say you're clever."

Without another word, he cocked his head to the side and she followed him to the place where he'd been standing, a little bluff overlooking the campsite and the woods. He dropped down to the rock with a grace that still shocked her and patted the place beside him. She sat down as well.

For a while, the two of them merely sat there. Staring up at the stars.

The lightning might have stopped, but the freakish weather continued. Streams that were supposed to be bubbling over were frozen still. Katerina's breath billowed out in a frosty cloud, yet a sprinkling of summer flowers was still blanketing the ground.

If it stuck her as strange, she could only imagine what Dylan was thinking. A ranger. A man who'd dedicated his life to living off the land. As they'd wound their way over the mountains and across the hills, she'd seen little flickers of it in his eyes. A lingering glance here. A trace of a frown there. Every day, weighted down with that same silent confusion.

"Couldn't sleep?" he finally asked.

She jerked out of her introspective trance and pulled in a deep breath. "After the second time Tanya smacked my nose, I figured I'd better walk it off."

Dylan laughed quietly, having suffered his fair share of late-night injuries himself. "Yeah, that girl's a menace." But his smile was soon to fade as he shifted towards her in the dark. "Speaking of injuries...how's your wrist?"

Katerina clutched it instinctively closer, as the pain she'd been trying to deliberately ignore pounded suddenly to the forefront of her mind. In truth, she didn't really know. She'd never had a broken bone before, so it was impossible to rank it on a scale. Shortly after the downpour had ended, Tanya had spotted a cluster of white flowers and tore off a few petals. After rinsing them with some rainwater, she handed them to Katerina and instructed her to chew them for a while before spitting them out. They'd help with the pain—she'd said.

Hyper-aware that the whole thing might be a prank the princess had followed her advice anyway, and much to her delight the pain did indeed subside. But the power of those petals was long gone, and little sparks of pain were shooting up her arm once more.

"It's fine," she said quickly. A little too quickly to be casual.

Dylan stared at her for a beat before his lips curved up with the faintest grin. "You know, you don't really lie well enough to be a politician."

She considered it for a moment, then nodded thoughtfully. "...that's probably why they chased me out of the castle."

There was a beat of silence, then Dylan burst out laughing again. It was such a warm sound, it literally seemed to brighten the forest around him. Katerina watched out of the corner of her eye, mesmerized, until he quieted down once more. Around the same time, his eyes fell upon her wrist.

"I really am sorry..." he started to say, then stopped himself with a quiet sigh. She'd already reprimanded him once for apologizing. He wasn't about to try it again. But he wasn't able to just let it go either. Like the princess, ever since it had happened he'd been playing it over and over again in his mind. "You know what's strange? You didn't even scream."

She turned to him in surprise, her long hair trailing down the side of her face. "What?"

"When you fell," he said again, staring deep into her eyes, "you didn't scream."

Yes, in hindsight, that was rather strange. Except that, to Katerina, it was the most natural thing in the world. She flashed a quick smile, looking back at the stars. "Of course, I didn't scream. I knew you'd catch me."

He stared at her a second more, unsure what to say, before he averted his eyes quickly and turned back to the forest. Some sort of nocturnal bird

was singing a lonely song. A sad, haunting melody that lingered for a moment in the crisp air, fading quickly into the night.

“What’s wrong?”

This time, it was Dylan’s turn to be surprised. He glanced at her, unable to entirely hide the look of worry from his face. “Nothing. Why would you think something’s wrong?”

She studied his face for a moment, flashing a sarcastic grin. “You know, you don’t really lie well enough to be a ranger.”

He chuckled softly. “Touché.”

For a moment, it was quiet. He waited—hoping the question would simply pass. She also waited—silently pressing for an answer. In the end, it was he who caved.

“It’s...this.” His eyes roved over the shadowy landscape, growing more and more troubled with each pass. “I know this land. I’ve been here before. But this?” His lips thinned into a hard line, and he shook his head. “...this doesn’t feel right.”

Even a girl who had grown up in a castle could sense it, too. That same feeling of unease stirred again in Katerina’s stomach as she hugged her knees, pulling them to her chest.

They’d done an incredible job thus far of evading the people who were after her. They’d beaten unspeakable odds just staying alive. Every decision had been carefully thought out, and every move was meticulously planned five steps in advance.

But, despite their every precaution, they had somehow veered off course.

The wind stirred up again, and without thinking Dylan slipped his arm around her tiny shoulders. She leaned into his chest, and together the two of them stared up at the sky.

Unable to shake the feeling that something was driving them forward. That something was taking them to places beyond their control.



IT TOOK AN AWFUL LOT to get Tanya out of bed in the morning, but the promise of a hot breakfast was enough to do the trick. Since losing what

was left of their provisions in the avalanche, the gang had been collectively pretending that they weren't constantly starving. That they weren't swaying where they stood as the days of food deprivation and blood loss slowly took their toll.

But all of that was about to change. Sometime shortly before dawn, Dylan had tracked down a stag. How he'd done it with just his knife, no one knew. But Katerina suspected it had something to do with the large, wolf-like tears in the creature's flesh. However it happened, it couldn't matter less. The beast was hanging now over their fire, dripping deliciously onto the hissing logs as the smoke spiraled slowly into the sky.

"Aires, I take back every terrible thing I've ever said about you." Tanya wiped her mouth with her sleeve. "And trust me, there have been a lot."

Dylan chuckled, twirling a serrated bone between his fingers. The teasing banter was a lot easier to take in stride on a full stomach. As was the fact that at least three of them still had broken bones, and the fourth looked like he'd taken a battle axe to the side of the face. "Well, thanks for that. And don't let appearances fool you. I really invest a *lot* of time thinking about the things you have to say."

She tossed a bite of meat at him, laughing aloud when he caught it in his mouth.

"You two are like children," Cassiel said wearily, rubbing his eyes as the dancing flames reflected across his flaxen hair. "Like drunken children who were never taught to be still."

In terms of injuries, out of the four of them he was still definitely the worst off. The days of hard travel had done nothing to heal his wounds, and the subsequent nights of sleeping next to Tanya hadn't helped. The food had brought a bit of color to his face, but as things stood he was still tired and pale, wincing discreetly every time he shifted his weight or pulled in a breath.

Dylan took in every detail with a quick sweep of his eyes but fixed a careful smile on his face, moving swiftly around the fire so the two of them were sitting side by side. "Did someone have bad dreams?"

The fae shot him a strained glare, but otherwise ignored him.

"It was the one with the fish again, wasn't it? Tell me it was the one with the fish."

Katerina and Tanya fought back smiles as Cassiel's fingers twitched toward his blade.

"I thought so." Dylan shook his head with a sigh. "I don't know what to tell you, man. The context is strange enough, but when you throw in that bit with your father..."

Cassiel finally broke down and grinned. His dark eyes flickered up to Dylan's for a brief, communicative glance before he murmured something in a language Katerina didn't understand.

Dylan threw back his head with a laugh, kicking another log onto the fire. "What? The venison wasn't to your liking?"

"There was a claw in mine," Cassiel replied sardonically. "Missing one of yours?"

Dylan tilted his head with a sweet smile. "Aww, honey, you never complained about my cooking before."

"It usually involved a good deal of whiskey."

The entire campsite fell momentarily quiet at the word, like they'd taken a group sedative, then Dylan glanced suddenly towards the forest trail.

"On that note, my budding alcoholism isn't going to sustain itself. We're only half a day's walk from Fairport. It's just on the other side of the canyon. We can rest there for a little while and stock up on supplies. From there, it's just three days to Brookfield."

"Three days?" Katerina said in surprise. In her mind, the journey had been endless.

"Three days." Dylan flashed her a little smile before turning to the others. "Tanya, smoke the rest of the meat. We can eat what we want and sell the rest in the village. Cass, why don't you scout ahead for the best route to the canyon? From there, it should be an easy shot to the village." His eyes twinkled, and he couldn't help but add, "That is, unless you're too worn out."

Cassiel made a very particular hand gesture and disappeared into the trees, while Tanya got started with the fire. With nothing else to pack or prepare Katerina pushed slowly to her feet, staring off into the blinding sunrise.

*Three days. We can make it three days, can't we?*



The rain had stopped. The storm had passed. The sun was shining. And for the first time in what felt like years, they'd gotten to eat a hot meal. Their luck had changed, hadn't it?

*Yes, she rubbed the stone in her pocket, it most certainly has.*

She and the others headed off down the trail, all feeling the same way. Like an invisible weight had suddenly lifted. Like there had finally been a positive shift in the tide. Something to tip the scales back into their favor. They continued along that way for half a day's walk, thinking it over to themselves with secret smiles.

...until they got to the canyon.



## Chapter 10

“OH—COME ON!”

Katerina wasn't sure she'd ever seen Dylan so angry. Not even when she'd wandered off on her own back at the festival. Not when he'd woken up with a concussion in a giant's cave. Not even when he was fighting for his life against a gang of vampires. This was much, much worse.

He literally fell to his knees with a vicious curse, glaring at the canyon beyond.

At least...it was supposed to be a canyon.

*What the heck?*

At some point, it had been filled to the brim with what looked like a massive landslide of rocks. The kind of rocks you couldn't climb. The kind of rocks you couldn't hope to move. In one fell swoop, their easy gateway to Brookfield had been sealed forever.

“What are the ODDS?!” Dylan continued to rage, his voice rocketing violently off the high canyon walls. “What are the freakin' odds? Are the gods against us? Like, seriously?!?! What have I done to deserve this?!”

The questions echoed back to him again and again. There was no answer.

“I don't understand,” Cassiel murmured. He, too, had frozen dead in his tracks and was staring up at the colossus in utter disbelief. “How did this possibly happen?”

It was a fair question. Unless a mountain of boulders had literally dropped down from the sky, landing squarely in the canyon, Katerina didn't remotely understand what she was looking at.

“Limestone...” Tanya knelt down at the base of the nearest boulder, running a delicate hand along the edge. “Maybe the river swelled, and the villagers were trying to build a dam—”

“And they used *giants* to do it?!” Dylan pushed to his feet and stormed a couple of steps away, raking his hands manically through his hair. “No, I'll

tell you what happened.” His eyes flashed as he threw a look of pure murder to the sky. “Someone up there *hates* us!”

Give the man a target—he’d hit it every time. Give the man an opponent—you’d be sweeping the poor guy off the floor. But this was something different. Something you couldn’t fight, or predict, or even see. Something that was rendering that invincible man completely helpless.

“*SCREW OFF!*”

His voice echoed around the canyon once more, rattling the stones, and sending a host of little shivers running up Katerina’s arms. It was scary enough to see him lose control without the dramatic backdrop. If he wasn’t careful, he was going to cause another rockslide.

“Hey,” she put a tentative hand on his shoulder, trying to stop the manic pacing, “just take a breath. I know what this looks like, but it’s going to be okay—”

“No, it isn’t, princess!” He ripped his arm away, whirling around to face her for the first time. “None of this is going to be okay! None of us is going to be okay!”

Up close, he looked even worse than she’d thought. The bits of his skin that hadn’t been ravaged by the avalanche had turned a frightening shade of white, and his fingers kept periodically flexing into fists—as if at any moment he might go and tear the boulders down, one by one.

“I’ve been charged with getting you to Brookfield. A task that’s nearly impossible just by itself.” He leaned in closer, enunciating every word. “My *entire job* here is to keep you safe, and if this kind of thing keeps...”

Words failed him, and he turned back to the mountain, staring up at it with the expression of one who was truly lost. Science had failed him. Geography had failed him. Almost two decades of gut instinct and experience were screaming at him to run the other way.

But he couldn’t. They had to keep moving forward.

Somehow.

“We’ll have to go around.” Two deep breaths. That’s all the time he needed to collect himself. Then the ranger was back, prying open a window as yet another door slammed shut in their face. “We’ll just have to go around.”

“There is no *around*,” Cassiel replied quietly. His eyes never left the mountain. He didn’t see Dylan’s nervous glance. The way his face tightened with a preemptive apology.

“Yes, there is.”

There was a moment of silence, then Cassiel rotated slowly with a look of dawning comprehension. Their eyes met, then he started shaking his head.

“Oh no, no, no, no. Absolutely not.”

“What is it?” Katerina asked in alarm.

“*Absolutely not*. Dylan!”

The ranger sympathized, but in his mind there was clearly no other solution. The one road open to them had been closed. They would simply have to open another.

“It’s the only way—” he began tentatively.

“NO!” Cassiel interrupted, as fierce as the princess had ever seen him. “We are NOT going to Laurelwood!”



JUST AN HOUR LATER, the gang was standing in front of a group of densely clustered trees.

They had been fighting through a strong headwind the entire hike over, but now that they’d arrived the air was suddenly still. Between that, and Cassiel’s almost violent reluctance to coming, just peering into the emerald darkness was enough to give Katerina the creeps.

*Laurelwood.*

The princess knew very little, except what scraps she’d gleaned from obsessing over the castle’s heavily-censored history books. It wasn’t a subject that garnered much royal support, but throughout the years she’d managed to piece together the basics.

Before the Damaris dynasty had fought its way to power, the land of the five kingdoms had been ruled by the Fae. It was a different time, countless centuries before her generation was even born. The earth was younger. Wilder. Untamed. Yet beautiful and delicate all at the same time.

The Fae ruled with a different kind of magic than the sorcery her father had used to claim the throne. It was a magic derived from nature. An elemental magic. Katerina remembered Alwyn telling her about it once, when she was a very small child. Even then, she could tell he was jealous.

When the kingdoms fell, the magic died along with them. Living only inside those scattered Fae who had managed to survive. Lost in the tide of history. Fading from rumor into myth. It had retreated from all but a select few places in the world. Laurelwood was one of those places.

And suddenly, she was standing right at its doorstep.

The group stood there awkwardly for a moment, lined up shoulder to shoulder, before Tanya took it upon herself to break the stony silence.

“So...this is Laurelwood, huh?” she asked with a forced brightness. One look at Cassiel’s scowl was enough to confirm. “It doesn’t look haunted.”

*Uh...yeah, it does, actually.*

“It isn’t haunted,” he muttered. “It’s cursed. There’s a difference.”

*Is there? Because they both sound pretty bad...*

“It isn’t haunted, and it isn’t cursed.” Dylan took the first brave step forward, motioning for the others to do the same. “That was over five hundred years ago, Cass. And even then, it was just a story told to scare away the Red Knight’s army. You’re really going to take it seriously?”

*I think I’m taking it seriously...*

“A curse is a curse.” Cassiel’s eyes flashed before he turned cautiously back to the forest. A quiet breeze was filtering now through the branches, making them whisper and dance. “I don’t care how long ago it was...it’s nothing to be taken lightly.”

It was impossible not to be affected by the quiet words. Perhaps it was the weight with which he said them. Or the unfathomable look in his eyes. Perhaps it was the forest itself. The fact that it seemed to be reaching out with its branches, beckoning them inside.

Either way, they had no choice.

“There is no curse,” Dylan repeated, soft but firm. “The villagers spread the rumor so that the royal forces would keep their distance—”

“What would you know?” Cassiel snapped. “You’ve been on this earth about five minutes, Dylan. All of you have. You know nothing of the way things were before.”

For the second time in two days, Katerina studied him curiously. Wondering at his actual age. Wondering how the witch had been able to sense it. From the outside, he only looked to be about twenty years old. But the eyes gave it away. You could see centuries in those eyes.

It was an uneasy standoff. While the two men had a habit of being at each other's throats, they were almost always in line. But on this solitary point, Dylan could see no compromise.

"I know that if we don't cut through the forest, we're going to have to climb back *up* Redfern Peak, before hiking back over Clever's Pass. And, lest we forget, that entire entryway was recently blocked by a giant avalanche." He paused for a moment, his eyes asking forgiveness where his pride could not. "This is the only way, Cass. You know it."

Without another word, he walked deliberately inside the tree line. The girls paused a moment, looking between the two, before they followed suit. Only Cassiel remained behind. His feet frozen to the same spot. Staring at the forest like Dylan was asking him to walk through fire.

Fortunately, a willingness to walk through fire seemed to be a prerequisite to their friendship.

"You coming?" Dylan called without looking back.

Cassiel lingered there another moment, shivering slightly as he gazed up at the trees. Then he pulled in a deep breath and stepped over the threshold, following the others inside.

*Curse or not, we're in it now. We're in it now...and there's no going back.*



YOU KNOW THAT FEELING when you can tell you're having a dream? The colors are too bright, the world is too floaty? You try and try to wake yourself up, and when you finally manage to open your eyes it's only to realize that you're still dreaming?

That's what Laurelwood was like. A dream within a dream.

They ghosted noiselessly across the forest floor, moving with the instinctual silence one slips into when you enter a library. Even Tanya, the resident chatterbox, had the sense to hold her tongue. Instead, they kept their eyes sharp and their hands at the ready. What they were looking for, Kate-

rina would never know. A nightmare come to life? An army of dead Fae? She was almost too afraid to wonder. But one look at Cassiel's face kept her moving, and it kept her quiet.

If he was this wound up himself, then she was on the verge of a heart attack. Jumping at every shadow. Startling at every sound.

Not that there were many. The place reminded her of a tomb.

"Why is it cursed?" she finally broke the silence to ask.

Dylan glanced back, looking wary, while Cassiel looked down at her in surprise.

"I'm sorry?"

"The curse." She cleared her throat, trying to make her voice sound stronger. "I know this place used to belong to the Fae, and they lost it in the Great War. So, who cursed it? And why?"

Dylan shot another uneasy look at Cassiel, turning back to the princess. "Kat, I'm not sure this is the best place to be discussing it," he began in a low undertone. "Maybe when we get to the other side—"

"Let her speak, Dylan," Cassiel interrupted, silencing him with a single look. "The girl deserves to know her own history. She is a Damaris, after all."

Katerina fought back a flinch at the way he said her name and gave him a tight smile instead. At least he was playing ball. And she couldn't stand the silence a second longer.

"This place did once belong to the Fae," he continued, glancing around at the trees. Even drenched in sunlight, there was something ominous about them. It was as though they were waiting for something. Trapped in a century long since passed, and unable to move on. "It was one of the last remaining strongholds during...what did you call it? The Great War?"

Katerina's face flushed as his lips twitched up in a faint smile.

"We learned to call it something else." What that was, he didn't say. He simply kept walking with a quiet sigh, his feet making not a single noise as they swept lightly over the ground. "In the final weeks of the war, the Fae army was divided. One was fighting in the north, another in the west, and the last was fighting right here in Laurelwood."

Suddenly, the eerie silence made sense. It might have happened half a thousand years ago, but Katerina shuddered to think of how many men

and women had lost their lives in this very forest. How many had taken their last breath, gazing up at the ancient trees. She pulled her cloak tighter around her with a little shiver.

“The Fae were fighting well but they were heavily outnumbered, and the Red Knight had driven them deep into the woods.” Cassiel was speaking in a flat monotone, as if part of him had been left back in time and all he was describing was playing out before his eyes. “Queen Eliea knew the cause was lost. The men had her troops surrounded and were closing in on all sides. In an act of supreme sacrifice, she went before the Red Knight and offered herself up instead. She surrendered her own life, that he might spare the lives of her people. The Red Knight agreed.”

At this point in the story, Cassiel dropped his eyes to the forest floor. At the same time, Katerina’s head shot up in confusion. She may not know as much about history as someone who had lived through it, but she knew a fair bit about the Red Knight. He was revered throughout the kingdom—her brother’s childhood hero. And he wasn’t exactly known for his merciful side.

“He did?” she asked in confusion. “He spared their lives?”

Cassiel’s face tightened with an emotion that Katerina would never understand. Not if she was given seven lifetimes to try. He was quiet for a moment, then he shook his head.

“No. He didn’t.”

“The Red Knight tricked the queen,” Dylan took over softly. “The second she surrendered her crown, he told his men to open fire. The Fae had already laid down their weapons. They were kneeling with their hands on their heads. It was a slaughter.”

Quiet as it was, the word seemed to ring out in the forest, bringing the very trees to life with it. They bristled their branches and whipped out their leaves. Rising and falling in the angry wind.

“And what happened to the queen?” Katerina asked in a whisper. By this point, she was almost afraid to ask. She could tell by the looks on their faces it wasn’t good. And knew enough about her own people to guess the ending for herself.

“The queen was killed as well.” Cassiel pushed through his dark reverie and continued walking at a brisk pace. “The Red Knight kept her alive long



enough to watch the massacre of her people, then he ran her through with his sword.”

*All in the name of the Damaris flag.*

“But with her dying breath, the queen cried out a wicked curse.” The fae’s eyes flashed with muted triumph, and Katerina suddenly remembered there was another chapter to the story. “The Red Knight had won the day, but he would not live to see another. And if a child of man were to ever again set foot in this forest...he would not leave it alive.”

*I had to ask.*

Katerina froze in place as a bone-chilling breeze rippled through the woods.

She remembered reading about the Red Knight with Kailas when they were kids. He had been a mighty warrior in the time of the Great War. The most distinguished and feared of all the king’s champions. His campaigns had become the stuff of legends, and even today there wasn’t a child in the five kingdoms who didn’t grow up hearing his name.

But as epic as his rise to fame had been, it ended just as quickly. No one really knew what had happened. He simply never came back from the Great War.

The platoon he’d been commanding in the east left a trail of wreckage and broken bodies behind them, but when the king sent a messenger with his congratulations, there was nothing left to find. The messenger returned with gifts still in hand, saying that the Red Knight and his entire army had vanished into thin air. Never to be seen or heard from again.

Of course, the kingdom was wild with speculation. Many suspected disease. One foul pestilence that had wiped out the entire platoon. Still others theorized the men had fallen prey to the harshness of the land. Caught in a flash flood or wiped out in a blizzard. The wilderness on the outer rim of the kingdom was a savage place. Such things were not unheard of.

But standing there in the middle of the forest, listening to Cassiel’s quiet words and the whisper of the trees, Katerina was suddenly certain of two things. The Red Knight and his men had never made it out of the forest. And she and her friends should never have come.

“So...what exactly are we doing here?”

It was impossible to keep the fear out of her voice, and Dylan cast her a quick glance before forcing a smile. “Oh, come on, you’re telling me you believe in curses now?”

Both Tanya and Cassiel shot him a doubtful look, while Katerina rolled her eyes.

“In the last month alone, I’ve tripped through a ghost, sidestepped a hag who was trying to buy one of my eyes, and saw you change into what can only be described as a giant dog. So, yeah. My perspective on all things supernatural has changed somewhat.”

Dylan scoffed, and opened his mouth to reply but was quickly interrupted.

“You don’t believe in curses?” Tanya asked curiously.

He hesitated a moment, then compartmentalized and resolutely shook his head. “When I’m standing in the middle of what’s alleged to be a ‘cursed forest,’ I choose not to believe in curses.”

Her eyes cooled with a sarcastic smile. “And when you’re not?”

There was a slight pause.

“I don’t believe in curses.”

But even as he said it, he cast a nervous glance around him and picked up the pace.

They continued like that for some time. Walking swiftly. Hardly talking. Hardly daring to look around. They had gotten to the forest a little after mid-day, and by Katerina’s reckoning the sun should be close to setting. But, strangely enough, it stayed high in the trees. Never faltering or slipping lower in the sky. Like they were stuck in some kind of time loop. Trapped at high noon.

After several hours in the same fashion, she finally quickened her pace and caught up with Dylan. “What time do you think it is?” she asked softly, not daring to raise her voice.

He glanced up at the sky, his usual indicator, studied it for a moment, then lowered his eyes with forced determination back to the trees. “It’s not that late. We haven’t been in here too long.”

Katerina’s throbbing legs and aching belly begged to differ, but she chose not to press the matter any further. Instead, she focused on another. “Are we going to set up camp in here? Because I’d really rather—”

"Kat, we're going to get in and out of here as quickly as possible. You have my word." His eyes flashed quickly around the trees before he muttered under his breath, "I don't want to be in here anymore than you do."

A hundred more questions rose to the tip of her tongue, but she kept them purposely to herself. He was stressed enough as it was. And she doubted he had any answers.

Instead, she slowed back down, then fell into step beside Cassiel.

He hadn't said much since telling the story of the dead queen. It seemed to have taken a bit out of him just to say it. But while he seemed just as uneasy to be trespassing in the woods as the others, in a strange way he also looked very much at home.

The way he moved with an effortless grace through the trees. The way he didn't leave tracks like the others. The ranger in Dylan might have accustomed himself to a life spent in nature, but it was the birthright of every fae. A fundamental belonging that ran in their very blood.

*I wonder where he actually comes from. Was it a place like this? A woodland realm? A fallen kingdom, lost during the rebellion? I wonder how many of them survived. I wonder if he can ever go home...*

"I can feel you thinking, princess." Cassiel shot her a look from the corner of his eye, never slowing his pace. "Can you do that someplace else?"

There was a hitch in her breathing as her eyes shot guiltily to his face. Then she saw that he was smiling, and she relaxed with a deep breath.

"Sorry, this is all just...kind of surreal."

For a moment, he actually softened. For a moment, that smile actually reached his eyes. But as quickly as it had cleared, his face grew abruptly sad.

"For me, too."

The words touched a place deep inside, and her heart broke as she gazed up at him once more. A king without a kingdom. A prince without a throne.

*All in the name of the Damaris flag.*

That was the moment that all her questions vanished. That was the moment when the words died forever on the tip of her tongue. She had no right to ask them. She had no right to be speaking to him at all. The history books had been written. The die had been cast. And Katerina Damaris certainly had no right to wonder about this lovely fae's ancestral home.

But the world outside the castle was nothing like what she thought it would be. At every turn, there was a surprise. And all its wonders and eccentricities never ceased to amaze her.

“I don’t hate you,” Cassiel said quietly.

Breaking through the silence. Answering a question she couldn’t bring herself to ask.

Katerina could swear her heart stopped beating as she stared up at him in surprise. It didn’t look as though he was lying. But she didn’t see how it could possibly be true. She tried several times to speak. She tried to understand where that kind of quiet compassion could have possibly come from.

In the end, she was at a complete loss.

“You can.” Her voice was barely louder than a whisper. “I remember the look on your face when you found out I was a Damaris, but I didn’t fully understand it until now. You have a right to hate me, Cass. Especially you. Especially here—”

“You can’t take the blame, Katerina. And you can’t take credit.” His eyes softened again as they looked her up and down. “You weren’t even born.”

She held his eyes for only a moment, then bowed her head.

“But it was my family—”

“The same family who’s hunting you down? The same family who tried to kill you?” A look of sudden comradery flashed across Cassiel’s face, and his lips curved up in an ironic smile. “There’s a chance the two of us have more in common than you think.”

Katerina blinked. Looked at the ground. Then blinked again. Her emotional threshold had been reached. A second later, the sarcasm kicked in. She gazed up at him with wide, entreating eyes.

“Did we just become best friends?”

“Seven hells.” The fae rolled his eyes and quickened his pace, shooting a look of pained exasperation towards the sky. “You mortals can be so clingy.”

“Is that a yes?”

His lips twitched up in a reluctant grin. The type of grin that only Dylan had ever been able to solicit. “Yes. We’re best friends. Closer than that, really. You have a special place in my heart.”

Katerina nodded wisely. “That’s what I thought. The signs are all there.”

The fae snorted under his breath. “I mean, I’m still going to kill you...”

Katerina laughed. A welcome relief after all the stress that had been bottling up. "Don't worry, I won't take it personally."

There was a beat of silence. Followed by a much longer pause. When Cassiel finally glanced down at her, he looked surprised. As if he'd completely forgotten she was there. "What?"

She hesitated, staring back in confusion. "What, what?"

Cassiel shook his head. "You won't take *what* personally?"

Her smile faltered for a second, and a tiny frown creased her forehead. "You said you were going to kill me...I said I wouldn't take it personally."

The fae looked at her with blank, vacant eyes. "...kill you?"

A sudden chill raised the hair on the back of her neck. She opened her mouth to respond, but before she could say a word Dylan raised his hand and the entire group came to an abrupt stop.

"Hang on... just everyone wait a second."

She stared at Cassiel for a second more, then hurried up to the front of the line to see what had happened. It only took a moment to forget the entire exchange, but without seeming to realize it she circled around to Dylan's other side, putting a casual barrier between herself and the fae. Like a child who shied instinctively away from the heat of a flame.

Dylan was frowning to himself as he stared out at the trail in front of them. His arms were folded across his chest and an uncharacteristically puzzled look was troubling his handsome face.

"This doesn't make any sense," he murmured, speaking to no one in particular. "I know that we've passed this creek already...but we've been heading due north."

Katerina glanced back and forth between his eyes and the water, while Tanya shifted uneasily on her feet.

"There's also the fact that we've been walking for the last six hours, but the sun's still hanging directly above us in the sky," she ventured tentatively. "Are we going to talk about that?"

Dylan said nothing, but his frown deepened as he stared out at the trees. It was true that the forest looked exactly as it had when they'd stepped into it, half a day earlier. If Katerina didn't know better, she'd swear not a moment of time had passed at all.

“Cass?” he called quietly. “I don’t...” He trailed off, staring once again at the creek. “We’ve seen this before, haven’t we? This is the same crossing as before?”

Cassiel didn’t answer. The wind picked up in the trees.

“I don’t like this,” Tanya murmured, one hand drifting instinctually to her blade. “I have a bad feeling about this...”

“Dylan?” Katerina took a step closer, tripping slightly as a gnarled tree branch caught on her dress. “Can we just turn back? Is it too late to go back?”

At this point, she’d be willing to risk another avalanche. Anything was better than staying here another second, in the endless sea of sunlit trees.

Dylan opened his mouth to reply but closed it a second later. His sky-blue eyes swept the woods in front of them, and his heart quickened in his chest. A feeling of intense claustrophobia was settling in quick. A kind of foreboding panic, rising swiftly to the surface.

*“Dylan.”*

Katerina reached out to grab his sleeve, but a branch caught her dress again. She looked down in surprise to see the same knotted piece of wood she’d just tripped over, tangled once more in the fabric. For a second, she didn’t know what to say. It didn’t make any sense.

Then the branch moved.

“DYLAN!”

He jumped around in surprise, just in time to get knocked to the forest floor. He landed hard on his back, spat up a mouthful of blood, then stared up in shock at the trees.

No longer were they shining innocently in the sun. It was as if the entire forest had come to life. As if the trees themselves had taken up arms against them. No sooner had Dylan pushed to his feet than a root popped out of the ground right behind him, wrapping tightly around his leg.

“Holy crap!” he gasped, trying desperately to keep his balance. “CASS!”

But the others were having problems of their own. Tanya leapt forward with her dagger, hacking away at the offending root, but the second the blade touched wood she flew back with a scream. A knotted branch of redwood had twisted violently in her hair. Katerina tried to grab her, but no

sooner had she lifted her arm than the very ground she was standing on gave way.

She fell to her knees with a shriek, staring down in terror as she began sinking slowly into the earth. Like quicksand, the ground came up to meet her. Engulfing her feet. Creeping up her legs.

“Dylan!” she screamed again, reaching desperately for anything she could use to pull herself out. She was buried up to the thigh now. And it was climbing ever higher. “Dy—”

A sharp branch whipped across her face, cutting off her scream and filling her mouth with blood. She choked and gasped, trying desperately to pull in a breath as she sank up to her waist.

“CASS!” Dylan yelled again, still unable to free himself. Instead of being swallowed by the earth, it was as if the tree itself was trying to strangle him. Another three branches had wrapped around his body, and a fourth was snaking its way around his neck. “CASSIEL!”

It was only then the princess realized that one member of their party was suspiciously missing. It was only then she realized the forest was hardly their only problem.

*Cass?*

The fae was standing perfectly still. Without a shred of emotion. Without an ounce of self-awareness. Without a single indication he noticed that the world was coming to an end.

When he heard Dylan calling, he slowly lifted his head. With eyes as black as night.

*Oh crap.*

Katerina sucked in a quick breath, her entire body recoiling in terror as the ground continued to swallow her whole. For a moment, she was simply speechless. Then she and Dylan locked eyes.

“Still don’t believe in curses?”



## Chapter 11

“Cass?”

Dylan paled in terror as his friend gazed back at him, not a trace of recognition on his face. For a moment he cocked his head, almost as though he was considering, then he swept across the forest floor, pulling out his blade as he went.

“Cass, *wait!*” Dylan scrambled back as far as the roots would let him, but it was getting increasingly difficult to move. By now, they had wrapped around his waist and both legs, with a curled hook circling slowly around his neck. “Snap out of it, man! You don’t want to do this!”

But it was like the fae couldn’t even hear him. He raised the blade above his head with deadly precision, hardly batting an eye as it swung back down to earth.

“*CASS!*”

Dylan twisted in such a way that, instead of decapitating him, as the stroke was clearly meant to, it severed the root twisting around his neck. He gulped in a huge gasp of air, then reached blindly for his own blade, bringing it up just in time to counter the other.

“Wake up!” he cried in between parries. “Cass, it’s *me!* What the heck are you doing?!”

There was a sharp cry as the fae’s blade stabbed deep into his shoulder. Katerina threw her body towards him, desperate to help, then let out a shrill scream as she continued sinking slowly into the forest floor. It was enveloping her cloak, her dress, creeping its way up to her neck.

It looked like the game was over.

Dylan was breathless and bleeding. Katerina was just seconds from being buried alive. But in that very moment, just when it seemed like all hope was lost, a blur of color streaked through the air.

...as Tanya Oberon threw herself onto Cassiel’s back.



“You’ve got to rein it in, dude!” she panted, trying her best to keep out of reach as he struggled to shake her. “We’ve all fantasized about stabbing Dylan but do it on your own time!”

They thrashed around together, spinning in wild circles on the forest floor.

“Seriously?!” Dylan took the moment of reprieve to start slicing away at the roots still binding him. They splintered apart, one by one. “You think this is a joke?!”

“It’s a defense mechanism,” she hissed through gritted teeth, wrapping her arm around Cassiel’s neck in a chokehold and pulling with all her might. “And you’re welcome, by the way.”

He wouldn’t have to wait long to return the favor. The second he’d cut the last branch free, Cassiel caught hold of Tanya’s arm and flipped her onto the ground. All the air rushed out of her body upon impact, and her eyes fluttered open and shut as she stared up at him. Dazed and disoriented. Paralyzed with pain. Waiting for that deadly blade of his to do its work. He’d just raised it over his head once more, when Dylan came out of nowhere, tackling him to the ground.

“Get the princess!” he shouted to Tanya, kicking the knife out of Cassiel’s hand. “Get her out of here! Run and don’t look back!”

Tanya picked herself up off the ground with a whimper of pain, stumbling over her own broken leg as she hobbled her way to Katerina. She reached her just as the princess’ head was slipping under the roiling ground. All that remained was a single hand, stretching up desperately towards the sky. The shifter grabbed it and pulled for all her worth, leveraging her entire body against the ground until slowly, inch by inch, she began to pull the princess free.

Katerina let out a piercing scream when her head broke the surface. A second later she was dragging herself across the ground, spitting out mouthfuls of dirt and gasping for air.

But that’s when the entire scene shifted dramatically.

The sound caught Cassiel’s attention, and there was a sudden pause in the fight. He glanced over his shoulder, looking at her in surprise before he left Dylan abruptly behind. Swiftly closing the distance between them. His pitch-black eyes fixed squarely on her face.

That's when she realized something very important. Dylan wasn't the primary target.

She was.

Every ounce of color drained from her face as she staggered weakly to her feet. For a split second, she considered running away. Then she remembered who she was dealing with and she simply froze, staring in absolute horror at his vacant face.

She couldn't outrun him. She couldn't fight him. There was nothing to be done.

"Cass..." she whispered, "this is the curse. The queen's curse. You have to fight it."

But deep down, she knew it was no use. If he didn't recognize Dylan, he wasn't going to recognize her. And he certainly wasn't going to hesitate a moment before taking her life.

Then again, there was a certain ranger hell-bent on making sure that didn't happen.

"Kat—RUN!"

He flew across the clearing and threw himself upon Cassiel once more, taking advantage of the fae's momentary distraction to kick out his legs and send them both falling to the ground. For most anyone else the impact would have been enough to stop the fight, but Cassiel was a dangerous enemy to have. Even more so because, while he was aiming to kill, Dylan didn't want to hurt him.

"Please," he panted, "stay down."

His arms wrapped around Cassiel's chest at two strategic points, then he pulled as gently as possible. There was a sickening *crunch* and Cassiel let out a gasp of pain, bowing his head to the forest floor. A pool of blood stained his shirt as all the old wounds from the avalanche opened up once more, but while the pain must have been excruciating it wasn't enough to stop him.

With a feral cry, he pushed to his feet. His eyes still locked on Katerina. His entire body still straining to reach its target. When Dylan tried to grab him, he whirled around and broke the ranger's nose. When Katerina stumbled back in retreat, he took off in full pursuit.

That's when the paralysis broke, and she started sprinting for real.

*Please, let him fall! Please, let something happen!*

In hindsight, it was only thanks adrenaline that she was able to hold out as long as she was. Cassiel was fast as lightning, and moved through the trees with a natural grace. She was still battling mild oxygen deprivation and the underbrush was rising up to fight her at every step.

She let out a breathless cry as the entire forest stretched out to grab her. Latching onto her dress, whipping across her face, tangling in her long crimson hair. There was a noise behind her and she threw a panicked glance over her shoulder, to see that Cassiel was gaining fast. Dylan and Tanya were in hot pursuit, but they were fighting off the forest the same as she was, tearing their way forward as vines and branches tore and slashed at their skin.

For a moment, she thought it was all over. Then a tortured cry made her look back again.

Cassiel had stopped dead in his tracks and was clutching tightly at his shoulder. A second later, his fingers streamed over with blood. It took Katerina a beat to figure out what had happened. It took her a space to see the sharpened tent peg sticking out of his flesh.

"I'm sorry!" Dylan yelled as he raced towards him.

Whether he was apologizing to Katerina for not getting there sooner or to his best friend for impaling him with a camping implement, she didn't know. At this point she didn't care. A fleeting glance was all she needed. The next second, she was tearing once more through the trees.

The battle that raged on behind her was one for the ages, but it was one she would never see. Cassiel ripped the tent peg out of his arm and whirled around with a look of pure murder, but Dylan was armed with three more. They collided in the middle of the forest, yelling and cursing as they crashed together again and again. One trying to kill. The other trying merely to subdue.

Katerina did her best to put it from her mind. She tuned out the violence and the screaming and kept her eyes fixed on the horizon. If she stopped now, she was dead. If she kept going, she was most likely dead. But either way, she had to keep moving. It was her only chance.

The sound of light footsteps echoed suddenly over her shoulder and she spun around with a gasp of fright, only to see Tanya running full-speed behind her.

“It’s okay!” she panted. “It’s just me!”

It may have just been her, but it was most certainly *not* okay. How the girl was managing to sprint with a broken leg, Katerina would never know. She could only assume it was the same kind of adrenaline, but that could only sustain them for so long. Already, both girls were beginning to slow down, and the sound of the men’s fight was getting closer. Time was running out.

“It’s NOT going to be okay!” she gasped back. “It’s the freakin’ CURSE! ‘*And if a child of man were to ever again set foot in this forest—he would not leave it alive.*’ How do we fight against that?!”

Tanya cast a quick look behind her and paled in abject fear. But when she looked forward again, her face was set with a hard determination. “Well, I see two loopholes. First of all, *she* most certainly will be leaving the forest.” With a burst of speed, she rushed forward and grabbed the edge of Katerina’s cloak. “And we won’t be doing it on foot...”

Before Katerina could wonder what she meant the air around her exploded on all sides, and she was jerked suddenly off the ground. The reflexive scream died in her throat as she looked wildly around, trying to understand what had happened. Trying to make sense of the fact that the girl she had just been talking to had sprouted giant, birdlike wings and was lifting them both into the sky.

...right out of Cassiel’s deadly hands.

“*Tanya?!*”

Her voice was choppy and shrill. Torn between sheer astonishment and a complete and utter breakdown. She glanced only once at the ground below them, just long enough to see Cassiel’s burning eyes, before she turned her face once more towards the heavens.

The forest might have been cursed, an enchanted sunlit circle in every direction, but they were going up. Straight through the center of the bewitched trees. Towards the clear, night sky.

But that didn’t mean the forest was going down without a fight.

A sharp sting sliced across Katerina's face, followed by a warm rush of blood as the branches of the nearest tree reached out to grab them. A second later a twisted vine wrapped around her ankle, dragging her back towards the earth.

"Cut it off!" Tanya cried, but she wasn't having much better luck.

The higher they flew, the harder the woods were fighting to stop them. And, judging by the shifter's fierce look of concentration and the beads of sweat running down her face, she couldn't sustain the flight much longer. Curse or not.

"I got it!" Katerina grabbed the knife out of her friend's belt and slashed wildly at the branches, doing her best to fend them off. "Just keep going!"

To Tanya's credit, she certainly tried. Her wings pumped powerfully through the air, but they were losing momentum and the trees were closing in on every side. After only a few seconds, the knife was knocked clean out of Katerina's hand. A moment later, a heavy branch struck Tanya across the back of the head. They dropped down a few feet, tilting dizzily, then another branch wrapped suddenly around the princess' waist, jerking her violently through the sky.

There was a painful gasp. Followed by a rush of air. Then all was quiet.

Time seemed to move in slow motion as she slipped from Tanya's hands. The branch disappeared, and her hair billowed up around her as she started to fall. There was a scream from somewhere in the distance, a very human scream, but she didn't know whose it was.

Then everything went black.



IT TOOK KATERINA A long time to realize she was awake. Even after her eyes were open. Even after she'd been staring at the ceiling. It took her a long time to realize her head was on a pillow, and her body was on a mattress, and she was in a *bed* for the first time in what felt like a very long time.

Things came back slowly. Lighting her brain in little flashes. Then fading back into a fog.

*Get up. You need to get up.*

A stabbing pain shot through her body as she tried to sit up, followed immediately after by the strangest feeling of weightlessness. Her head spun, and she threw out her arms for balance, only to realize that one of them was bandaged. Along with her wrist. Along with her foot.

*What the hell?*

Then, all at once, the memories came rushing back. The queen's curse. The forest coming to life. The desperate flight towards the sky, and then...falling. She couldn't remember anything past that. Just the sensation of falling, then the whole world went dark.

*And I wasn't the only one...*

With a painful gasp, Katerina's feet hit the floor. She looked up, only to discover that all three of her friends were lying in beds next to hers. It was morning, and they appeared to be in an infirmary of some kind. An oddly pleasant-looking room, considering the circumstances, with walls of creamy white stone that opened up to a full window overlooking a picturesque little village just beyond.

But it wasn't the *where* that concerned her. It was the *who*, the *how*, and the *why*.

After casting a frantic look around to make sure the four of them were alone, she limped hastily across the smooth stone to check on the others. Her heart froze in her chest with each one, staring down at their tranquil faces, before it slowly started beating once again.

They were alive. All of them. Battered, bloodied, and broken in more ways than one could count, but alive. The men, especially, looked somewhat worse for wear.

In his quest not to seriously injure his friend, Dylan had been deeply injured himself. There wasn't an inch of his skin that didn't bear testament to the savage attack, and even though he was lost in a deep sleep Katerina could tell he was in pain. It wasn't a good idea to fight a fae on the best of days. Let alone a fae prince. Let alone a fae prince who had been placed under an evil spell.

And on that note...

Katerina crept back to the side of Cassiel's bed, staring down at him with a suspended sort of fear. She'd gotten close enough to make sure he was still breathing, but her courage failed after that and she retreated to the

others. But now was no time to be afraid. If he was truly still cursed it was better she find out as quickly as possible, so she could protect the others.

With shaking fingers, she reached out as delicately as she could and pulled back his eyelids. A wave of profound relief swept through her entire body, calming her like a drug. The bewitched obsidian was gone, and they were back to their usual sparkling brown.

Then those eyes shot right to her face, and she leapt back with a shriek. She wasn't the only one.

Cassiel bolted straight up with a gasp, clutching at his neck with a belated sort of panic, like a part of him was still stuck in the fight. A rush of pain tightened his eyes, followed by a rush of disorientation, followed by a rush of fear as he looked around and didn't recognize his surroundings.

"Cass, just calm—"

But there was no calming down. A second later he jumped out of bed, only to realize he wasn't wearing any pants. He pulled a sheet around his waist and turned to Katerina, pale with shock, but before she could say a word to reassure him a frantic question burst from his lips.

"Where's Tanya?"

She was surprised. The entire world had fallen down around them, and the first thing he did was ask about Tanya? She stared at him for a second, still worried he might not be quite sane, then pointed quickly to the bed behind her. The bed where the beautiful shifter was still fast asleep.

Of course, she didn't stay that way for long.

"Wake up." He shook her roughly, far too roughly considering her fragile state. Katerina watched with wide eyes as her little head shook back and forth, spilling her cinnamon hair across the pillow, but before she could stop him Cassiel shook her again. "Wake up. Open your eyes."

"*Cass.*"

The princess reached out to grab his arm, but a second before she could touch him it actually worked. There was a soft hitch in breathing as Tanya's eyes fluttered open and shut. They took a second to focus before she slowly came around, gazing up at both of them in the soft light. "...you still possessed?"

Cassiel's entire face lit up with a breathtaking smile as he reached down without thinking and stroked back her hair. Considering his initial show of

force, there was something profoundly delicate in the way he was handling her now, in the way he knelt tentatively beside her bed. "You're all right." The words were more to reassure himself than anyone else, but they had a remarkably soothing effect all the same. "I didn't...you're alive."

"Despite your best efforts," Tanya muttered, but she pushed up on her arms with a grin. A second later, the grin faded as she carefully examined his face. "What all do you remember?"

He froze for a moment, his beautiful face growing deathly still as he tried to search back through the haze. A second later, those sparkling eyes came up blank. "Not much. Just...pieces."

She nodded slowly. It was coming back to her the same way. In fragmented little shards. But one thing had stuck in Cassiel's memory. It didn't look like he'd ever be able to forget.

"You had wings..." he said slowly, trying to put it to words. "I was trying to—" His face tensed at the thought before clearing in pure astonishment. "...but you flew into the air."

Katerina's heart quickened as the image flashed in her mind. The way Tanya had taken flight a second before he could catch her. The way she'd risen gracefully into the air.

A strange emotion danced across Cassiel's face as he stared down at her in wonder.

"You looked like an angel."

This time, Katerina actually took a step back. Her eyebrows lifted slowly, and she bit down on her lip to restrain a smile. *Okay, is this the blood loss talking or what?*

Tanya looked just as surprised as she was, but secretly, the princess could have sworn she was also a little bit pleased. She hid it expertly, of course. Cloaking it in a heavy veil of sarcasm as she pushed up to a sitting position with a dismissive roll of her eyes. "What?" she blushed. "You can't be the only one."

Before he could answer, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and pushed lightly to her feet. Big mistake. The second she was vertical, she swayed slightly and reached back for the mattress. Cassiel leapt forward immediately to catch her. Bigger mistake. No sooner had he raised his arms



than a fresh wave of blood spilled over his chest and he doubled over in pain.

*"Hell bounds!"* he cursed in surprise, staring down at his shirt. "I don't...what happened?"

The girls exchanged a quick look before rushing forward to help. Despite his fervent protests they took him by either arm, leading him slowly back to bed. With Tanya, his refusals were surprisingly reserved. With Katerina—not so much.

"For bloody sake, princess. I do not consent." He twisted away with a vicious glare, only to get hit immediately upside the head.

"Just shut up and lie down already." Katerina pushed him delicately onto the mattress, taking extra care as she propped a pillow beneath his head. "I think you've threatened us all quite enough."

It didn't matter what age they were, what social standing, or even what species. One thing was true across the board: men made the worst patients.

He opened his mouth to refuse, then another wave of pain swept over him and he relented with an adorable scowl. Folding his arms petulantly across his chest, while his body relaxed in utter relief. But while her words were meant to be teasing, they hit a little too close to home. Triggering things his subconscious had buried. Memories that had been lost in the spell.

The scowl faded, and the arms came down as bits and pieces started to come back. The transformation played out quickly on his face, like watching a nightmare come to life. For a split-second, he froze perfectly still. Then his eyes shot up to Katerina, shining with unspeakable fear.

"Dylan," he whispered. "Please tell me—"

"I'm alive," a sudden voice interrupted them. "No thanks to you."

Katerina whirled around to see Dylan leaning against the wall. Even looking like he'd been recently dropped off a cliff, the man still managed to smile. His arms were folded casually across his chest, and his eyes twinkled as they swept over the three shell-shocked friends.

"Dylan!"

Without stopping to think, Katerina launched herself across the room as fast as her bandaged leg would go and threw herself into his arms. He staggered back a step, but held onto her fiercely, burying his face in her hair

with a hidden smile. A second later, the two of them staggered back again as Tanya added onto their huddle, throwing her tiny arms around the pair of them.

Even Cassiel tried to push to his feet, but at that point Dylan detached himself from the others and was quick to stop him, easing him back down with brotherly concern.

“Careful,” he chided gently. “It’ll be no fun screaming at you if you’re already passed out from the pain...”

The two men locked eyes, and a truly indescribable look passed between them. One that encompassed all those things they’d never be able to say. The women stared on in fascination, but a second later it was like it had never happened. They were back to their usual selves once again.

“I told you the forest was cursed.”

Cassiel lifted his shoulder in a would-be shrug as Dylan stared down with a cool glare.

“You *didn’t* tell me you’d turn into a homicidal zombie the second we stepped inside, though.”

There was a guilty pause, then the fae’s eyes dropped down to the bedspread. “Yeah...that was a surprise to me, too.”

A medley of both extreme amusement and exasperation flickered across Dylan’s face, but before he could open his mouth to respond the door opened, and the four friends leapt back of one accord—huddled closely together as they braced themselves for whatever was to come.

Fortunately, it was nothing more than the world’s friendliest doctor.

“Oh, my heavens!” He almost dropped his pen and clipboard as he stared up at them in shock. “You’re awake—all of you! I didn’t think that would happen for quite some time!”

“We’re just full of surprises.” Dylan stepped forward with a tight smile, casually shielding the others from view as he looked the doctor up and down. “I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ve met...”

The man stared at him for a second more, remembering his manners all at once.

“Of course. You must have thousand questions.” He grasped Dylan’s hand without a second’s pause, shaking it profusely. “My name is Tobias Matlock. I’m the resident doctor here in Vale. You were brought in late last

night for treatment. Some rather serious injuries between the lot of you, but don't worry, you're all going to be just fine."

"Vale?"

Dylan pulled back in surprise. Apparently, they were much farther off course than he'd originally thought. His eyes flickered automatically out the window before returning to the doctor with an instinctual unease. It wasn't in his nature to rely upon the kindness of strangers, and he didn't quite know what to make of this one now.

Katerina, on the other hand, couldn't be more grateful.

"We really can't thank you enough." She limped forward with a smile, pushing past Dylan despite his continual efforts to shield her from view. "*All* of us," she added pointedly, elbowing him discreetly in the ribs. "If it weren't for you, there's a good chance we could have died out there."

There was an awkward beat of silence, then the others took their cue. Filling the air with half-hearted murmurs of gratitude, while taking great care to avoid the doctor's eyes. After another elbow to the ribs even Dylan joined in, though he continued to study the doctor cautiously.

"I'm sorry, but I'm having trouble understanding..." Dylan trailed off, searching the man's face for any hint of a lie. "Where exactly did you find us—"

"Perhaps I can answer that question."

The door pushed open again, and a group of five tall men strode into the infirmary. This time, the gang's reaction was much more difficult to hide. Katerina fell back into Dylan's shadow, while his hand drifted instinctively to his blade. Tanya's eyes darted swiftly to the exits, forming a dozen contingency plans on the fly, while Cassiel pushed slowly to his feet.

It was a defensive posture that didn't lessen in the slightest, even when the man in the middle stepped forward with a reassuring smile.

"Henry Chambers, acting magistrate of Vale." He wasn't exactly friendly, but at least he was courteous. And his eyes shone with open curiosity as he looked the youngsters up and down. "It was my men and I who found you on the edge of the forest; we were coming back from a hunt."

Dylan never blinked, staring at the man with a carefully practiced calm. "You hunt in Laurelwood Forest?"

It was a test. One they'd had the unfortunate experience of learning firsthand. But the man didn't falter for an instant. He appeared to be telling the truth.

"No, none of the villagers go into the forest," he replied evenly. "But we hunt in the glen that borders the northwestern edge."

"A lot of pheasants this time of year," one of the men standing behind him volunteered.

"Yes, a lot of pheasants." Henry's eyes twinkled as he continued to look the travelers up and down. "Like I said, no one goes into the forest—for the simple reason that no one who's tried has ever come back out. Which is why we were so surprised to have found the four of you."

A little chill crept up Katerina's spine, and she inched even closer to Dylan. His eyes were fixed on the man, but he said nothing. Waiting for him to make the first move.

"Rather, we found the two of you," Henry clarified, gesturing to the girls. "This one was unconscious, and *this* one," he jerked his fingers towards Katerina, "kept screaming that there were two more inside. Wouldn't let us touch her until we promised to go and look."

The princess blushed. She didn't remember any of that. But the words had a profound effect on Dylan. For the first time since the door had opened he lowered his defenses, staring at the man with something close to respect.

"And you did?" he asked, unable to keep the surprise from his voice. "You went inside?"

The man met his gaze for a moment before his face softened as well. While the gang was in their late-teens—with one immortal exception—he and his men were close to forty. It was impossible not to feel protective, even slightly paternal, at the sight of injured youngsters travelling on their own.

"You're just a kid," he said quietly before becoming abruptly gruff. "At any rate, it isn't often that we get strangers up in these parts. The last thing we'd want to be is...inhospitable."

His tone ended the discussion, at least for now. With a quick gesture of his hand, the rest of his men emptied the room. He made to follow them, pausing only to give instructions to the doctor.

“Let me know what they need, and I’ll send up supplies.” His eyes flickered over the blood-stained sheets before tightening around the edges. “In the meantime, make sure they get lots of rest.”

At this point Cassiel and Dylan shared a quick glance, after which Dylan stepped quickly forward. A charming smile was painted across his face. One that very rarely failed to hit its mark. “Thank you for that. But it won’t be necessary.” He cocked his head towards the others in a seemingly casual gesture. “It’s actually time we get back on the road.”

Both Henry and the doctor turned to him with matching looks of amusement but said not a word. Instead, they simply watched as he stammered on, sounding less and less credible all the while.

“Seriously, we’re just fine.” To prove his point he clapped Cassiel cheerfully on the shoulder, ignoring the fresh wave of blood that followed. “If we could just give back our clothes—”

“You’re fine, are you?” Henry’s eyes twinkled as he stepped forward again, staring at the boy in front of him with growing fondness. “In that case, I wish you well.”

He offered out his hand for a cordial farewell, and Dylan glanced down in surprise, pleased he was relenting so quickly. His body relaxed, and he flashed a quick smile, nodding his gratitude.

Then he made the extreme mistake of shaking the man’s hand.

To start, Henry Chambers didn’t shake. He pulled. And the second he did, the newly stitched hole in Dylan’s shoulder reopened with a vengeance. He jerked forward with a gasp, unable to hide it, then bowed his head, refusing to meet the man’s eyes.

Everyone else in the room froze as Henry gently released Dylan’s hand, staring down at him in a way that convinced Katerina he had sons. After a moment’s pause he cleared his throat softly, a silent demand that the young man meet his gaze.

“What’s your name?”

*Riley.* Katerina had heard the alias before. *Riley O’Keathe.*

“Dylan.”

For the second time the room froze in surprise. But Henry flashed him a genuine smile.

“Get some rest, Dylan. We’ll see you for dinner tonight.”

The ranger said not a word as the man swept out of the room. The doctor was soon to follow, and only a moment later the four friends were left alone. No one said anything for a moment, they merely stood there in an increasingly comical silence. Then Dylan tilted his chin with an admirable air of nonchalance and headed back to his bed.

“I decided we should stay.”

It was a testament to the delicate state of his ego that none of the others said a word to contest this. They merely climbed into their own beds, hiding secret smiles all the while.

*Sure.* Katerina pulled the blankets up to her face, covering her mischievous grin. *You decided.*



## Chapter 12

The gang didn't rest at all that day. Didn't sleep a wink. Instead, they spent every second strategizing. Mapping routes, patrolling the infirmary, and devising various methods of escape should their new hosts turn out to be less than hospitable.

At least, that was the plan. But then they accidentally fell asleep.

There was only so much abuse the human body could take. Only so much blood loss, trauma, and sheer exhaustion before it took matters into its own hands and lost consciousness. It was a full twelve hours before Katerina opened her eyes again. A full twelve hours on a mattress, with a pillow, in a heated room. Three things she half-thought she'd never experience again.

"Dylan?" she murmured automatically, pushing back her messy curls and gazing in sleepy disorientation around the room. "Are you here?"

The others were still out cold. All sprawled out in various poses of childlike fatigue on the beds. Cassiel had pulled the covers all the way over his face, Tanya had somehow twisted around herself like a pretzel, and Dylan? Well, Dylan had to be the cutest one of all.

Katerina pushed to her feet and tiptoed across the room with a little smile, gazing down at him with a feeling of tenderness she was having a hard time trying to control.

His hair was sprawled across the mattress like a messy halo, one shoe had been lost while the other was dangling from his ankle by nothing but a lace, and he was hugging a pillow to his chest like it was some kind of teddy bear, squeezing it occasionally tighter as he twitched in his sleep.

*Too. Cute. For. Words.*

For a moment, she simply stared. Then, without saying a word, she perched upon the edge of the mattress and brushed back a strand of his wild hair. His eyes snapped open the instant they touched, and his hand shot out to catch her wrist. She flashed a smile, then waited patiently.

Her new friends spooked easily. She was learning to adapt.

It took him a second to get his bearings before he slowly released her. He was just as thrown by their cushy surroundings as she was herself, and by the time he registered that it was beginning to grow dark outside he sat up on the mattress in alarm.

“What time is it?” His voice was scratchy, and his words were thick with sleep. Although he had yet to notice, he had not yet let go of the pillow.

The princess smiled even wider, reaching up again to run her fingers through his hair. “I think it’s coming up on around seven. There’s a giant clock in the town square, and you can see it from here. People are getting ready for dinner.”

He nodded quickly, then registered her touch for the first time. While he instinctively tensed, he didn’t pull away. Quite the contrary. His eyes flickered to hers with a curious little smile. “What’s this?”

She had no idea what was making her so bold. She had no idea what was making her feel this way at all—given the living hell they’d just been through. But, for the first time in what felt like ages, she was rested, well-fed, and felt some small degree of security. It left her mind free to wander onto different things. Like the man who occasionally kissed her with no explanation.

She flashed another grin but didn’t remove her hand. She rather liked touching his hair. The messy waves. The silky texture. It was the kind of hair that was just dying to be played with. “I don’t know,” she answered coyly, twirling a lock of it between her fingers. “Nothing.”

His lips parted uncertainly, but for once the great Dylan Aires didn’t know what to say. He simply sat there, staring back with a tentative smile, leaning subconsciously into her hand. They stayed that way for a long moment, and it looked like he was about to break the silence, when there was a faint rustling of sheets behind them as Cassiel unearthed himself from his nocturnal tomb.

“Seven hells.” The fae stretched his arms painfully, feeling the spot where the doctor had laced a series of silver stiches through his skin. “I could use a drink.”



Katerina retracted her hand immediately, and Dylan dropped his eyes with a grin. The moment was effectively ruined. But that didn't mean there wouldn't be plenty of others to come.

Hopefully.

"Dylan?"

The ranger twisted his head, glancing over with an amused smile at his friend. A friend who seemed blessed with the world's worst timing. "Yeah?"

"At some point in the woods...did you stab a tent peg through my arm?"

Katerina took that as her cue to leave. She pushed quickly to her feet, taking a step back as Dylan did the same. "You should probably—"

"Yeah, we're going to need to talk that one out."

There was an awkward moment as they both tried to walk past the other, mirroring each other's every move. Then Dylan lifted her by the shoulders and set her aside, giving her a little wink as he headed over to discuss with his friend the hazards of witchcraft and camping.

"Oh, that's fine. No one ask about how *I'm* doing."

Katerina turned around with a grin to see Tanya sitting up in the center of the bed. A small nest of blankets was circled around her, and despite the fact that they were safe, dry, and indoors for the first time in weeks, she was looking distinctly sorry for herself.

"Well good morning, sunshine." The princess perched on the edge of her bed with a little smile, wondering what could possibly be going on inside that crazy head. "Sleep well?"

"Too well," Tanya replied, stifling a shudder. "I dreamt we were all trapped in this cursed forest where I got bitch-slapped by a fern, then one of us went crazy and started trying to kill all the others." She looked up dryly as the room fell suddenly silent. "What? Too soon?"

In what turned out to be rather fortunate timing, there was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" Dylan called warily.

No sooner had he asked the question than it pushed open and a tiny, middle-aged woman bustled inside. In her arms, there was a stack of freshly laundered clothing. Clothing that looked very familiar, despite the uncharacteristic absence of blood.

“Your clothes,” she said with no preamble, setting them down on a chair. “And after you get dressed, Mr. Chambers requested the pleasure of your company at a feast in the town square. He wanted me to let you know we’re having pheasant. It’s already started, so no need to rush. Just come down whenever you’re ready. And let me know if there’s anything else you need.”

She left as quickly as she’d come, leaving the gang staring blankly at the clothes. It was quiet for a moment, then Tanya turned with a hopeful smile to the others.

“So, I know we were heading to Brookfield, but I have a better idea. Let’s stay here. *Forever.*”

Cassiel laughed quietly and moved forward to grab his shirt, tossing the shifter her cloak at the same time. “You have my vote. Dylan can build us a house at the edge of the village.”

“Wait,” Dylan slipped his leather jacket over his arms, “why do I have to build the house?”

“Because you stabbed me in the shoulder with a tent peg.”

“I thought we’d gotten past that—”

“*Guys.*” Katerina stood in the center of the room, fully dressed and feeling happier than she had in a long time. She waited until all eyes were on her, then cocked her head towards the door with a little smile. “Let’s go to a feast.”



IT MAY NOT HAVE BEEN a ‘feast’ by any royal standard to which she’d become accustomed, but Katerina couldn’t remember the last time she’d had so much fun. While she’d only been in exile for a little over a month, so much had happened that she’d almost forgotten what it felt like to relax, let her guard down, and simply enjoy herself in the company of good friends.

The gang ate, and drank, and laughed far into the night. The second the sun went down the villagers had lit a massive bonfire. Musicians wielding flutes, and guitars, and fiddles weaved their way seamlessly through the crowd—all chiming in with the same festive tune that looped in a continual chorus as the stars peeked down curiously through the clouds.

Henry Chambers—or just Henry, as he insisted on being called—turned out to be everything the four friends could have hoped to find in a host. He was as generous as he was engaging. As curious as he was kind. And no matter how many drinks they consumed or how late the conversation stretched into the night, he never pressed. Never asked a single question they wouldn't be able to answer. Never said or did anything to set them on guard. By the time the dinner portion of the evening was over, and the dancing had begun, Katerina looked over twice and saw Dylan laughing openly at something the man had said. No defenses. No resistance. No lies.

Considering everything they'd endured over the last few weeks, it felt like the perfect end to what had been an endlessly long day. The princess clutched her flagon of ale with both hands and leaned with a contented smile against Dylan's shoulder. Soaking in the atmosphere. Taking in every detail of the lively party. Every person. Every song. Committing them all to memory.

Vale was as unique in its remote location as it was in its diverse population. Just at a glance, the princess counted no fewer than twenty different species. All enjoying the same party. All living in a perfect state of coexistence. It was unlike anything she'd ever seen. A virtual poster for the benefits of supernatural integration. Dwarves building fires. Pixies garnishing plates. Shifters dolling out ale.

It was a living fairytale. Tucked away in the shadows of the mountains.

Of course, at every stage of the night, there had been several pairs of eyes staring right back.

The lively city rarely got any outside company, and although the magistrate might have been the model of discretion the presence of the four beautiful strangers—found along the edge of the mysterious forest—was enough to set the youthful population ablaze.

Katerina had almost forgotten what it was like to be in the company of other people their own age. The men looked at the women. The women looked at the men. But although the gang received many propositions throughout the night (some innocent, some with varying degrees of indecency), they turned down each and every one. Sticking close together at all times.

For once, it wasn't a fear-based reaction. It wasn't done in the context of watching each other's backs. Something had changed since that night after the storm. Something that had grown stronger with each passing day. A bond had been forged. The strength of which the four friends were only just becoming aware themselves.

"I'm not going to lie, Cass. I thought you'd go for her." Dylan nodded at the retreating back of a young woman who'd just asked the fae to dance. "Broken ribs or not. She was hot."

Katerina's spine stiffened, but at the same time Dylan wrapped his arm around her waist with a little wink. *He* didn't think so. He was only giving Cassiel a hard time.

But it seemed Cassiel couldn't care less. The man had an undeniable reputation with the ladies, but after a certain angelic transformation in the woods he only had eyes for one girl. A girl who had been conspicuously missing from the party for the last thirty minutes.

"Have you seen Tanya?" he asked, oblivious to the transparent timing of the words.

Katerina and Dylan exchanged a quick grin before he downed the rest of his ale. "She wandered off with a group of shifters a while ago—said she'd be right back."

The fae nodded distractedly, his eyes sweeping over the crowd before he pushed suddenly to his feet. "I'm getting another drink. You guys want one?"

"Absolutely," Dylan replied. Katerina shook her head.

The two of them watched him disappear, weaving his way through the crowd, before turning back to the fire. The musicians had struck up a slower tune now. A deliciously hypnotic melody that had the people of the village swaying in front of the flames.

"I still can't believe what happened," Katerina said quietly. Dylan glanced down curiously, and she stifled a quiet sigh. "I'm trying not to think about it. I mean, I'm trying to put it from my mind. But I still can't believe what all happened...back in the woods."

His arm tightened again as the two of them fell silent. Playing it back again and again as they stared with troubled eyes into the fire. It wasn't the kind of thing you could even begin to process. It wasn't the kind of thing

where you could hope to gain the mental upper hand. You simply had to wait for it to wash over you. Bit by bit. Piece by devastating piece.

“And all because of a curse.” Katerina’s eyes were wide with wonder as she stared into the flames. “One woman’s curse, five hundred years later—it did *all* that.”

“Not just any woman,” Dylan corrected gently. “A queen of the Fae. I can’t imagine a worse enemy to have. There isn’t a force in the world that could convince me to get in her path.”

“But that’s just what I don’t understand.” Katerina twisted around to face him. “It’s easy to see why the Fae used to be in power, but how could they have ever been defeated? I’ve seen Cassiel fight, and he would have been just one man in an army of thousands. The power of that queen’s curse? Half a millennium later? How could the five kingdoms have possibly fallen?”

Dylan stared at her for a long moment, then turned back to the fire with a quiet sigh. “Your ancestors used magic. Different magic than the Fae’s. Wizard magic.” His voice tightened slightly at the word. “There are few things more powerful and destructive in this world. It was so powerful, that once your father ascended to the throne he killed all the wizards as well.”

“All except one,” Cassiel interjected.

Katerina straightened up with a flush. She hadn’t heard him come back and hadn’t realized he’d been listening. She probably would have saved the question for another time. But the fae didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he seemed unnervingly interested as he settled down beside them, pausing only to hand Dylan a drink.

“One he kept as a slave to protect him. A royal pet.” His eyes glowed with sudden intensity as they fixed on the dancing flames. “Rumor has it that he’s still there, living in the castle.”

A dreadful sinking feeling filled the pit of the princess’ stomach. As if she’d swallowed a heavy stone. She’d often wondered, but never asked. Like so many things in her life.

“Alwyn,” she quietly confirmed. The fae’s eyes danced with a vengeful kind of hunger, and she stiffened defensively. “The man raised me as a child,

taught me everything he knew. He actually risked his life just to save mine, to get me safely out of the castle.”

Cassiel nodded casually, but Katerina had a terrible feeling that if they ever finally did get back to the castle and he met Alwyn, none of that would make the slightest bit of difference.

There was a beat of awkward silence, and Dylan cleared his throat. Then a head of cinnamon hair bobbed towards them, and they breathed a collective sigh of relief. A second later, Tanya plopped down beside them. Breathless and flushed. She wasted no time in stealing Dylan’s ale.

“Where have you been—”

Katerina started to ask, but Cassiel interrupted her with the far more obvious question.

“What happened to your hair?”

Together, the three of them leaned forward, staring with wide eyes. Tanya may have only been gone half an hour, but she’d come back an entirely new woman.

No longer did her silky hair fall in a shoulder-length bob, but it had been cut into a delightful array of sharp angles. The sides were shaved down incredibly short, while the top cascaded down her back in a series of jagged waves. There was no other word to describe it. It was badass.

She blushed a little under the weight of their staring but looked incredibly pleased. “I had to cut it pretty severely with my knife when I got stuck up in that tree.” No matter what she did, she couldn’t stop touching the sides. “One of the girls here helped me even it out.”

As she spoke, Katerina had a vague recollection of her being lifted into the air with a tree branch twisting through her hair. Come to think of it, things had looked pretty rough back in the infirmary. She’s written it off as sleep-deprivation and severe bed-head.

“So...what do you think?”

Tanya addressed the question to the whole group, but it was clear she was only looking for one person to answer. Cassiel’s eyes swept her up and down with a twinkling smile.

“I like it.”

She blushed again, running a hand nervously along the edge and trying very hard to act as though she didn't care. "I thought you preferred long nymph hair."

The fae shook his head, those bright eyes never leaving her face. "It looks nice. It suits you."

There was another awkward pause before Dylan pushed abruptly to his feet, pulling Katerina along with him. "I think we're going to...go be somewhere else."

Without another word the two of them vanished into the crowd, weaving their way, hand in hand, through the throng of dancing bodies. Katerina flitted along behind him with a grin, stealing occasional glances back over her shoulder at the two people sitting together on the bench.

"That was really smooth," she teased as soon as it was quiet enough to hear. They had left the party behind, and were walking along one of the moonlit trails that circled the edge of the city. "*I think we're going to go be somewhere else?* That's really the best you could do?"

"Give me a break," he grinned, stifling a theatric shudder. "I didn't want to see that."

"Why not?" Katerina circled around in front of him, pulling them both to a stop. "I think it's adorable. Although, I wouldn't have thought Tanya was really Cass' type."

Dylan rolled his eyes. "Cass doesn't really have a type beyond *woman*. But Tanya'd better be serious about it. She'd better not just be jerking him around."

The princess' eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Are you serious? You're actually worried *Cassiel* might be the one who gets hurt here? I would have said for sure it'd be the other way around."

Dylan considered it thoughtfully, then shook his head. "Cass is casual with women. That's his thing. There's nothing casual about the way he's looking at Tanya." He stuck his hands deep in his pockets, gazing back towards town. "So, she'd better be careful—that's all I'm saying."

Katerina let out a sparkling laugh, stepping deliberately in front of his gaze. "Or what?" she teased. "You're going to beat her up? Fight to avenge your slutty best friend's honor?"

“So, what if I am?” Dylan’s eyes twinkled as he pulled her suddenly closer, wrapping his arms around her waist. “Someone’s got to do it, and who’s going to stop me? *You?*”

The conversation suddenly escalated to a whole other level as they pressed up against each other. Standing just inches away. His head leaned down, bringing them even closer still, as she stretched instinctively up on her toes.

“I could stop you,” she whispered, barely breathing as her eyes flickered down to his lips. “I could stop you whenever I wanted.”

“Oh, yeah?” He slipped a finger under her chin, tilting up her face to his. “...try.”

Before she could say a word, before she could pull in a proper breath, they were kissing once again. His mouth closed over hers as her arms wrapped around his neck.

There was nothing tender about the way it happened this time. Nothing sweet, or shy, or soft. It was rough. And delicious. And completely overwhelming. All at the same time.

His fingers tangled fiercely in her hair as he lifted her clean off her feet, walking them both off the moonlit path and into the privacy of the trees. One they were there, he wasted absolutely no time untangling the ribbons in the back of her dress. It slipped loosely around her shoulders at the same time that she pulled off his shirt...at the same time that he pressed her up against the trunk of a tree, hitching her legs around his waist as his hands slid all the way up to her thighs.

“Is this okay?” he panted between kisses. She parted her lips to answer, and then his tongue was in her mouth, robbing her of all sense of control or reason. “I can stop—”

“No,” she breathed, closing her eyes as her head fell back against the tree, “don’t stop.”

The night sky was spinning around them. Her hair was full of smoke. Her eyes were full of stars. For a split second, she pulled back to look at him. Then her face lit up with a radiant smile. “I think I’m falling in love with you, Dylan.”



It should have been one of those perfect moments. It should have been one of the best nights of her life. Instead, a gust of cold air swept between them as she slid slowly down to her feet.

*...or not?*

There was really no describing the look on his face. She didn't know that anyone could fly through so many emotions so fast. First there was passion, then there was surprise, then there was a kind of longing she didn't understand. And he ended on...fear?

"Dylan?" She gazed up at him with wide eyes in the dark. The front of her dress was hanging dangerously loose, and she fought the sudden urge to cover up. "I'm sorry, should I not have..."

A flush of red hot humiliation colored her cheeks, as her eyes stung with forbidden tears. He had yet to say anything. In fact, he had yet to even move. He simply stared as if he had never really seen her before, unable to catch his breath.

The longer the silence went on, the more unbearable it became. After another moment the princess lifted her hands tentatively to his chest, feeling the pounding, uneven heartbeat below.

"I didn't mean anything by it," she whispered, too scared to take her eyes off his face. She had the strangest feeling that if she looked away, she might never see him again. "If we can just—"

He took a deliberate step back. Out of the reach of her hands.

"We should get back to the party."



## Chapter 13

**I** *think I'm falling in love with you...*  
*...we should get back to the party.*

Katerina was having trouble hearing anything beyond those words. She was having trouble not bursting into spontaneous tears every ten seconds as well, but that was a different story. She didn't remember the walk back to the party, only the careful barrier of distance that was between them. She didn't remember re-lacing her dress but she must have, because later she discovered that she'd cut her finger on one of the hooks. She didn't even remember what she'd said in response.

Words had failed her, but she must have nodded. Either that, or she was simply shaking so hard that he took it as an affirmative. He'd picked his shirt up off the ground, slipped it quickly over his head, then gestured awkwardly back to the road. She'd followed without a word. Floating. Numb.

It wasn't until they neared the bonfire that her senses started to come back to her. The sound of laughter and music broke through the ringing in her ears. The heat of the flames warmed her pale, frozen skin. She took a step to join the others, when he suddenly caught her by the hand.

"Katerina..."

For the first time, she realized that he looked just as lost as her. His beautiful eyes were wide and dilated, his fingers were trembling nervously against his coat, and from the way he kept glancing back down the trail it was as though he'd left a part of himself back in the forest. The second he'd gotten the nerve to speak, he'd trailed off again. Now he was simply standing there. Quiet as a grave.

Their eyes met for a fleeting moment, a moment that seemed to last forever and was gone in the blink of an eye—then the princess turned abruptly on her heel.

"We should get back to the party."

The others were still deeply engrossed in conversation when they returned. It wasn't like they were being too obvious about it, but there was an

intimacy in the way their heads bowed together under the guise of 'hearing each other over the music.' There was a little something extra in the way they smiled. Smiles that implied many, many more to come.

But they pulled apart quickly when Katerina and Dylan came back. Not so much because they were embarrassed, but because it was clear that something was wrong.

"Kat?"

Tanya sprang to her feet immediately, looping an arm around the princess' shoulder while casting a threatening look at Dylan over her back. Cassiel didn't stand but he tilted his head curiously to the side, gazing at his friend with a silent question. Dylan looked deliberately away.

"Are you okay?" Tanya asked in a hush, pulling Katerina down beside her on the bench and tilting her body in such a way that it was clear the men were not invited to the conversation. "What's wrong, what happened?"

A detached part of Katerina was surprised. The two girls had gotten quite close over the last few weeks, but not over anything like this. Not over anything normal. For a split second, she almost felt as though she was back at the castle. Talking with one of her childhood friends.

*Except that I'm not. Except that those friends are dead. These people don't know me.*

*And I clearly don't know them at all.*

"Nothing. I'm fine." Katerina wiped her face quickly, forcing an admirable smile as she reached out quickly and downed the closest flagon of ale. Tanya watched her with concern, and was about to try again, when the princess looked quickly over her shoulder and found an escape. "Mr. Chambers, this is a great party! Thank you so much for inviting us!"

Despite his insistence, 'Henry' was never going to take. The gang had been programmed with an instinctual deference to elders, and this man commanded more respect than most.

The man's eyes flickered with a quiet contentment over his subjects before turning back to the four friends with a smile. "I'm happy you decided to come. We don't get visitors very often in these parts, and I'm afraid you four have caused a bit of a stir."

As if to illustrate his point a group of giggling girls rushed past, pausing only to cast lusty stares at both Dylan and Cassiel, before vanishing quickly

back into the crowd. Under the present circumstances, it couldn't have been more awkward. Dylan dropped his eyes with a quiet sigh.

"We've arranged for some rooms to be prepared for you at the village tavern for the duration of your stay," Henry continued, oblivious to the sudden shift in tone. "It's close enough to the infirmary that the doctor can continue making daily check-ups, and once some of those broken bones start to heal—"

"Actually, we're going to be leaving in the morning."

The others turned to Katerina in surprise—both at the sentiment, and at the sudden air of authority. Even Henry knew to hold his tongue. But no one was more surprised than Dylan.

"Kat," he began uncertainly, "it might be better to wait a few days—"

"It's a generous offer, but we didn't come here by chance," she interrupted briskly. "We came here for a reason—not a party—and it's time we get back on the road."

She didn't know where it was coming from. The sudden practicality. The newfound air of calm. But as the townsfolk laughed and twirled obliviously in front of the fire she found herself clinging to it with both hands. They had stayed here long enough. It was time to leave.

"But, like I said...it's a very generous offer." She stood with a gracious smile, reaching out to shake Henry's hand. "Thank you again, for everything. I really can't say it enough."

He didn't try to shame her, like he did to Dylan. He didn't even try to change her mind. A flicker of genuine respect twinkled in his eyes as he shook her hand warmly. "Now that you know where to find us, we'll expect to be seeing you again."

She smiled again, then reached for the bench to gather her up cloak. The others watched her for a moment, still trying to keep up, then pushed to their feet and followed suit. Apparently, the decision had been made. And, apparently, she was now the person who was making them.

Only Dylan remained on the fence, a look of worry flickering in his eyes. He glanced once more towards the forest, as if he could see something the others could not, before turning with a forced smile to bid farewell to their generous host.

"Thanks again," he murmured, shaking the man's hand. "I appreciate it."

Henry's eyes twinkled once more as they flashed between the ranger and the princess. The hint of a smile curved the corners of his lips, but he said not a word. "So, where are you headed?"

Katerina expected Dylan to lie. Or at least, not be so open with the truth. But it seemed the night was full of surprises for everyone.

"North," he answered automatically. "To the Black Hills."

For a second, Henry's smile froze. He glanced at the others, like there was a chance they might be joking, before turning back to Dylan with a slight frown. "The Black Hills?"

Something in his tone made Katerina pause. The others stopped what they were doing and straightened up uneasily, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Yeah," Dylan said cautiously, studying the man's face. "Why?"

Henry glanced between them for another moment, shaking his head in honest surprise. "Well, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but a wildfire swept through the Black Hills about a week ago. Burned the whole area to the ground. There's nothing left."

Katerina didn't need to look at the others to understand the heavy significance of the words. She didn't need to hear the hushed profanities, or see the looks of despair, or watch the way Tanya hurled down her bag to know exactly what had happened, and exactly what it meant.

There was nothing left. Brookfield was gone.



"THIS IS UNBELIEVABLE!" Dylan cried. "Bloody unbelievable!"

While it had certainly seemed strange to Henry, given that their destination had recently been destroyed, the gang had chosen to leave Vale that evening. After hearing the news that their safe house had been destroyed, no one felt in the mood for a party. And, given the fact that the entire royal army was closing in from all sides, they didn't want to expose the lovely people of such a lovely town to any more danger than they already had.

Granted, that decision had left them standing in the middle of nowhere. With no place to go.

"I mean...the avalanche, the rockslide, the forest, the storm?!" Dylan threw up his hands to the sky, demanding answers when there were none to be had. "When will we catch a freakin' break?"

Tanya was just as enraged, but was keeping it to herself—furiously sharpening, then re-sharpening her blade on the edge of a stone. Cassiel had stayed very quiet—staring into the flames of their campfire, lost in troubled thought. Only Katerina was still on her feet. Standing a little off to the side as Dylan paced back and forth—ranting to the sky.

"I swear, if I'd known things would turn out this way, I would have spent more time with the witches at that damn festival. Stocking up on amulets and talismans for luck—"

"This isn't about luck," Katerina said quietly.

The others turned to her, and even Dylan stopped his pacing long enough to listen. She hadn't said a word since they'd left the village, but she'd been deep in thought. Trying to fit the pieces together. Trying to make sense in a world of chaos. She wasn't making much progress, but something about Dylan's words triggered an idea. Then illumination struck.

"You said it yourself." Her eyes danced with the light of the fire as she stared at each of them in turn. "The avalanche, the rockslide, the forest, the storm? That isn't just coincidence. That isn't just bad luck. There's intent behind it. There's a person at play."

"She's right," Cassiel said quietly. "It's like this whole journey has been cursed."

Dylan didn't say a word, reserving his judgement, but Katerina could see those same pieces start fitting together in his eyes. Every decision, every turn, every step of the way. It was too much to happen by chance. There was another person in this game. One who'd been playing all along.

"But who could do something like that?" Tanya asked in fright. She'd stopped her manic sharpening and was staring up with wide, worried eyes. "Who'd have that kind of power?"

Cassiel and Dylan exchanged a quick glance, then the ranger looked away with a sigh.

"A wizard," he said quietly. "A dark wizard. It's the only explanation."

A chill ran up Katerina's arms and she stepped closer to the fire. "But I thought you said my father had all the wizards killed. There's no one left—"

"There are some," Dylan replied bleakly. "Scattered about the five kingdoms, living in exile, living in disguise...even your father couldn't get them all."

The princess sank suddenly down beside Tanya, unable to comprehend how they'd managed to pit themselves against such a deadly foe. "But why would a dark wizard help Kailas?" she finally forced herself to ask. "In their mind, wouldn't he be the enemy?"

"Help a Damaris, to kill a Damaris?" Cassiel's lips curved up in a crooked smile, one that didn't meet his eyes. "I can think of a lot of people ready to take that deal."

She flashed him a look but kept silent. He wasn't trying to provoke her. In fact, he seemed to be the only person present who didn't instinctively cringe from the truth.

"So, what can we do?" All of that unshakable optimism had vanished, and Tanya looked as though she was afraid to even ask the question.

What could they do? Against far-flung sorcery? Against an all-powerful wizard?

For a long time, the campsite was quiet. The four friends sank into their own heads, reeling with the horror of it, trying in vain to come up with a plan. The only sound was the occasional spark or snapping of a twig as the logs collapsed slowly beneath the flames.

Then all at once, a slow smile began to spread up the side of Katerina's face.

*How will we fight against an all-powerful wizard? With an all-powerful wizard of our own.*

"Dylan?"

With great effort he pulled himself out of his troubled mind, lifting his head to meet her eyes. The look on her face confused him, even more so when she pushed suddenly to her feet.

"I need to find some water.."



"SO, WAIT A MINUTE," Tanya demanded, her short legs struggling to keep pace as the others swept quickly through the woods, "you're telling me

that all this time, you've had a magical way of contacting anyone in the outside world...and you didn't say anything?!"

"How was I supposed to know the thing was for real?" Katerina replied, ducking quickly under a low-hanging branch. "And who exactly would we have wanted to be contacting?" Her eyes met Dylan's, and for a split second the two actually shared a grin. "Trinkets and talismans, right?"

He laughed under his breath, making his way swiftly towards the pond. "Right."

The plan was simple. Use the seeing stone. Talk to Alwyn. If there was a dark wizard out there, one who was plotting against them, he would know what to do.

Of course, not everyone had been on board.

Tanya was nervous about 'meddling with sorcery,' and Cassiel looked like he'd rather set himself on fire than put his trust in a wizard. But, at this point, they had no choice. They were out of options, and the enemy was closing in on all sides. Time to make a friend.

"Just...be careful," he said for the tenth time, standing a bit of a ways back as Dylan knelt beside the edge of the water, Katerina by his side.

"Trust me." She flashed him a reassuring smile, then pulled the stone from her pocket and dropped it into the water. "I know what I'm doing."

At once, a strange feeling of serenity washed over her. Her eyes snapped shut, and it was as though she was looking at a map. Not one she could see, but one she could feel. Her entire body warmed as she directed her thoughts to the palace. To the wizard sitting inside.

*Alwyn...*

There was a moment of silence. Then a voice lifted out of the water.

"You called?"

Katerina's eyes snapped open with a gasp, to see the watery reflection of the wizard staring back at her. He looked exactly the way she remembered. Same speckled robe. Same crooked spectacles. Same snow-white hair—clinging like a manic cloud to the top of his rounded head.

"It worked," she breathed, hardly believing what she saw. "You're here."

The wrinkles on the wizard's face melted into an affectionate smile as he chuckled softly. "Well, not exactly, dear one. I am most certainly still back



at the castle, and while I don't know where exactly you're seeing me, you and I are speaking from the bottom of my wine glass."

The princess let out a breathless laugh, then leaned closer to the water, brought to tears with a wave of homesickness that caught her completely off-guard. "I miss you."

"I miss you, too, Katy." The wind blew gentle waves across the water, and his voice thickened, as if he'd developed a sudden cold. "I can't say how glad I am to see you safe."

"But, what about you?" she asked eagerly. "What all has happened since I've been gone—"

A throat cleared quietly behind her, and she hastened to get back on point. There was no telling how long the magic of the stone would last, and there were important things to discuss.

"Actually," she amended quickly, "I haven't got much time. Alwyn; we think there's a dark wizard after us. Someone who's doing everything they can to curse our journey from afar."

"Us?" He stretched upwards, trying to see past her fiery hair. "Ah, yes, I see you've made some friends on the road."

"A wizard," Dylan interjected, bringing them back on point. "What can you tell us?"

Alwyn gazed at him curiously, then turned back to the princess, looking more and more anxious all the while. "Well, it's certainly possible," he said slowly, turning it over in his mind. "In fact, judging by your brother's mood the last few days, I'd say it was probable. If Kailas didn't know where to find you, he'd have to rely upon less conventional means. Sorcery. Magic."

Cassiel stiffened, and walked briskly away as Katerina leaned closer to the pond.

"What can we do?"

It was an impossible problem, but her old mentor had never failed her before. And no matter how much distance was between them, she had every confidence in him now.

Sure enough, Alwyn didn't disappoint.

"You leave the wizard to me." His brow furrowed with a sudden frown. "In the meantime, we need to get you somewhere safe."

“We had a place in mind,” Katerina said helplessly. “But it burned down a few days ago.”

The wizard considered this for a moment, poring over the vast stores of information tucked away in that wrinkled head, before looking up with sudden inspiration.

“Katy, do you remember me telling you about the Talsing Sanctuary?”

She shook her head, but Dylan leaned forward with a frown.

“Talsing—I know it. It’s actually not far. But how would we—”

“You need to get there,” Alwyn said urgently. “The monks will grant her safe passage. It’s the only place completely out of Kailas’ reach.”

“*If* the monks grant her safe passage,” Dylan said uncertainly. “And why would they? She’s not a student; it isn’t a safe house for wayward royalty—”

“They will,” Alwyn interrupted with certainty. “I’ll send them a message, and they will. You need to get there quickly; the longer you stay on the open road, the greater the risk.”

The ranger opened his mouth to argue but closed it a second later. It might be yet another gamble, but the wizard was right. They were out of options. And they needed to get off the road.

“Katy,” the ancient sorcerer leaned as close as he could to his goblet, the tip of his nose touching the surface of the wine, “just keep your head down and promise me you’ll stay safe. The monks at the monastery can help you. *Let* them. Don’t underestimate yourself, dear one. You have a lot to offer. You just need to find it. Inside.”

A look of bewilderment rippled across the princess’ face, but she nodded quickly. “I will.”

Alwyn nodded quickly. “In that case, I’d better be off. If there really is a wizard working against you, as you say, then there isn’t any time to—”

There was a sudden splash, and his face vanished from the pond. A second later the water grew still, and the stone floated up from the bottom into Katerina’s waiting hand.

She stared at it blankly for a moment, then slipped it back into her pocket. “I guess these things come with a time limit—”

“Talsing Sanctuary,” Cassiel interrupted, staring at Dylan with a very strange expression. “Is that an actual possibility? Is that somewhere *you* can go?”

He stressed the word *you* in a way that Katerina didn't understand, and she lifted her head curiously to see that the ranger had gone white as a sheet.

"I don't...I don't see that we have much choice."

"Why wouldn't you be able to go?" Katerina interjected. "What aren't you saying?"

Their eyes met for a moment before he brushed it off with a dismissive shrug.

"Nothing. Of course, I can go, and it's a good thing he said Talsing, because the sanctuary is less than a day away. We can head out in the morning—"

"Uh...guys?"

The others looked around to see Tanya staring with wide eyes into the valley. The same valley they'd just hiked out of in search of the little pond. The light of a thousand torches flickered in her eyes as the others turned slowly around to follow her gaze.

It was the royal army. Not part of it, but all of it. The whole bloody thing.

*They found us.*

"Maybe we should leave right now instead..."



THERE WAS NO TIME TO plan. There was no moment of deliberation. At this point, it wasn't necessary. Dylan took one look at the scene before him and backed a step away.

"We can't fight this. We need to run."

Then they were off. Sprinting up the side of the mountain. Running like they'd never run before. Flying through the trees like the hounds of hell were behind them.

*...because they probably are.*

In the dizzying hours that followed, the gang had only two things going for them. But they were two things that couldn't possibly be overstated. First, there was a chance that the army scouts hadn't actually seen them yet. Second, they'd had the entire day to sleep.

Just two small advantages, but they clung to them with everything they had as they raced up one ravine and leapt down another. Not bothering to cover their tracks. Not daring to cast a glance behind them. Keeping their eyes locked on the target. On the tiny mountain ledge that served as a gateway to the one place on the planet they would be safe.

The passage of time stopped making any sense in the hours that followed. Those precious moments between midnight and dawn. It flew past with breathless speed, then suddenly slowed as the four friends gave themselves entirely to the task at hand.

The fatigue was overwhelming. The pain stunned them in their tracks. It got to the point where Katerina didn't know if she was awake or dreaming. Perhaps she was in some state in between. The only thing that remained constant was their perpetual forward motion. And the fact that the little ledge was getting ever closer as the hint of dawn began to light the sky.

Of course, that's when the sound of the army grew loud behind them.

*We're not going to make it,* Katerina thought as the four of them tore their way up the stony mountain trail. Racing full speed to the top of the peak. *They've seen us now. They're getting close.*

It was true. No longer were her ears filled with a general hum of commotion. She could hear particular voices now. Individual people calling out to each other as the army closed in on their trail.

Not two seconds later, a wooden spear went whizzing just inches past her head.

She let out a shriek and stumbled dizzily to the side. It was the first time she'd broken pace in hours, and she felt like if she stopped moving there was a chance her body would simply shut down and she would never move again.

Fortunately, a familiar hand shot out to steady her arm.

"It's okay," Dylan panted. "I've got you."

He may have had a grip, but things were certainly not okay. As she spun back towards the ledge, Katerina caught sight of the massive horde of soldiers sprinting up behind them. Soldiers that looked better rested and better armed than she or her companions.

"Don't look back," Dylan commanded, pulling her forward with a burst of speed. "Just keep your eyes forward. We're almost there."

As shocking as it was, he was right.

They rounded a curve in the mountain, and when they came out on the other side the doors of the sanctuary were finally in sight. It was nestled tranquilly on the top of the adjacent peak, built into the very mountain. The only thing that separated them was a long bridge that stretched from one peak to the other. A bridge of planks and rope. It was swinging slightly in the breeze.

“*That?!?*” Tanya yelled, ducking as a volley of arrows fired her way. “We need to cross *that?!?*”

Cassiel threw her to the side as another volley fired her way. At the same time, he reached down and picked up the spear launched at Katerina. Without breaking stride, he hurled it back down the mountain. There was a swish of air, followed by a gurgling yell as it hit its target.

*One down. Just fifty thousand to go.*

“Dylan,” Katerina gasped, throwing her entire body towards the bridge, “what if we don’t make it? What are we going to—”

“We’re going to make it.”

Their eyes met, and he said it again.

“We’re *going* to make it.”

It wasn’t an option. It wasn’t a choice. They would make it. Or they would die trying.

The army was closing the distance between them, gaining constant ground, but only a few seconds later the gang skidded to a stop at the edge of the bridge. They stared at it for just a fraction of a second, swinging precariously over the deadly abyss, before jumping on top.

“Whoa!” Katerina threw out her arms for balance, grabbing hold of the rope. “Guys, this thing was NOT meant for more than one person at a time!”

Already, the beams were beginning to shake. The rope was beginning to tremble. For a terrifying moment, it felt as though the entire thing was about to flip over and pitch them off. Then the wind died down and it righted itself once more.

“Cass and Tanya, stay to the right,” Dylan commanded, flinching to the side as a dagger whipped past his face. “Kat and I will stay to the left.”

They divided quickly and did as he asked, cutting their way through the misty mountain air with as much speed as was possible. It was an impossible task but, for once, luck was on their side.

They had made it more than halfway before the first soldier set foot on the bridge.

That's when things started to get interesting...

There was a rush of air, followed by a sudden cry as an arrow whipped through the air in between them. A splash of crimson shot into the mist, and Katerina look up in horror to see Tanya's body fall precariously against the rope. She was doubled over at the waist, clutching at her side.

"Tanya—"

She started to scream, but before she could two more arrows followed suit. One lodged itself rather harmlessly in her cloak, while the other buried deep into Dylan's thigh.

His knee buckled, and he went careening towards the edge, but in a strange turn of events she leapt forward and caught him just before he slipped over the side. At the same time, Cassiel picked up Tanya and draped her across his shoulders, racing toward the doors with renewed speed.

"Are you okay?" Katerina gasped, steadying Dylan and dragging him forward all in the same motion. They were almost to the other side of the bridge, but the enemy was gaining fast. "Dylan, talk to me! Are you all right?"

He let out a gasp of pain, but when he lifted his head once more she didn't see a trace of it in his eyes. There was anger there instead. Lots of anger. And a fierce kind of determination. "Better than all right," he answered, draping a protective arm across her shoulder as they raced forward. "I just thought of a little surprise for our friends..."

Tanya and Cassiel had already reached the other side of the bridge. They banged desperately on the tall doors, but there was no response. By the time Dylan and Katerina joined them, their faces were pale with a helpless sort of panic.

"What are we going to do?" Tanya gasped, collapsing against the door as she gazed out at the advancing army. "It's not opening. What are we going to do?!"

For a moment, it seemed there was nothing left they *could* do. Then, with a smile Katerina would always remember, Dylan stepped bravely forward to face the horde.

“We’re going to stall for some time.”

Without a moment’s pause, he reached down and ripped out the arrow that was still lodged in his leg. A torrent of blood was quick to follow, but no sooner had he grabbed the shaft than he thrust it with all his might into the center of the rope.

There was a violently snapping sound as the threaded twine gave way. The soldiers yelled with fright and skidded to a halt, but it was too late. A second later, Dylan cut the other side.

It seemed to happen in slow motion. The moment when the bridge fell.

Katerina watched with a strange sort of detachment as what had to be a thousand men plunged to their death in the endless mist, the ancient bridge twisting around them like a child’s ribbon. The sounds of their screams grew quieter and quieter until, at last, all was still.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” Tanya said quietly, staring down into the mist.

Dylan followed her gaze for a moment, then turned deliberately back around. “I can’t believe I didn’t do it sooner.”

Cassiel didn’t say a thing. He just turned back to the door and started pounding on it with his fist. Katerina watched him for a second, feeling a bit dazed, before the weight of their predicament started to settle upon her weary shoulders. Her eyes flickered once to the mountain they were standing on, then back to the mountain on the other side. Twice, her eyes made the journey. Then a third time. Sweeping across the endless distance that separated the two peaks.

“Dylan?” she began uncertainly.

Unlike her, he didn’t look. He took a deep breath and kept staring right in front of him.

“I know. We’ll deal with it later.” After a moment, he added, “It was the only way.”

She froze a second, nodded, then turned with forced determination back to the door. At the moment, she was in absolutely no position to worry. She was in no position to do anything at all.

But the fact remained.

They'd made it to the sanctuary. Their harrowing journey was complete.

The only problem?

*We now have no way to leave.*



**THE END**





## Book 3 Unceasing

THE QUEEN'S ALPHA SERIES

# UNCEASING

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
W . J . M A Y





## UNCEASING Blurb:



**S**he will fight for what is hers.

When their sanctuary suddenly becomes a prison, Katerina and the gang must work together to save not only themselves, but everyone else in the remote, alpine retreat.

Secrets are revealed and new identities are discovered as the princess delves into her past, uncovering things she never thought possible. Awakening a hidden power buried within.

The stakes have never been so high, and everyone's a target. Can the princess unlock the ancient magic in time? Can they find a way off the mountain before disaster strikes? Most importantly, in a world where everyone's out to get them...

...Who can they trust?

**Be careful who you trust. Even the devil was once an angel.**



## Chapter 1

When you've spent so much time racing forward, it's difficult when you finally come to a stop.

Katerina felt as though she was standing on the side of a road, watching a carriage fly by. A part of her was still lurching forward with belated momentum, though her body had long since gone still. Her crimson hair whipped out in front of her, as if caught in a sudden backdraft of wind, but she wasn't moving. None of them were. Their endless journey had finally come to a close.

*"Come on!"*

A loud banging startled her back to the present. Followed by the soft panting of breath. A searing pain shot through her skull as she opened her eyes, gazing weakly at the world around her.

It was a world of dazzling and deadly extremes. Cliffs that dropped thousands of feet into a swirling sea of mist, and alpine peaks that stretched up to touch the very sky. The stars that had guided them through the long and terrifying night had given way to the lighter hints of dawn. But while the sun had finally risen above the mountains, it was trapped behind an impenetrable layer of clouds—painting the entire picture a surreal shade of white. A color that was pinpricked by a hazy swarm of red and black. The uniform of the royal army, standing just on the other side of the cliff.

*Waiting.*

Katerina's knees curled into her chest and she leaned as far as she could into the rock behind her. Her head was spinning, overwhelmed by the elevation alone, and as she sucked in a breath of the thin mountain air, gazing out across the abyss, she was reminded of a simple yet terrifying truth.

The journey might be over. But the nightmare had just begun.

*"Come on!"*

The same voice that had awakened her echoed suddenly louder, and she tilted back her chin to see Cassiel pounding fiercely upon the door that barred the four of them from the sanctuary. His whitened knuckles were

smearred with blood, and already there was a small dent in the iron from where his fist was making contact. The noise was deafening. But still, nothing happened.

“Cass?”

He looked down in surprise, and she suddenly realized that the two of them were the only ones still conscious. Tanya was passed out against the door, her hands clutched weakly around the arrow sticking out of her side, and Dylan was lying in a pool of blood beside her. His impossible burst of strength—ripping the blade from his leg and using it to save their lives—had lasted only as long as it needed to, leaving him completely bereft in its wake. His skin was pale white, his chest was barely moving, and despite the belt strapped around his leg that pool of blood was getting bigger.

“Cass, they’re bleeding out!”

*Why didn’t he see it? Why wasn’t he doing something?*

She pushed shakily onto her palms, but before she could ask either question there was a sudden clattering upon the stone. The mist swirled and her eyes widened as a rogue arrow skidded to a stop at her feet. Just a foot away from where she’d been sitting.

For a second, she simply stared. Turning it over with the point of her shoe. Then she lifted her gaze in terror to the army on the other side of the cliff.

It was only then she understood the frantic pounding. The desperation to get inside. What did it matter if they were bleeding out if they were all about to be killed anyway?

“Oh...right.”

The beautiful fae didn’t say a thing. He simply looked at her, looked back at the army, then lifted his hands once more to the door. Striking it hard enough to shatter away bits of stone. A second later, she was standing beside him. Pounding against it with all her might.

*Ducks in a barrel.*

The words came back to her again and again. Like a dark mantra she was unable to shake.

Several years ago, she and a few of her favorite ladies rode out into the forest to meet up with the royal hunt. While women were not allowed to participate directly in such activities, they were permitted to observe and

cheer for their favorite knights. When the men got tired of the bloodshed and slaughter, they would retire upon picnic blankets and regale the ladies with stories of their cunning and bravery over pastries and wine. (This had all seemed rather impressive at the time. In light of present circumstances, Katerina couldn't imagine anything more absurd.) At any rate, when they'd finally caught up with the hunt, they were surprised to see not a single animal had been slain.

"What happened?" Katerina remembered asking. "You couldn't find anything?"

Her horse shied back a step to make way for Kailas' powerful steed.

"Oh, we found them all right." His eyes lit up with a dark sort of excitement as he peered down into the trees. "Ducks in a barrel."

The princess followed his gaze with a frown, only to pull back in sudden shock.

An entire herd of snow-white deer was trapped in the ravine down below. While they had clearly fled in terror, the second they were through the bottleneck a large boulder had been rolled forward to seal off any escape. They were still standing there now. Clustered close together. Pawing at the ground in heartbreaking panic. Their lovely eyes wide with fear.

It wasn't until the archers stepped forward that Katerina realized what was about to happen.

"Wait! You can't!" When her brother turned to her coldly, she tried to appeal to his sense of honor. "Where's the sport in that?" she reasoned. "They're completely defenseless. You've won."

Her mistake had been in thinking that there was a sense of honor to appeal to. Kailas didn't have one. He hadn't for a very long time.

"Yes, I have." His lips curled into a wicked smile, and his eyes glowed with anticipation as he slowly lifted his hand. "And now I reap the spoils."

It was a massacre. The sounds of which still haunted her to this day. Katerina didn't go hunting with them after that. And she never rode through that part of the forest again.

*That's what we are now. Ducks in a barrel. Trapped on a cliff with nowhere to run and no place to hide.*

The bulk of the royal army had endured the same midnight sprint as she and her friends, but it was only a matter of time before the most skilled

archers were brought to the front. They were lucky it hadn't happened already. At most, they only had a few more minutes—

A sharp cry echoed suddenly off the rocks.

*...or less?*

Katerina whipped around to see Cassiel's hand freeze upon the door. At first, it looked as though he'd simply stopped knocking. Then she saw the arrow stabbed straight through his center.

"CASS!"

She raced forward with a shriek as he bowed his head in pain. Tangled strands of blood-soaked hair brushed against his arm as he took a moment to get his ragged breathing under control.

On the other side of the cliff, the archers reloaded with a uniform shout.

"Cassiel, what can I—"

He held up a finger for silence, bracing his body against the wall. A ribbon of blood trickled down his arm, and his eyes were bright with pain. Then, with a strength and resilience the princess would never understand, he took a deep breath, gritted his teeth, and ripped the shaft right out of his flesh.

*Holy bloody smokes!*

The princess froze in place, mouth agape, staring with unblinking eyes at the bloody handprint stained upon the door. She was still standing there when he reached up and continued knocking with his other fist. It was a fluid transition that barely missed a beat. He only paused long enough to drop the arrow, then grab her cloak and yank her out of the line of fire.

"Keep your head down," he commanded, using his own body as a shield as another volley smashed into the stone just above them, "and keep knocking."

She stared up at him in a daze, like someone trapped in a bad dream. Her body was pinned snugly between him and the door—so close it was hard to breathe. So close she could see every drop of blood clinging to his eyelashes. So close there was only enough room to follow his request.

But while the request might save her, it left him wide open to attack.

"Cass, I can't—" she objected.

She tried to shift away, but he grabbed a fist of her hair and dragged her back again, shoving her roughly against the wall. Their faces were just inches apart as he towered over her. As dazzling as he was terrifying. Making her feel as protected as she was afraid.

“Do as I say.”

Their eyes met for a fleeting moment, then she turned around.

Her mind was reeling in horror. Her face was wet with the blood dripping down from his hand. She felt his rapid heartbeat pressed between her shoulders. Felt every ragged, shallow breath whisper across her neck. His muscles tensed with each pounding impact, and at any moment she expected another arrow to sink into his skin. For the warmth of his body to disappear as he fell to his knees. For her last protector in the world to crumble to the ground.

But he didn't. And as long as that was true, they still had a chance.

She pulled in a huge gulp of air and did as she was instructed, pinned between his body and the door. Knocking against the iron with all her might. Teeth rattling with the vibrations as he did the same. Flailing both fists with blinding speed as their cries for help echoed high into the clouds.

There was a quiet moan beside her. So soft she could barely hear. Without breaking her rhythm, she saw Dylan stirring weakly upon the ground. His enchanting face tight with unbearable pain. A faint trembling creeping up his bloodied limbs, even in his sleep.

*He doesn't have much time left. None of us does.*

Impossible as it was, she began striking the door even harder. Pounding against it with every bit of strength she had left. Summoning up every last reserve. Hitting it so hard that...

...that a spark flew off the metal?

With a quiet gasp she jerked back, staring down at her hands in alarm. Above her, Cassiel continued the desperate assault, oblivious to what had just happened.

*Did I just see that right?* Her eyes grew wide as saucers as she turned her palms up and down incredulously, searching for any lingering clue. *Could that have possibly been real?*

“Cass...” she began in a trembling voice, “there's something—”

But before she could finish that sentence, there was a metallic groan from somewhere deep inside the mountain. Both she and Cassiel leapt back, dragging their fallen friends with them, as the door they'd been battling so furiously creaked open, revealing a tiny man in a simple brown robe.

It was strangely anti-climactic.

For a moment, both parties simply stared at each other. One side, breathless and exhausted; the other, frozen in shock. Even the arrows came to a stop as everyone gathered held their breath.

*Please...please don't turn us away...*

The monk's eyes travelled slowly over the bloody teens, then to the army on the other alpine peak, then down into the shadowy abyss that lay between. They lingered there for a moment before coming to rest on the empty wooden posts that once held the bridge that led in and out of the sanctuary. Posts that were still sporting frayed ribbons of rope, blowing gently in the breeze.

At that point the fae stepped back while the princess took a step forward, grimacing apologetically all the while.

"Yeah, it was like that when we got here."



THE NEXT FEW MINUTES passed by in a blur.

There were too many people, too much shouting, and too sudden a swarm of movement for the princess' wearied mind to keep track. The most she could do was keep her eyes open and remain standing as she and the others were carried into the sanctuary. Rather, some of them were carried.

Cassiel had insisted on taking Tanya himself. Wave after wave of blood poured down his shoulder as he knelt with tender care and slipped his hands under her lifeless body. Her tiny arms wrapped around his neck as she was lifted into the air, but her eyes remained shut.

True to form, Dylan had jerked awake the second the first stranger touched him but, try as he might to make sense of the situation, he looked just as lost as Katerina. At first, he staunchly refused the efforts of anyone else to assist him. It wasn't until his mangled leg literally gave out beneath him that he finally accepted a helping hand.



As for the princess, she was simply in shock.

She and the others had been racing on nothing but fumes since their midnight meeting with Alwyn by the pond. Pushing their battered bodies as far as they were physically able to go. Living from moment to moment, painfully aware that each one might be their last.

Now that the chase was over and the world around them had slowed to a stop, that endless night was beginning to catch up with them.

Tanya was placed directly into the hands of a doctor, whisked away in a cloud of antiseptic and gauze. Cassiel—who was still sporting at least five cracked ribs that had never gotten a chance to heal—stopped suddenly in his tracks, coughed up a mouthful of blood, then half-collapsed into the stone wall. He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

Only Dylan remained standing. But he did so only because Katerina was no longer able to stand herself. The second she started to falter, he ripped free of the people trying to hold him and rushed across the damp courtyard, catching her delicately in his arms.

And just like that—all was well.

It didn't matter what the two of them had been through, it didn't matter how they'd left things that night in the woods. They were together now. And they were safe.

Everything else would work itself out in time.

"I thought we were going to lose you." She pressed her face into his jacket and closed her eyes, pulling in a deep breath of that familiar scent. "I thought maybe we'd lost you already."

His arms tightened and he shifted her away from his bad leg. One hand came up to stroke the back of her hair as the other held her tight against his chest. Steady and secure. "I'm not so easy to lose..."

A tired smile pulled at the corner of her lips, and she lifted her head to see him staring down with a twinkling grin. The same grin he'd had the night they met. The one that had kept her strong, kept her sane. The one that had kept her safe and smiling every night since.

But the night was over now. It was time to face the day.

They tried their best to stay together. Tried not to let this bunch of well-meaning strangers separate them. But it was hard enough just to stay awake. The world around them blurred as Tanya vanished in one direction

and Cassiel was taken in another. A second later two pairs of strong hands slid in between Katerina and Dylan, prying the two of them gently apart.

“It’s okay,” a soothing voice murmured, sweeping her legs out from under her. “You’re safe now. You can let go.”

A few steps away, another cluster of men in brown robes was having a slightly harder time subduing Dylan. The word ‘infirmary’ was used several times. As well as the coaxing threat of, ‘she needs to see a doctor.’ It was followed by a much quieter, ‘...so do you.’

“You can let go,” the voice told her again. She lifted her head in a daze, to see a pair of bright blue eyes. Eyes that shone with gentle reassurance. “I promise, it’s all right. Just let go.”

*Let go? Was she still holding on?*

She unclenched her fingers at the same time she was whisked away down a stone corridor, flanked between two other tall men. The last thing she remembered was the feel of Dylan’s hand as it was ripped away from hers. The look in his eyes as the two of them were torn apart.

Then everything went black.



KATERINA WOKE THE NEXT morning feeling better than she had in ages. She also woke up thinking there was a good chance she had slept for more than just one day.

Her wounds were too healed. The bruises had already begun to fade. And although she felt well-rested she was overwhelmingly weak, as though she hadn’t eaten in ages.

The second her eyes adjusted to the light, she pushed shakily to her feet and looked around the room. It was everything the mind conjured when it heard the word ‘monastery.’ Cold stone floors. Simple twin cot. A roughly-hewn dresser, only large enough to house a few changes of clothes, and a small nightstand pushed up against the window.

No flags. Which she thought was a bit strange. There wasn’t a building in the five kingdoms that wasn’t required to wave the king’s banner. Even the tavern she’d stopped in that first night had one propped up behind the bar. But, on second thought, it was to be expected.

The monks of Talsing Sanctuary belonged to their own order. In effect, the monastery was its own sovereign state. Concepts like kingdoms and political loyalties had no place here. These men had devoted themselves to a higher power. Within these walls, there was no greater authority.

Katerina took inexplicable comfort in that fact as she made her way over to the nightstand.

A brass plate had been placed in the center, complete with a piece of unbuttered toast and several slices of fruit. Beside the plate sat a small cup of water.

She reached out eagerly, then suddenly froze. Too scared to touch it.

What if it had been poisoned? Laid out as some kind of trap? She didn't know these people. For all she knew, she'd been unconscious for days and the army had already found a way inside.

For a second, she was too scared to touch it. Then she was too hungry not to.

The paltry meal only lasted a few moments as the starving princess wolfed it down. The bread was gone in four seconds flat, and the fruit remained a delightful mystery. It didn't look or taste like anything Katerina had tried before, but she knew she'd crave it as long as she lived.

She tried hard to savor the final bites, soaking up every bit of citrusy sweetness, but it was gone too fast and she sat back on the bed feeling a little sick.

*Serves you right, you little glutton. Bet the others didn't inhale theirs quite so quickly.*

Blinking heavily against the fatigue, her eyes lifted to the window. Outside, the birds were singing. People were bustling cheerfully about on their morning rounds. Even the sun had escaped its misty cage to make a rare, uplifting appearance.

Katerina blinked once. Feeling slightly betrayed.

*How is that possible? After everything that's happened? After everything I've seen? How is it possible that the rest of the world is carrying on as though things are somehow okay?*

She stared through the glass another moment, lingering on a pair of chattering monks with baskets draped over their arms. Then a far more important question flashed through her tired brain.

*Where are my friends?*

With the caution of someone who'd spent the last month and a half on the run, she slipped silently out the door and ghosted down the narrow hall. Eyes darting in every direction. Walking on tiptoes, she quickly realized there wasn't a need.

She was completely alone and unsupervised. Free to come and go as she pleased. And while she passed the occasional person in the corridor, they flashed polite smiles but paid her no mind.

It made her feel a lot better about eating the food.

After a few minutes, she finally made it through the maze of stone corridors and into the outside world. It may have been sunny, but the elevation made it a lot colder than it had looked from back in her room. Cold enough that she reached automatically to tighten her travelling cloak.

It was only then she realized she was wearing a simple white cotton dress. The same kind of thing she'd seen on maids back at the castle. The same kind of thing she saw on the other rare women mixed amongst the men milling about the courtyard.

*Shouldn't someone be talking to me?* She came to an uneasy stop in the middle of the cool grey stones, peering nervously around her. *Shouldn't we be discussing the fact that the royal army is waiting outside?*

She froze uncertainly, giving people the chance to approach her if they should wish, before her eyes latched onto a familiar head of hair. Two of them, in fact. White-blonde and cinnamon.

With a sigh of relief, she hurried up the steps to join them on the parapet. A strategic location to be sure. High enough to set them away from the rest of the general population, but central enough that they were still able to see everything going on.

*Looks like I'm not the only one who's nervous to be here.*

"Hey," she greeted, sliding automatically into line beside them, "when did you guys get up?"

From the looks of things, they had been out there a while. Tanya was sitting in a chair with her leg propped up in a sling. She had that same depleted look about her that Katerina was feeling herself, but was strangely calm at the same time. Cassiel stood beside her. Arms folded lightly across

his chest. Staring silently over the high stone wall at the rows of battalions just beyond.

Jumping slightly, as if she hadn't seen the princess coming, Tanya flashed her a quick smile.

"Yesterday afternoon. Apparently, I spent the first two nights in the infirmary under some kind of sedation, but finally came 'round." She cocked her head towards the fae. "This one and his demented twin were already awake, terrorizing the medical staff. You're the last one."

*The first two nights? So I was right. We've been here a while.*

Katerina's first reaction was to be deeply disturbed that they'd been sedated without any sort of permission, but just one look at her friends told her that it was the right thing to do.

She couldn't remember the last time Tanya had a spot of color in her cheeks. The last time that Cassiel could pull in a full breath without a shooting stab of pain. The bloody bandage on his hand was brand new, but so was the injury that caused it. An injury she remembered in sudden, perfect clarity as she flashed back to their time together on the cliff.

"...Cass?"

In truth, she didn't know what to say. Where did one begin? With a simple thank-you? After the risk he'd taken, literally holding his body over hers? It seemed too small a gesture.

His eyes flashed over, and for a suspended moment both he and the princess locked eyes. A moment was all that it took. She should have known he wasn't one to dwell.

Instead, he flashed a brisk smile and cocked his head towards the wall. "Dylan will want to know you're awake."

She blinked a second, struggling to change course, then followed his gaze up a tiny winding staircase that led to the roof. Even from where she stood, she could see the corner of a familiar cloak blowing in the breeze. The heel of a boot dangling carelessly in the air.

*Of course, the bloody ranger has to pick the tallest mountain in the world, then climb to the very top of it. Of course, he can't keep his feet firmly planted on the ground. The man is deranged.*

"That looks...safe."

Tanya flashed a grin, but Cassiel merely returned his eyes to the cliff.

“He spends all his time there.” A faint smile ghosted across his face. “Well, either there or sitting beside your bed.”

A furious blush spread across her cheeks, and she found herself glad no one was looking.

“Yes, well, that’s his job,” she said rather lamely. When this got no response, she was quick to add, “I’m actually paying him, you know.” *I didn’t give up my mother’s pendant for nothing.*

The fae merely rolled his eyes, while Tanya shot her a sideways grin. “Uh-huh.”

Sensing it was probably best if she made a discreet exit, the princess waved an awkward hand then scampered up the winding staircase Cassiel had pointed to. Each stone step was smaller and more uneven than the last, and by the time she reached the top she was literally clinging to the walls on both sides just for balance.

“You sure this is high enough?” she called out in a teasing voice that did little to hide her anxiety. “Maybe there’s a weather vane or something you can nest upon.”

She didn’t even hear him move, but the next second there he was. Standing framed in the doorway. His dark hair blowing gently into his eyes. His hands at the ready, reaching out to hers.

“You’re awake,” he said in surprise. Then he was quick to grab her. “Kat, what are you doing up here—you’re going to fall.”

Her foot slipped on the tile beneath her, but she defiantly held her ground.

“Why do you automatically assume that?” Her fingers dug into the sides of his cloak, hanging on for dear life. “You know, contrary to public opinion, I’m actually not a klutz.”

His eyes twinkled as a dozen or more memories to the contrary flashed through his mind, but he kept them to himself. Gently guiding her to a seat beside him on the smooth stone.

“How are you feeling?” he asked instead.

She settled down beside him, trying hard to objectively consider the question. There was a way to come at it from most every side.

Physically: not all that bad. A little weak. A little dizzy. But not all that bad.

Mentally: still trying to catch up. Confused. Disoriented. Waiting for the dust to settle.

Emotionally: probably best not to even touch that one.

"I'm fine," she replied with a quick smile. "What about you?"

His eyes twinkled again as the obvious lie hung in the air between them. It was a casual dismissal. One she'd learned from him. One she wasn't able to pull off nearly as well.

"I'm fine, too."

*Shocker.*

This time they were unable to keep from laughing. It burst out of them with no warning, soft and sudden. More indicative of damage than mirth, but at this point they were both glad to simply have the option. After the other night, things could have gone the other way.

"I see the army still hasn't moved," she said quietly, the second they'd finally stopped.

For a moment, she almost regretted saying anything at all. Every bit of laughter faded from his eyes as he gazed out across the swirling sea of clouds that separated them. As poorly as her eyes could make out the splashes of color, the red and black dots of the royal uniform, he was able to see them a hundred times better. Picking out individual faces. Picking out individual blades.

"Why would they?" There wasn't a trace of emotion left in his voice. It was simply flat. "For the first time, they know exactly where you are. And they know you're not going anywhere."

A bit of strain crept in at the end, and she peered sideways through her curtain of hair to study him. The look on his face was the same as the others. Subdued. Quiet. Eerily calm. But at the same time there was a hint of dread.

At first, she had attributed this to the aftershock of the chase. Those hours between midnight and dawn weren't something you could shake through sheer force of will. And as if the physical damage wasn't bad enough, there were also the psychological ramifications to consider. The debilitating flashbacks, punctuated with the silent echoes of their screams.

But as the morning began to inch by, she was coming to understand that the nightmarish chase was only half of it. It was the present that had them worried. It was the future.

After all the weeks of running, after all those close calls and hair-raising evasions, they had finally been caught. Yes, they were still technically safe, but the game was over. The deadly dance had come to an end. They were in a cage now. Staring out through the bars at people who wanted to kill them on all sides. People who were content to wait. People who would show them no mercy.

No, it wasn't something you could shake. And Katerina didn't think for a moment that, as Dylan gazed out across the abyss, he wasn't thinking about the hundreds of lives he'd taken the moment he decided to cut the cables on that bridge.

"I just can't believe we made it," she said quietly, momentarily setting their other problems aside and focusing instead on this one shining truth. "We're alive. The *whole army* was chasing us down, but we're still alive." Her voice grew suddenly shy as her eyes flickered to him again. "And that's all thanks to you."

He glanced over sharply, caught off guard by her rather generous assessment. "Me?" A peculiar look flashed across his face before he shook his head curtly. "I got shot, Kat. I got shot and blacked out. You and Cass were the ones who got us in here."

"I'm talking about before that," she pressed gently. "We wouldn't have even made it to the door. We wouldn't have even had the chance if you hadn't cut—"

"I don't want credit for that."

The conversation ended as quickly as it had begun. Neither side had gained any ground. But a silent understanding had been reached.

After a moment, Dylan glanced over at her again. "At any rate, we're not out of the woods yet."

Katerina's spine stiffened automatically, as she was suddenly aware of the bustling monastery behind her. Of the silent horde of faceless monks.

"No one will talk to me," she said under her breath, glancing over her shoulder as if they might be listening anyway. "When I woke up, I just wandered out here—"



“That’s because they’re all talking to each other.” He ran his fingers through his hair with an air of uncharacteristic resignation. “They’re deciding whether or not they’ll allow us to stay.”

Katerina’s mouth fell open, and she blinked in shock.

She hadn’t once—not for a single moment—considered that might be a problem. Her mind had focused with such tunnel-vision clarity on simply ‘reaching the sanctuary door,’ that she had never considered what might happen once they made it inside. She’d gotten assurances from Alwyn that the monks would grant them safe haven. That he’d be sending them a message. But even if he hadn’t they were *monks*, right? Surely they wouldn’t turn the four of them into the cold.

*Not that they could anyway. They’re trapped up here now, too, same as the rest of us.*

“But...of course they will!” Her voice cracked with a wave of panic. “I mean, won’t they? I know they have to be angry about their bridge, but I’m sure there’s a way to—”

“I don’t know, Kat,” Dylan interrupted quietly. There was that strange resignation again. An uncharacteristic surrender from a man accustomed to having everything under control. “I don’t know.”

The wind picked up, tossing their hair in a little cloud around them as the two fell quiet. For the first time since leaving the tavern together all those weeks ago, the decision at hand wasn’t theirs to make. They received only the consequences, none of the control. For the first time since they’d left the tavern, their fate was resting entirely in someone else’s hands.

For the first time, Dylan’s isolated perch made sense. So did that bleak expression.

“Hey, it’s going to be all right.” Without stopping to think she slipped her hand into his, giving it a comforting squeeze. “These guys are monks. They’re not going to just send us...”

A throat cleared suddenly behind them.

“...on our way.”

The two of them looked around to see a young man in a brown robe. The same man who’d opened the monastery door. Leather sandals. Corded belt. Hair cropped close to the head.

His eyes swept over them for a moment, taking in every detail, before he gestured down the staircase with a polite smile. “He’s ready to see you now.”

Dylan pushed to his feet, but Katerina stayed frozen in place—incapacitated by a sudden wave of fear. “Who?”

The monk smiled again, but it was neither comforting nor warm. It was simply a reflex. A conversational filler to get people from one moment to the next.

“You’re about to find out.”



## Chapter 2

The monks of the Talsing Sanctuary might have been ignoring them before, going about their daily chores as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, but the second the four friends were summoned to the ‘meeting room,’ all of that changed.

It was as though a curtain had been pulled back. Revealing them for the first time.

Katerina stuck close to the others as they were shepherded down one flight of stairs and then up another. Lost in a series of identical stone hallways, each more circuitous than the last. She ignored the probing eyes and muffled whispers, ignored the pointing fingers and the way a hundred different pairs of eyes lit up with scarcely-contained enthusiasm. She kept her head down and her eyes fixed always on the step right in front of her. Comforted that Dylan was standing by her side.

*I wonder if they know who I am,* she thought absentmindedly as they wound their way through another endless series of halls. *I wonder if they’ve guessed that I’m the missing princess.*

It wasn’t too far of a stretch. By now, the entire countryside had been plastered with Kailas’ damn wanted posters, and one would have to have been living underwater to have escaped the news that the king had died. Then there was always the fact that the royal army was parked right outside.

But, on second thought, Katerina wasn’t so sure. The lack of imperial flags and banners was only the beginning. These people were completely isolated. Living at the very top of the tallest mountain in all of the five kingdoms. If there was a solitary place on earth that wasn’t at all concerned with the political death games circling the head of Katerina Damaris, this might be it.

To be honest, it was an almost absurd kind of relief. One that broke through the weighty matters at hand, and tickled Katerina with the novelty as she realized that her three friends were getting just as many stares and whispers as she was.

But the monks weren't the only ones doing the staring.

"I thought this was some kind of church," Tanya whispered, one arm wrapped around Cassiel for support as she limped along, trying to keep pace. "I thought everyone here was a monk."

So had Katerina. But, clearly, there was more to Talsing Sanctuary than met the eye.

While it had initially been hard to see anything past the sea of brown robes, it was becoming clear that the monks of the order were only part of the general population. For that matter, they didn't even necessarily seem to be in the majority. The people who lined the halls, stretching up on their tiptoes for a glimpse of the mysterious travelers, would have looked more at home in Vale than they did living at the top of a mountain.

There were creatures and people of all shapes and sizes. At every age and walk of life. From human-looking children to clusters of pixies, to a towering troll who looked so solemn it was all Katerina could do to avert her eyes. It was more of a village than a strict religious order. A village so surprisingly diverse the princess didn't know how she hadn't spotted it immediately.

*Maybe they were all hiding from the army,* she thought suddenly, her eyes flickering from one supernatural face to the next. *Maybe they were all trying to keep out of sight until we proved not to be a threat.*

Whatever the hesitation, it was gone now. At one point, a tall group of men actually tripped over themselves in an effort to open the final door before Katerina had to do it herself. She and Dylan stepped back in surprise, and as the tallest of them slipped and fell to the floor a sudden giggle of laughter echoed from somewhere back down the hall.

Katerina glanced over her shoulder in time to see a young woman standing behind them in the tunnel, shaking her head with a sarcastic smile. Her eyes sparkled strangely in the dim light, dancing with a wry grin, before they flickered over the clumsy men and came to rest on the princess.

For a second the two women shared a silent look. A silent look paired with a curious frown. Then Katerina and her friends were whisked away and the woman vanished into the crowd.

"Don't say a thing," Dylan murmured under his breath as the gang passed beneath a tall stone archway. "Let me do all the talking."

Katerina was more than happy to oblige. The 'meeting room' might not have been as austere or intimidating as the great judgement halls of the castle, but there was an undeniable weight to it. A sense of gravity that made her straighten up with a little shiver.

*And that must be 'him.'*

There, sitting in the center of it, was a man who looked as old as time. He didn't have all the trappings—there was no tumbling white beard, no sea of ancient wrinkles to obscure the knowing eyes. Quite the contrary. He was fit and stately and didn't look older than fifty.

But there was something about him all the same.

This man had been alive longer than anyone she'd ever met. Katerina was suddenly sure of it. He'd seen things, and experienced things, and done things the rest of them could only dream of.

Already, Cassiel was looking at him like a kindred spirit.

He waited patiently until the room had filled to capacity, letting the people of Talsing cram inside, then raised a hand for silence. The order was immediately followed, and a sudden hush swept over the entire room. It was then that he stood, staring intently at his unexpected guests.

"Before anything else, I'm incredibly pleased to see you all back on your feet." His voice was quiet, too. Not that it mattered. The room was hanging on every word. "It looks as though none of you sustained any permanent injuries. For that we can be glad."

It was a kind way to break the ice, and all at once Katerina felt a rush of gratitude for the days of sedation. There was a fleeting pause, then Cassiel stepped forward with a gracious smile.

"That is thanks entirely to you." He was as charming as he was sincere. A far cry from the fearsome warrior Katerina had seen on the cliff. Yet, between the two of them, it was suddenly easy to see the High Born prince that lay dormant inside. "You have our eternal gratitude—not only for opening your doors, but for the care we received once we were inside. We thank you. Truly."

At that point, both Katerina and Tanya stepped quickly forward with murmured words of gratitude. Only Dylan stayed where he was. Keeping his eyes locked on the floor.

*Okay, so when he said 'let me do all the talking,' I take it he meant Cassiel instead?*

It was true. The fae glanced quickly behind him, his eyes flickering almost imperceptibly to the ranger's face. They rested there for a brief moment as a silent communication was exchanged. A second later he turned back to the front, and it was as if the entire thing never happened.

"Allow us also to apologize," he continued quietly, "for the circumstances of our arrival."

'Circumstances of our arrival.' That was a generous way of putting it. The lovely fae was so composed and disarming, that for a moment it was almost easy to forget that he and his friends had destroyed a centuries-old bridge. Essentially imprisoning every monk and villager inside.

The man in charge seemed to think so, too. His eyebrows lifted with the hint of a smile, and for a second Katerina could have sworn he looked right at Dylan. Then he returned to the fae.

"Let us not mince words. We have no allegiance to the royal army that followed you here, neither do we wish them any harm. The Talsing Sanctuary is above political entanglements. An order and authority all to itself. As such, we will not involve ourselves either way."

The princess stifled another shiver and moved closer to her friends. They wouldn't involve themselves? Did that imply a certain unwillingness to harbor political refugees?

Cassiel's eyes flickered up uncertainly, but before he could say a word the man continued.

"Neither do we have any intention of turning you into the cold. For over a thousand years, the sanctuary has opened its doors to anyone in need of guidance. They need only ask."

For the second time, the man's eyes came to rest upon Dylan. They lingered there for a moment, softening with an emotion Katerina didn't understand, before he reached into his pocket and pulled out a single piece of paper scrawled hastily in a looping hand.

"Furthermore, someone has seen fit to ask for you." The paper fell open, though it was too far away for anyone to read. "Only moments before your arrival, I received a message from an old acquaintance requesting safe haven

for you and your friends. This haven will be granted for as long as it's necessary. You have nothing to fear from the people inside these walls."

Again, Katerina was overwhelmed with a rush of gratitude. At the same time, she found herself overwhelmed with questions and tried to think back to anything and everything she could remember from the brief conversation between the wizard and the ranger at the pond.

When Alwyn had suggested Talsing, Dylan had been doubtful. More than doubtful, he'd flat out questioned the wisdom of such a proposition.

"If the monks grant her safe passage," he'd countered. "And why would they? She's not a student; it isn't a safe house for wayward royalty—"

The word lodged in her brain, and she looked around with sudden curiosity. A student? Was this place some kind of school? And the man in charge...he was like the headmaster?

"Well...thank you," Cassiel said softly, blinking at the floor in surprise. He had obviously counted on going several rounds with this intimidating man, trying to ensure a place for them within the walls. He hadn't expected it to be offered on a silver platter. "That's incredibly kind."

Again, his eyes flickered back to Dylan. This time they seemed to be prompting. Urging him to step forward as well. But the ranger stayed frozen in place, his gaze fixed firmly upon the floor.

"Of course, now that the bridge has fallen, we'll have to discuss what steps to take." For the first time, the man's voice rose a bit sharply. "Our provisions are supplemented from the villages at the base of the mountains. There's only so long we can subsist on what's already inside."

"We will!" Katerina blurted before she could stop herself, staring up at the man with tears of apology shining in her eyes. "We're so sorry for putting you at any sort of risk. I can never tell you just how sorry. We'll make it right. I promise."

Cassiel tensed, Tanya paled, and Dylan glanced up for the first time. All unsure about such an honest admission of guilt. But the man was looking down at her with a spark of interest. As if, for the entire audience, he'd been waiting to hear what she had to say.

*They don't need banners or flags. This man knows exactly who I am.*

Their eyes met for the briefest moment, then he turned away with a smile.

"In that case, I'll advise you all to get some rest. The monks will supply you with anything you need, and we can talk more in the days to come."

Just like that, the meeting was over. It ended as quickly as it had begun. Cassiel and Tanya were still murmuring words of thanks when the man swept suddenly out of the chamber from a door on the side. It wasn't until he was gone that Katerina realized she didn't even know his name.

"That's it?" she whispered to Tanya as the room began to empty out. A few brave people flashed them tentative smiles, while others seemed more eager to discuss the details amongst themselves. "That's all there is to say?"

"It's enough," Cassiel interjected softly. He, too, was watching people file noisily from the room. "Under the circumstances, we couldn't have asked for anything more. Michael's a good man."

"Michael," Katerina repeated in a daze. "Is that his name?"

She glanced automatically back at Dylan, but he was already heading to the door. Winding his way through the mass of people without really looking at anyone. When he got to the edge, he paused and waited for the others.

All of whom looked at him with varying degrees of confusion and exasperation before following him out.

It wasn't until the princess was sweeping past him that he leaned down and caught her arm. "What happened to keeping your mouth shut?" he asked under his breath.

She yanked her arm free, staring up with the hint of a glare. "I'm sorry. I figured you were keeping quiet enough for the both of us."

A wave of guilt flashed across his face, and he opened his mouth to say something, but she was out the door before he could get out a word. Together, the four friends followed the crowd through the winding labyrinth of corridors and back into the outside world.

They were just pouring out into the courtyard, when there was a flash of raven-colored hair and a shadowy figure went barreling right into Dylan's arms.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" The others stepped back in surprise as the young perpetrator righted herself quickly, one hand still wrapped around the ranger's arm. "I didn't see you there."



It was the girl from down in the tunnels, Katerina realized. The same one who had laughed when the men tripped over themselves to help them before.

Up close, she was even more beautiful than the princess had imagined. A slender, athletic frame. Smooth, mocha-colored skin. Long, silky hair. And lips that always seemed to be somewhere between a smirk and a pout. But far and away, the most bewitching thing about her was her eyes.

In her entire life, Katerina had never seen such incredible eyes. One was dark espresso, while the other was electric blue. An almost startling combination, but it fitted the girl like a glove.

She was the kind of girl the men at the castle would have fawned over. The kind that Katerina had always watched with a bit of jealousy from the confines of her chambers.

The hint of a dimple puckered at the corners of her lips as she flashed Dylan a seductive smile. A smile that barely masked the brazen boldness underneath. "I can be so clumsy sometimes."

He made sure she was steady before casually unwrapping her hand. It was a clear dismissal, but Katerina could have sworn he did it with a bit of a grin. "I'll bet."

There seemed to be more to the words than was said. The same way the greeting between the two came off as just the slightest bit strange. The way they leaned towards each other without seeming to think about it. The way they took in every detail, a lingering smile in their eyes.

It set Katerina's teeth on edge.

"I'm Kat." She held out her hand before she could stop herself, surprising everyone standing in the little circle, no one more than herself. Usually, these kinds of women were to be avoided. But this one seemed to require a little confrontation. At least, that's what the princess told herself.

The girl stared at her for a moment before peeling herself away from Dylan as her face lit up with a genuine grin. "Rosaline Macado." They shook briefly. "But everyone here calls me Rose."

*I'll bet they do.*

The princess' eyes made a rather sullen study of her face as the rest of the friends proceeded to make their own introductions. Realizing, with a

heavy heart, that the situation was even worse than she could have imagined.

The girl was *likeable*. Friendly. Playful. Warm. Before Katerina realized what was happening, she was horrified to discover that the lovely woman had actually made her smile.

*...bitch.*

“—granted, I’ve only been here about twelve months myself, but in all that time I’ve never seen anyone new come through the door. And the way you guys did it?” She shook back her long hair, looking distinctly impressed. “Let’s just say, they’ll be talking about it for a long time to come.”

The others shared a silent look, unsure how they felt about that. But before any of them could respond, a bell sounded from high in the clock tower and the girl jumped back to attention. A second later she was tearing across the courtyard, the same as everyone else.

“Anyway, it was nice meeting you!” she called over her shoulder. “I’ll see you around.”

Katerina and Tanya lifted their hands in a half-hearted wave, but she was already gone. Their fingers wilted as they gazed with wide eyes around the suddenly deserted courtyard instead.

“What the heck just happened?” the shifter demanded. “Should we be getting inside, too?”

Dylan merely shook his head, looking suddenly tired. “They’re going in for classes. For classes and prayers. We’re free to have this time for ourselves.”

Katerina stared at him curiously, but he carefully avoided her eyes.

“Come on,” he said, leading them back towards the chambers, “let’s get settled in.”

They were already halfway across the courtyard before Michael stepped outside.

Almost all the way to the door before he called out softly. His eyes fixed on the back of the ranger’s head. “Dylan.”

The ranger’s shoulders tightened as his skin paled. For a moment, it looked like he was going to turn around. Then he kept on walking as if he hadn’t heard the call.

*What the heck’s going on?*

Katerina glanced discreetly over her shoulder, eyes already tight with apology, but the man didn't look surprised. In fact, he was staring back with steady patience.

As if the boy had been walking away from him for a long time.



## Chapter 3

That night Katerina lay in bed, not sleeping for hours. Staring up at the ceiling. Thinking over the events of the day. The four friends had spent the afternoon and evening together—having realized that their rooms were next door to each other—and even shared a simple meal on Tanya’s bed. But despite having time alone for discussion, there ended up being very little to talk about.

Dylan was lying. That’s all there was to it.

He had obviously been here before. The maze of corridors didn’t confuse him. He knew where the kitchen staff kept the extra bowls. Prayers started at six. Dinner started at nine. He knew it all. Not to mention the fact that he obviously had some complicated history with Michael.

But Katerina couldn’t for the life of her get him to talk about it.

Tanya simply didn’t care. As long as the gang was safe on one mountain, with the royal army trapped all the way on another, she seemed content to focus on healing her broken leg and enjoy as many hot meals as she possibly could. Not that Katerina could blame her.

Cassiel obviously knew the truth but didn’t care to tell the princess. He and Dylan had an even longer and more complicated history than Dylan and Michael. If the ranger wanted to keep certain things to himself, there was no way that Cassiel was going to break his trust.

Which left Dylan. But the man was a vault.

At countless points during the afternoon and evening Katerina found herself thinking that, if it weren’t for his natural born aversion to political bullcrap, he would have made a fine lawyer back at the castle. Never had she witnessed such skillful deflection. So many deft evasions. It wasn’t that he ever actually lied, he just simply bent over backwards to avoid the truth. And as long as that was the case, Katerina didn’t know if she’d ever find out what was going on.

A sudden knock on the door made her jump. Followed by a whisper in the dark.

“Kat, are you awake?”

*Speak of the devil, and he'll come knocking on your door.*

Quiet as a mouse, she leapt out of bed and scampered across the floor, wishing she had a robe to wrap around her thin nightgown. How did the monks stand it? It was so cold!

“Listen, stalker,” she teased as she pulled open the door, “I’ve had quite enough of these late-night—” She broke off suddenly as her eyes came to rest not on Dylan, but on the beautiful girl standing beside him. “Oh...hi, Rose. What’s... uh... what’s going on?”

Dylan opened his mouth to reply, but Rose beat him to it. Her bright eyes twinkled different colors under the torches mounted on the walls.

“We were heading out to get a drink.” Her eyes swept Katerina up and down with a little smile. “Wanted to know if you’d like to come along.”

The princess’ first impulse was to refuse. Not just because she was dressed in nothing but a freezing cold nightgown, while this girl was decked out in a corset and what looked like black leather pants, but also because she didn’t want to seem too eager to come. So, Dylan and the little she-devil were headed out for late-night drinks? Why would she volunteer to be a third wheel? Maybe things had changed between the two of them. Maybe there was nothing there. He’d felt things while trying to be her knight in shining armor. Maybe now he didn’t feel so... much. He wasn’t talking to her, refused to admit things. Maybe what they had was fleeting—gone like the bridge across the mountains.

She swallowed and straightened. That might be the case, but her feelings, whatever they were, hadn’t changed. She didn’t exactly want Dylan to be left alone with the girl either. Rose seemed nice and all. Just a little too pretty, a little too confident, a little too strong, a little too exciting—wait, was Kat jealous?! *Am I jealous?*

“I’m not sure,” she stalled, hedging her bets. “I don’t really have anything—”

“To wear?” Rose reached suddenly into the leather satchel strapped around her waist and pulled out Katerina’s very own travelling cloak. She tossed it to the princess with a knowing grin. “I figured they must have confiscated your stuff when you first got in here. Managed to pilfer this from the laundry before the lady who works there got back from lunch.”

*Well, wasn't that...genuinely sweet of you.* She smiled. *I can't be jealous. This girl's actually nice.*

Katerina took the cloak with a stifled sigh and managed to flash the annoyingly thoughtful girl a grin in return. "Thanks. Not that these dresses the monks gave us aren't great, but—"

"—but they look like something that belongs in a prison?"

The princess laughed, sliding the cloak over her shoulders. "Yeah. Something like that."

Without another word, Rose gestured down the hall and the three of them set off, pausing to collect Tanya and Cassiel along the way. Where they were going to get this mysterious drink within the walls of a monastery, Katerina had no idea. But as she followed the girl down further into the tunnels, she was quick to realize there was more to the monastery than met the eye.

Before they'd gone more than five minutes underground, Rose ducked off the beaten path and pushed open a tiny door carved directly into the stone. If you weren't looking, you would never have seen it. A door that led to a merry little tavern nestled beneath the foundations of Talsing itself.

"This is incredible," Katerina murmured, staring around with wide eyes at what looked like the world's most exclusive speakeasy. "The monks built all this themselves?"

Rose shook her head, settling down at a table and snapping her fingers for the guy running the bar to bring them some drinks. "Inherited it. Whoever came here before us—they obviously had a lot of time on their hands. And a lot of whiskey and cider."

*Whiskey* proved to be the key word. Cider as well.

The shots went down easy, and by the time the gang was two or three drinks in the afternoon intrigue was laid to rest. The broken bones were compartmentalized away. Even the army camped on the other side of the ravine was temporarily forgotten. Escapism was the name of the game. And heaven knew, after everything the four friends had been through they'd earned a temporary escape.

Dylan settled back and actually released the handle of his blade, Cassiel and Tanya made eyes at each other from across the table, Katerina finally

managed to silence those worried questions flying around her head, and Rose? Rose turned out to be a bit of a delight.

“To dodging arrows.” She raised her fourth glass in a jubilant toast, then registered the sardonic faces staring back at her with a little grimace. “Oh. Right. Well, to living through them.”

The gang laughed and clinked their glasses against hers, downing them in a single shot.

The four friends had clearly been to hell and back and, curious as she might have been, Rose knew better than to pepper them with questions. But the more of their story had leaked out, the more anecdotes had begun piling up—the more absurd the entire thing had become.

“You know, I honestly don’t know which is worse—” she muttered under her breath, eyes flashing two different colors as she tried to imagine it. “The avalanche or the woods.”

“The woods,” Katerina, Dylan, and Tanya said in unison.

As one, the rest of the table turned and looked at Cassiel.

He paused with his whiskey halfway to his lips, but somehow still managed to project a look of total innocence. “...I didn’t think the woods were that bad.”

Katerina snorted under her breath, while Dylan slowly raised his eyebrows. Considering that he had nearly been decapitated then hacked to pieces while strangled by roots, he had a slightly different perspective. So did Tanya, for that matter. Though she kept her opinions to herself.

“At any rate, I scarcely remember the woods.” The fae set down his glass, acting as though they were all exaggerating a great deal. “The avalanche almost killed us all.”

“Not Kat,” Tanya said suddenly. She cocked her head curiously to the side, as if she was piecing it together for the first time. “Kat managed to walk away without a scratch.”

“That’s true,” Cassiel backed her up quickly, thrilled to have shifted the conversational blame away from himself. “You were composed enough to stab that dagger between my ribs.” Rose lifted her finger with an automatic question, but it was ignored. “And how is that, exactly?”

For the first time since they’d sat down at the table, Katerina shifted a little nervously in the sudden spotlight. It was a question she had asked

herself many times. Ever since they'd stumbled away from the scene of the crime. The others had been barely holding it together—broken and battered and buried beneath a mountain of snow. But her? It was as if she'd been tucked away by a pair of velvet gloves. Not a scratch on her body. Not a single hair out of place. She assumed it was because they were all protecting her. Nothing more.

"How is it that I managed to *stab* you?" She tried to deflect the question with a joke. "To be honest, Cass, I'd wanted to do it for a long time, and I figured I'd never get a better chance than when you were already half-dead—"

A grin flashed across his face, but he didn't let it go.

"I'm serious." His eyes grew thoughtful as he played the ghastly day back in his mind. "All of us were caught up in it. All of us were almost killed. But you just walked away..."

It was a question that needed an answer, and three pairs of eyes burned into her face. But, fortunately, the fourth pair saw what the others couldn't. And provided her a gracious escape.

"These crazy fools keep protecting you, don't they?" Rose laughed. "Just lucky, right, Kat?"

She glanced up in relief and saw Dylan watching her with a twinkling smile. At the same time, she remembered their conversation back in the snow. He'd asked her the same question, and she'd given the same reply. He'd let it go then. And was still willing to let it go now.

Her lips curved up in a tentative smile before she shrugged, as casual as could be. "What can I say? Some of us have saved up a little karma. Comes in handy every time there's an avalanche, a rockslide, a flashflood..."

The others laughed and returned to their drinks. Only Rose remained staring at her, eyes dilated with unnatural focus as she tried to figure out the princess' role in the group. What made the others so protective? What made the fragile-looking girl with the bright red hair so important?

Unfortunately for Katerina, it was a game that was best played drunk. And the empty glasses of whiskey had already left the rules of propriety far behind them.



“So, how exactly did you guys all meet up?” Rose began innocently enough. Then the alcohol kicked in and she asked her real question. “And why is the royal army sitting right outside?”

For a moment the little table froze. The rest of the bar quieted just as suddenly, straining their ears to get all the juicy details the sanctuary had been buzzing with since their arrival.

Katerina shot Dylan a look but remained quiet. She had been strangely grateful that the girl had been nothing but good company thus far. That she had kept all those irksome questions to herself. That gratitude was vanishing quickly. As was her own ability to lie.

“Oh, you know those guys,” Tanya said with a dismissive scoff. “In the absence of any real problems, they’ll jump at the chance to screw somebody. Probably just itching to unionize—”

“It hasn’t exactly gotten easier for people of the supernatural persuasion since you came to the sanctuary,” Cassiel intervened gracefully. “A band of us travelling together attracted attention.”

A brilliant save. But it still begged the obvious question—

“And why were you guys travelling together?” Rose insisted.

The others were uneasy, but she was too drunk to notice it. The tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife, but there was no escape. It had gotten to the point where Katerina thought they would just have to walk away from the table, when Dylan leaned forward with a little smile.

“I’ll do you one better...why the heck is there a tavern at the base of a monastery?”

The tension vanished with a burst of laughter. At the same time, a dozen loud conversations started back up all over the bar.

Rose angled Dylan’s way with a seductive grin. “The monks know about it, but they’ve learned to turn a blind eye. There’s no harm, and besides, we’re not all monks.” Her eyes swept him up and down. “Some of us like to play.”

That *delightful* girl was vanishing by the minute. Replaced with a drunken little flirt.

“I’m sure you do.” Dylan swished the whiskey around in his glass and lowered his eyes to the table. Shutting down every advance before it could begin. The same way he’d been doing all night.

But Rose, it seemed, was unnaturally persistent. In fact, she seemed to rise to the challenge. “So... is it true what they say about rangers?”

Katerina looked up sharply as Dylan slowly lifted his head. On the other side of the table, Tanya shot the princess a quick look before hurrying to intervene.

“What—brooding little narcissists? Giant savior complex?” Tanya downed the rest of her whiskey with a little nod. “Yep. That’s rangers all right.”

Rose flashed a grin, but kept her eyes locked on Dylan. “How does the saying go? Good with their hands, good with their—”

*ENOUGH!* “Boys,” Katerina waved her glass suddenly in the air, having reached her emotional limit for brazen advances, “why don’t you get us all another round? I could use one.”

Cassiel lifted his eyebrows with a slight grin but pushed to his feet to do as she’d asked. On his other side, Dylan shot her a glance from the corner of his eye but got up to do the same. It wasn’t until they’d vanished to the other side of the room that she turned back to the little hussy, determined to let her have a piece of her mind.

But, again, Rose beat her to the punch. “So, what’s the deal with that one?” She cocked her head curiously to the side, following the men with her eyes. Tanya and Katerina followed her gaze before twisting back around, both slightly stiffer than before.

“You mean Dylan?” Katerina asked in a deceptively sweet tone. *Funny you should ask.* “As fate would have it, he’s actually—”

“No, not Dylan. The blond.”

The girls turned around again in surprise, to see her looking at Cassiel—studying his every move with an almost critical eye. On the other side of the table, Tanya slowly lowered her drink.

Rose, predictably, remained oblivious.

“Doesn’t look like much of a warrior,” she murmured, looking him up and down. “Too pretty to have ever seen a battlefield. Can the guy even fight?”

*Can Cassiel even fight?*

Awkward timing aside, it was the perfect thing to say. For the first time all evening, Katerina and Tanya shared a genuine grin. The girl might

be unbearably full of herself, but she had missed the mark with that one. Missed it by a mile.

"I don't know—Tanya?" Katerina tilted her head to the side, pursing her lips to restrain an amused smile. "What do you think?"

As if on cue a drunken shifter stumbled towards the bar, spilling his drink in front of Dylan and Cassiel in the process. At first, it looked as though he'd simply fallen. But just a second later, he began spouting off vile profanities and accusing them of bringing a heap of imperial trouble to the sanctuary door. (Not too far off the mark. But boys will be boys.)

At first, they attempted to ignore him. But when he shoved Dylan against the counter, Cassiel apparently decided he'd had enough.

It was over before it had even begun. Over so fast it was hard to keep track of.

One second, the man was advancing with a look of drunken fury. The next, he was lying on his back in a pile of broken glass. Cassiel was standing over him, looking almost bored by the entire proceedings. He hadn't used more than a single arm. He hadn't even spilled a drop from his glass.

"Yeah," Tanya replied with a grin, "I think he can fight."

Rose's mouth fell open as the men returned to the table, each holding a trio of glasses in their hands. For a moment, she simply stared. Then her eyes flickered over to the shifter, who had yet to get to his feet, before she turned back to her friends with a newfound respect. "Wow. You guys should lead the hunting expedition!"

Katerina's eyebrows shot up in surprise, while the men leaned forward with interest.

"Hunting expedition," Cassiel repeated with a frown. "And how exactly is that possible? I thought the only way off this mountain was the bridge that we just...misplaced."

"It may have *technically* been the only path, but we can still get creative." Rose's eyes glittered with anticipation as she looked from one to the other. "That is, if you're willing to take the risk."

A few weeks ago, the gang might have risen to the challenge. That competitive nature was in their blood. Now? They'd taken their share of risks. And they'd been running low on blood.

“Speak plainly,” the fae demanded. He had a habit of slipping into a slightly more formal speech when he was annoyed. “Is there another way down or not?”

Rose backed off quickly and was careful to adjust her tone. “Not for an army of mortals, no. But for a few highly talented individuals—yes. There is a way. And, considering the fact that the monastery is going to have to stock up on supplies before long, I think it’s a good thing the two of you are here.”

*The two of them?*

Katerina and Tanya glanced at each other at the same time. When Rose had been talking about taking a joint risk, they hadn’t imagined for a second that the two of them weren’t included.

“Just Dylan and Cass?” Tanya asked innocently. There was a bit of an edge to her voice, one that only her friends were able to recognize. “No one else?”

Rose plowed right on ahead, missing the subtle warning in her words. “Well, I think we all know what you’re capable of.” She grinned at the ranger before batting her eyes at the fae as well. “And as for you...I’ve never seen anyone move like that.”

At this point Tanya reached over and stole the rest of her drink, while Katerina simply rolled her eyes. A part of her could hardly blame the poor girl. Cassiel looked like some ancient prince. The kind that rescued the princess from the dragon in the tower. As for Dylan?

...Katerina had never met anyone quite like Dylan.

But the girl’s constant flirtation didn’t bother Katerina nearly as much as what she’d just implied. She remembered the look on Dylan’s face when the bridge fell to the ground. She knew he’d sat up on that rooftop, staring down at it ever since.

“What he’s capable of?” Kat repeated icily. She and the ranger may not have been seeing eye to eye at the moment, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t absurdly protective. “If he hadn’t cut down that bridge, everyone sitting at this table would be dead right now. Probably everyone in this bar. You really think the royal army would have spared a place full of supernaturals? I don’t care if it’s technically a sanctuary or not—”

"I wasn't talking about the bridge," Rose said quickly, frowning, as if she'd already forgotten it had fallen. "I was talking about the fact that our pretty little ranger is also a wolf."

For the second time, Katerina sat back in her chair. Absolutely stunned. It had taken her weeks to discover Dylan's magical secret. *Weeks*—and they'd been sleeping in the same tent every night. Spending every waking moment together walking up and down the same trails.

This girl shows up less than twelve hours ago and already has it figured it out?

*No. He must have told her.*

A feeling of deep, irrational betrayal bubbled up in the princess' stomach as she turned to Dylan with wide eyes. She knew she had no claim to him. She knew she shouldn't care. But only a few nights before, she'd been pressed up against a tree. His hands up her dress and his lips smooching hers. They'd kissed under the stars, and she'd told him that she loved him.

*But he walked away.*

*And now this.*

He caught her staring just as she was looking away. He must have seen the look of hurt and confusion cloud across her face, just as she lowered her eyes to the table.

"Kat," he started, reached out and grabbed her hand without thinking, oblivious to the table full of curious onlookers watching his every move, "it isn't like that—"

"What?" Rose asked innocently. "She didn't know?"

For the first time, he looked at the girl directly. Leveling her with a cold glare. "Of course, she knows. I'm just trying to explain—"

"Explain what?" Katerina asked with a forced smile, trying to play the whole thing off like it couldn't matter less. "Explain why the *three* of you will be going on some hunting expedition while Tanya and I will be left behind? And why? Because I'm just human? No offense, Tanya." She glanced at her shifter friend before looking back at Dylan. "Or explain how this girl somehow knows you're a—"

"She knows I'm a wolf because she's a wolf, too."

*That* brought the conversation to a sudden halt.

Tanya and Cassiel glanced up with matching looks of surprise. Rose tilted back in her chair with a smug smile and blinked innocently. Okay, not so innocently. Katerina stared across the table with scarcely contained shock.

She'd thought there had been something strange about their greeting, an underlying subtext that the others weren't able to see. She'd thought there had been something sarcastic in the way Dylan had smiled when she went tumbling into him, claiming to have made a clumsy mistake. She'd just never suspected it was because they had each recognized a shared magic within the other.

*Well, it's official...they're perfect for each other.*

After a few seconds of awkward silence Katerina settled back in her chair, tracing the edge of her empty glass and feeling strangely numb. Dylan shifted uneasily as the others shot him a look, trying to catch her eye, but Rose couldn't have been more pleased with how things had turned out.

"Two wolves and a fae," she summarized, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "I can't think of anyone else who could make it down the cliff without a trail." Her eyes flickered over the other girls. "Especially considering that you two aren't exactly at your best."

While they may not have been 'at their best,' that didn't mean that both Katerina and Tanya weren't perfectly prepared to kick her smug little ass. Already, Tanya was eyeing the cast around her leg like she was ready to break it off and bludgeon the girl to death.

"At any rate, you don't have to worry about any of that with me," Rose said bluntly. "There are a few of us shifters at the sanctuary. All of us can be ready to go at a moment's notice. All you have to do is say the word, and we'll be there."

"I bet you would," Tanya interjected with a scathing look. "All they have to do is snap their fingers, and you'll come running."

The not-so-subtle implication would have been enough to make anyone blush, but Rose only ever smiled. Turning that smile with full force right onto Dylan Aires. "Trust me...I can keep up."



## Chapter 4

“Of all the stupid, insufferable, infuriating little shifters—that girl has got to be the worst!” Katerina was storming back down the torch-lit corridor as fast as her drunken feet would carry her, pausing every now and then to circle back as Tanya limped after her in a cast. “I can’t believe she’s a flippin’ wolf!”

Tanya paused to take a breath, leaning against the wall for support as she kneaded tenderly at her braced leg. “Yeah...you mentioned that several thousand times.”

Kat shot her friend a look but didn’t really pay attention to what Tanya had said. “At any rate, I guess it explains her stupid multi-colored eye thing.” Katerina’s mind flashed back with a begrudging sort of admiration before she slapped the wall with her hand. “You know what—*no!* I bet the whole eye thing is fake! Just a colored lens or something she uses for attention.”

Tanya pursed her lips and began limping along once more. “Yeah. I’m sure that’s it.”

“Not that it was fooling *anyone*,” the princess continued in a rage, completely oblivious to the fact that she was raging alone. “The whole thing makes her seem ridiculous. *Not* that she needed any help looking ridiculous.” She came to a stop in front of her bedroom door, promptly forgot how to open a door, and slid down to the floor instead. “Drunken idiot. Can’t even hold her liquor.”

It was a testament to the strength of the bond they had formed out in the wild that Tanya didn’t say a thing. She simply hitched the princess’ arm around her shoulder, heaved her to her feet, and twisted open the door with her other hand. “Yeah, that would be super embarrassing.”

Katerina nodded with a self-righteous sniff and stumbled clumsily into her room, tripping over every piece of furniture before coming to a stop in front of her bed. “Why aren’t you more ticked off about this? She was looking at Cass, too.”

This time, it was the shape-shifter's turn to deflect. She met Katerina's eyes for only a second before tossing back her hair with an unconcerned shrug. "And why would that bother me?"

Katerina surfaced from her drunken haze long enough to shoot her a deeply sarcastic look before wallowing in self-pity once more. "I just don't see what she's doing at the sanctuary to begin with. The girl said it herself: she's no monk..."

She trailed off piteously as Tanya came and perched beside her on the bed.

At the castle, there had been an endless parade of suitors. Not a single day went by that she wasn't inundated with a flood of invitations, and gifts, and marriage proposals. She'd even received the occasional sonnet. But she'd never cared about any of them. Never been attracted. Never once felt that dizzying wave of breathless incapacitation the way she did every time she saw Dylan.

It was *excruciating*. And to be frank, the princess quite simply didn't know what to do. This was uncharted territory here, and she was working without a net. Those two glasses of whiskey she'd had to drink weren't helping matters. Neither were the ones that followed.

Fortunately, at least one good thing had happened since she'd left the castle. She might have made half a kingdom's worth of enemies, but she had also made a friend.

"The girl's a straight-up wench," Tanya declared, leaning back against the window. The princess nodded soundly, and they both stewed in that for a moment before she continued cautiously. "But, no, she's not a monk. She's probably a student. A lot of supernatural kids are sent to sanctuaries like this when they're young by parents who can't protect them. They come here to get an education. They learn to protect themselves."

Katerina mulled this over as well as her whiskey-soaked mind was able. She recalled Dylan saying something about people going to classes as well as going to prayers. Part-tavern, part-school, part-religious order...it was too much to keep track of.

"But that's not the real question." She looked up to see Tanya staring at her with a coaxing smile. "The real question is why you care if she was flirting with Dylan."



*Crap! I probably should've seen that one coming.* The princess froze with cartoonish guilt, trying to figure out her next move. The words stuck in her throat, and she suddenly felt each one of those six drinks pounding away in her brain. "I...I don't. It's just undignified, is all." A quiet sigh slumped her shoulders, and she bowed her head in defeat. "She doesn't even know him."

"Uh-huh." In a most uncharacteristic move, Tanya wrapped her arm around the princess' waist with an almost sisterly smile. "You know, you never got a chance to tell me what happened in the woods that night we were in Vale..."

An icy chill stole across Katerina's face as her mind drifted back to that beautiful and terrible evening. To the moment where it seemed like all the happiness in the world was right there at her fingertips. To the moment when everything went wrong, and it all shattered. "Nothing happened," she confessed quietly. "If anything had, I think... well, I think it's over."

Tanya's brow creased with concern, and the supportive arm tightened. "It didn't look like anything was over tonight," she ventured hesitantly. "It didn't look like anything was over when he grabbed you after the monks dragged us all inside. He wouldn't let you go. I don't think he *could*."

Katerina fell silent as she thought it over. She had played the moment back again many times herself. How the two of them had come together like magnets. How she felt his lips brush across her hair in a secret kiss. It felt the same as when they were back in the woods, when he'd tilted up her chin and kissed her under the stars.

...right before he walked away.

She opened her mouth to reply, unsure what exactly she was going to say. Then her head jerked up suddenly and she turned to Tanya. "Wait! How did you even see that? I thought you'd blacked out."

More than that, she *knew* Tanya had blacked out. She had a distinct memory of the girl's lifeless body being carried into the monastery. Cradled safely in Cassiel's arms.

For a second, Tanya froze as guiltily as Katerina. Then she blushed with a sudden grin. "How else was I supposed to get Cass to hold me?"

There was a moment of silence, then Katerina smacked her arm with a laughing shriek. "You *didn't*!"

"I most certainly did."

“You little sneaky bugger!” the princess cried, still laughing. “We were worried sick!”

“Hey, it was either going to be him or a monk.” Tanya dodged the pillow flung her way with a mischievous grin. “There was no way I was able to walk by myself. I just... decided to go with the better-looking option. Coincidentally, the option that *didn't* take a vow of celibacy.”

It was the proverbial straw.

Whatever tension had been left over from the bar, whatever lingering trauma, vanished clean away as the two of them dissolved into a fit of giggles. Loud, uncontrollable giggles. That kind that, once they started, they were unable to stop. It was as if that rational tether keeping them grounded had finally snapped, leaving them breathless and hysterical in its wake. Rocking back and forth as they clung to each other, the flood of alcohol in their system washing away the stress.

There was no end in sight. They were still going strong several minutes later, when there was a quiet knock on the door. A second later, it cracked open to reveal a familiar face.

“Guys...” Dylan began hesitantly, watching their every move, “is everything okay?”

For whatever reason, that just made them laugh harder.

They shook their heads and covered their faces as he slipped inside and bolted the door behind him, torn between a diagnosis of alcohol-poisoning or mere insanity.

“I was just...” He shifted uneasily, looking as though he'd rather go back outside and face down the royal army than deal with whatever mystical girl nonsense this was. “I was just making sure that everything was all right...”

The laughing only got louder, and he took a hasty step backwards.

“I'll actually just go—”

“No,” Tanya resurfaced with a gasp, “you stay. I'm going to go.” She pushed off the bed and hobbled towards the door, flashing the princess a mischievous wink on the way out. “See what kind of ‘holy vows’ I can break tonight. Wish me luck, Kat.”

Dylan turned and stared after her curiously while Katerina made a hasty effort to pull herself together, smoothing her dress and drawing in

deep breaths as the color began to fade from her cheeks. She was almost completely under control by the time he turned back around.

“Holy vows?” he asked her.

An echo of laughter danced through the princess’ eyes as she thought of Cassiel, sleeping obliviously just a few doors down. Completely unaware of the heap of mischief headed his way.

“You don’t want to know.”

“Yeah,” Dylan chuckled nervously, “you’re probably right.”

They stood there awkwardly for a minute. Her, staring down at the bed. Him, running his fingers back through his hair. Then he flashed a tight smile and reached for the door.

“Well, I guess I’ll just—”

“Yeah, you should go.”

Even though it had been his idea he froze in place, retracting his hand the instant she seconded the notion. His eyes made a brief scan of her face before a flush of color flooded his cheeks, leaving him as close to blushing as the princess had ever seen. “Kat, about tonight...I don’t want you to think—”

“What?” she interrupted, staring evenly into his eyes. “You don’t want me to think what?”

Again, the sudden spotlight threw him, and he paused uncertainly, looking as though he wished he hadn’t decided to check up on the girls after all. He shifted uneasily from side to side, dark hair spilling into his face, and when he could put it off no longer he finally lifted his eyes. “I didn’t want you to think that I’m interested in that girl,” he said quietly.

This time, it was Katerina’s turn to be thrown. She had expected a bit of a back and forth. A passive-aggressive dance that would leave them both exasperated and alone. If there was one thing she hadn’t counted on—especially from Dylan Aires—it was the truth.

*Typical that he chooses tonight...*

She was worried the alcohol would work against her. Freeze her tongue or make her fumble when she needed to be strong. But it turned out to be quite the opposite. A wave of confidence flooded through her as she pushed to her feet, lifting her chin to look him right in the eye. “And why would I care if you were interested in some girl?”

It wasn't a question so much as a challenge. Throwing the ball back into his court. Forcing him to confront all those things he'd failed to say that night in Vale. Forcing a resolution.

Whatever that might be.

Dylan bowed his head for the briefest moment as some indecipherable emotion clouded across his face. When he looked back up a second later, he was subdued but calm. "I'm glad you're all right."

Katerina blinked in surprise as he turned back to the door.

*That's it? He's just going to leave?*

"You are bloody unbelievable!"

She hadn't meant to say it out loud. Or maybe she had. The whiskey was making it hard to be sure. Either way, he pulled back like he'd been burned, turning slowly around to face her.

"Excuse me—"

"Why didn't you tell me that you'd been here before?"

It fired out before she could stop it, surprising them both. She'd meant to ask about the shifter. Or Vale. Or the hunting expedition. Or any number of other seemingly important things. Instead, her drunken mind had settled upon this. And latched on with a vengeance.

"What's the matter, Aires? Can't decide which story to tell?" Her eyes gleamed with months of pent-up frustration as she repeated the question. "Why didn't you say you'd been here before?"

This time, his shock was undeniable. That impenetrable calm had shattered, and it was written all over his face. For a moment he simply stood there, trying to come up with something to say. Then, without seeming to think about it, he took a small step back. "I...I haven't."

"Don't lie to me," she snapped. "Dylan, it couldn't be more obvious."

They'd never gone head to head before.

Never had she stepped up and refused to back down. But the tables had turned. She wasn't a lost little girl running around in the woods anymore, waiting for him to save her. Things had changed. *She* had changed.

"I don't know what you want me to say." He lifted his hands in the air and spoke with such sincerity that, if she hadn't known better, she would have sworn he was telling the truth. But, even as he did so, he took another subconscious step back. "Kat, I've never been to this monastery."

It was an incredible thing. The way he could look her right in the eyes...and lie.

She took a step forward, making up the distance they'd lost. Bringing them close enough that she was standing just a few inches away. Close enough that she could slap him. Or kiss him. At this point, she wasn't sure which she wanted more. Then her shoulders dropped with a little sigh. "I thought you respected me more than that."

She might as well have slapped him. His eyes tightened with visible pain as the walls seemed to close in around him, leaving him breathless and unsure. For a split second he reached out as though to take her hand, then he remembered himself and dropped his arm back to his side.

"Kat, I can't..."

He trailed off, looking utterly lost as he stared down at her face. There was a battle raging behind those beautiful eyes, one she couldn't hope to understand. But, apparently, it was one that tipped in her favor. A second later, he crossed behind her and sat down on the edge of the bed.

He bowed his head with a quiet sigh. It was time to come clean.

"It was years ago when I came here. I was very young."

He spoke softly, keeping his eyes fixed on the floor. When Katerina sat beside him on the bed, it barely registered. He was lost in the past. His troubled eyes seeing things she couldn't.

"I was lost, alone. Had no practical skills of any kind. No way to take care of myself." A tiny shiver ran down his arms, but he didn't notice. "Completely at the mercy of the world around me."

It wasn't until Katerina's lips started to tingle that she realized she was holding her breath. It was almost impossible to imagine. This younger, vulnerable version of Dylan. In her mind, he had been a knife-swinging toddler. Sure of himself from the minute he took those first steps.

But the story wasn't finished yet. In fact, it was just getting started.

"Michael took me in. Raised me as well as he could. Gave me an education. A family." His voice tightened involuntarily at the last word. "A home."

The princess was spellbound. Utterly entranced. In truth, she had never actually expected him to cave. The Dylan she knew never gave even a

bit more of himself than was required. Never revealed any more than he wished. And *this*? To finally come clean...only to reveal *this*?

"I don't understand," she interrupted quietly. "I thought you said your mother was the one who taught you—"

"She did," he replied quickly before just as quickly shutting down. "She did an incredible job...for as long as she could."

Another huge gap. Another giant hole where a chapter of the story should have been. But Katerina didn't press. Not about that. She had some experience with absentee mothers herself.

"It must've been a huge relief," she prompted gently. When he shot her a blank look, she was quick to explain. "After being out on your own for so long...to come here and find people to look after you. To find yourself somewhere safe."

He laughed shortly, but it never reached his eyes. "Not really. I hated it here." He laced his fingers in front of him, elbows resting lightly on his knees. "It was safe, comparatively speaking. But it was a cage. A beautiful, suffocating cage."

"So why did you come?" Katerina asked curiously. "Or, I guess more importantly, why didn't you just leave? It's not like the monks were keeping you here."

A muscle twitched in the back of his jaw, and she suddenly wondered if that was true.

"There was no leaving," he said shortly. "Back then, there wasn't a bridge yet to the outside world and I couldn't shift well enough to make it down the mountain on my own. I was stuck."

An interesting point, but it begged the obvious question...

"If there wasn't a bridge, how did you get here in the first place?"

For a second, he looked completely undone. Like that lost little boy had suddenly come back. Then he lowered his eyes back to the floor. "By a way that's no longer open to us."

His tone effectively ended the line of questioning, but for the first time Katerina felt as though that was one answer she might already have. She remembered the note the fairies had told her to deliver. The one Dylan had thrown away and had no idea the princess had read.

*I remember a little boy who once needed some help himself...*

Is that what the fairies were talking about? Had they taken a young Dylan to the sanctuary?

“At any rate, the second I knew I couldn’t leave that’s all I wanted to do.”

Katerina could understand that feeling very well. And, given the nomadic restlessness that ran through Dylan’s veins, she could only imagine how it must have been for him. Given the restless way his foot was bouncing up and down, she could only imagine how it must be for him now.

“Well, that’s perfectly normal,” she said sympathetically. “The claustrophobia. The feeling of being trapped. I feel that way right now—”

“No, it was more than that.” His soft voice brushed lightly over the stones, painting a picture and taking the princess along with it. “I wasn’t...I wasn’t in a good place the first time I came here. And it wasn’t just the monastery, it was a lot of things. I was only fourteen. My entire life had fallen apart, and I...”

He bowed his head suddenly, spilling his dark hair into his eyes.

“Michael tried to help me. He was patient and kind. He was better than anything I could have deserved.” A wave of fondness automatically lit his eyes before darkening away. “But I didn’t want help. I just wanted to leave. More than anything...I just wanted it to end.”

It was quiet when he finished speaking. It was quiet for a long time. Then, when it became clear that he was in a world all to himself, Katerina reached over and took his hand.

“So, what happened?” she asked in a whisper. Almost too afraid to say the words out loud. It wasn’t the kind of story to have a happy ending. “How did you get off the mountain?”

“Easy.”

He glanced down at their hands for a moment before pushing to his feet.

“I jumped.”



## Chapter 5

There aren't too many places a conversation can go, after one of the participants freely admits to having jumped off a cliff. Dylan left soon after. Leaving Katerina to lie awake in her bed for hours, staring at the ceiling, trying to process everything he'd said.

He'd left without saying a lot. Like how he'd survived, for instance.

She'd seen the drop from the monastery cliff a lot closer than she would have cared to, and she knew first-hand that one did not simply walk away if one were to fall. It was thousands of feet up in the air, with nothing but a carpet of jagged limestone boulders to soften your landing. To jump would mean an automatic death sentence, and yet Dylan had survived to tell the tale.

He'd also left without explaining what he meant about the shifter.

Katerina had put all her cards on the table that night in the woods. She'd told him she was falling in love with him around the same time that he was reaching up her skirt. It was literally the most vulnerable and intimate thing she could have done...and he'd walked away.

Much as she hated to admit it, the message was clear enough. He simply didn't feel the same way. And yet, every day he was doing things that seemed to prove otherwise. Whether it be those secret shared moments when they were curled up in bed, the fact that he couldn't seem to stop kissing her wherever they went, or the moment in the courtyard where he'd basically come back from the dead just to gather her up in his arms.

Then there was last night. 'I didn't want you to think I was interested in that girl.'

What the heck was she supposed to make of that?! Furthermore, wasn't the girl in the relationship the one who was supposed to play games? She may have been mistaken, having never done it before, but she was fairly sure that, as the woman, it was her right to play with him for a while. To jerk his emotions back and forth with a kiss and a smile, while she decided if this was something that *she* really wanted to do.



Why was *he* the one playing games? What gave *him* that right?

A group of giggling children raced past on their way to morning mass, rousing the princess from her deep trance. She pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders, casting them a quick smile as their little feet pattered over the uneven cobblestone. The echoes of the bell summoning them to the sanctuary were still lingering in the crisp morning air. Funny, she hadn't heard it ringing.

Unable to sleep, she'd ventured out of her room and up onto the stone parapet overlooking the cliff where she and her friends had gathered the previous morning. With nothing but starlight to illuminate the landscape, she'd been unable to see anything more than the night sky. But as the sun crept higher and higher, inching its way towards dawn, she was able to extend her gaze farther. Over the endless mountain peaks. Out across the breathtaking vista.

...across the ravine and to the army waiting on the other side.

"At this rate, we should start paying you."

She whirled around with another start, surprised and a little nervous to see Michael walking towards her across the stones. He moved with the easy grace of one no longer burdened by the toils of time. The prayers and classes of the monastery ran to the chime of the clock, but otherwise the sanctuary moved to its own schedule. Set above the rat race that consumed the rest of the world.

"I'm sorry?" she asked nervously, unable to shake the feeling no matter how graciously he smiled. The man was a force. She couldn't help but stand a little straighter.

He smiled again, the warm light of morning twinkling in his eyes.

"For security." He gestured to her perch on top of the wall. "I don't know if I've ever seen someone keep such a vigilant watch."

"Oh, right." A blush stole across her cheeks as she hastened to climb down. It was easier said than done. Shod only in thin leather boots, her feet had nearly frozen where they'd stood. It seemed time had gotten away from her after all. Maybe it was a monastery thing. "Not me, I'm afraid." She offered him a shy smile, tucking her hair behind her ears with trembling fingers. "Just along for the ride."

The monk tilted his head to the side with an endless sort of patience, a flicker of curiosity dancing in his eyes. "I highly doubt that. We all have our part to play. Our way to contribute."

*I wish very much that that were true.*

Another blush stole across the princess' cheeks, and she quickly change the subject. "I was just admiring the view. It's different here than what I'd imagined. Beautiful and very...quiet."

Despite the staggering view, it was the quiet that struck her most.

This was a girl who'd come from the hustle and bustle of the castle. Whose childhood home boasted no fewer than one hundred noisy people at any time. She shared her chambers with half a dozen other women. She feasted every night at dinner with musicians, and entertainers, and the rest of the court. Never had she known such silence. She'd never known such complete isolation.

But standing there now, gazing out over the exquisite mountain peaks with the wind in her hair and the sun on her face, she had to admit it wasn't entirely unpleasant.

Michael chuckled and came to stand beside her. "Yes, that doesn't surprise me. Most people who come here are struck by the quiet. It takes some getting used to. At some point or another, most of them find themselves up here."

Katerina nodded, but a sudden chill swept across her arms.

Was this the place Dylan had been standing when he jumped? Was it a morning just like this one when he decided to take his own life? Another chill rocked through her body as her eyes darted up to the roof, remembering the look on his face as he gazed out over the cliff. Remembering the easy and habitual way he'd settled himself down upon the tiles. A place he'd sat many times before. "Was Dylan struck by the quiet?"

Michael glanced down in surprise before that twinkle came back and he looked at her appraisingly. "Someone's been doing her homework."

She blushed again but said nothing. Waiting for the monk to answer or not, as he chose.

"Yes, Dylan was struck by the quiet." Michael gazed out over the vista with a far-off look in his eyes. "But it didn't bring him peace, the way it does to most. It brought him conflict instead."

“What do you mean?” the princess asked, staring up at him with wide eyes. “What conflict?”

Michael glanced down again, but this time his face warmed with a quiet chuckle. “That story isn’t mine to tell. Nor is it yours to hear. Only in his own time.”

She should have been embarrassed, but something in his face didn’t allow for it. Instead, the two stood there in a comfortable silence, gazing out over the snowy peaks.

“In the meantime, no one stays at Talsing without giving something back.” Her eyes shot up nervously to his face, but he shook his head with that same steady calm. “I don’t mean money. I mean a skill, your time. Everyone has something to give, Katerina. Whether they know it or not.” The wind picked up around them as he lay a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Don’t underestimate yourself, young one. You have a lot to offer.” His eyes twinkled as they gazed down into hers. “You just need to find out what that is.”

A sudden feeling of warmth stirred deep inside her chest. Right beneath the smooth skin where her mother’s pendant used to hang. She reached up to touch it automatically, unaware of the fact that Michael had been intently watching every move.

“Make use of your time here,” he continued. “The resources of the monastery are at your disposal. May I suggest the library,” he added suddenly, “as a good place to start?”

Their eyes met again as he looked down with that signature twinkling smile.

“In the meantime, there’s no reason in the world you shouldn’t be able to take care of yourself. No man or woman at Talsing is just *along for the ride...*”

As if on cue the doors opened, and a group of well-armed teenagers flooded out into the courtyard. They didn’t notice their two-person audience and didn’t waste a moment’s time as they split off into pairs and began to spar.

Katerina’s eyes widened as she watched them, trying to imagine herself among their ranks, when they parted suddenly as a handsome man swept

through the middle. A man who'd spent the better part of his night drinking, then taking an unwanted journey down memory lane.

He needed only a moment to find her. His eyes seemed conditioned by now to pick out her flaming red hair. A second later, he was cutting rudely through the practice session and heading up the steps to meet her. It was only when he got closer that he noticed Michael standing by her side.

*Well, this doesn't bode well.*

It was like watching a man get hit with a sedative. Freezing in place. There was a profound hesitation in his step when he saw the two of them standing together, and for a second Katerina thought he was going to turn right back around.

Then, with a sudden look of determination, he swept up the stone steps.

"What's this?" he asked with no preamble. "Private meetings on the terrace?"

Katerina shot him a look, chiding him for his rudeness, but Michael only laughed.

"They're only 'private' to those who insist upon sleeping through the bell." His eyes twinkled merrily as they swept his young protégé up and down. "A habit I see you've yet to break."

Dylan's face flushed, but he stood his ground. Granted, he seemed physically incapable of meeting the man's eye. Neither could he meet Katerina's.

"Don't you have a prayer circle to run?" he muttered. "Alms to give to the poor?"

Michael laughed again but began to make his way down the terrace. "I see those elusive manners have yet to materialize as well. Have a good day, children—I'll see you at dinner." He reached the bottom of the steps and was about to vanish through one of the doors, when he turned back, staring right at Katerina. "Remember what I said. There is a reason that you came here, child. A reason you were given this time. Don't waste it."

Without another word, he disappeared. Leaving the two teenagers standing in silence.

For a moment, Katerina wasn't sure what to do. She and Dylan hadn't exactly left things on an easy note; between that and Michael, she didn't

want to anger him now. But when she finally got up the courage to glance at his face, she was relieved to see he was smiling.

“Good morning.”

Her entire face brightened in response, warmed by the mere sight of it. “Good morning yourself. I wasn’t sure if...” She shook her head quickly, stopping herself before she could begin. “Good morning.”

He laughed lightly, turning his back deliberately on the people practicing in the yard before making his way up the steps to join her on the parapet. Despite everything he’d confessed the previous night, he seemed completely at ease. And, despite the fact that the sight of him standing on a ledge was giving Katerina a mild heart attack, he glanced over the side, then turned back to her with a smile.

“Are you avoiding them, too?”

She blinked quickly, trying her very best to appear nonchalant. “Sorry?”

He studied her face for a moment, reading between the lines, before glancing back down with a grin. “I forget, not everyone is cursed with hearing like mine.”

Her brow furrowed in confusion, but a second later she figured out what she meant. For the second time that morning the door swung open, and Tanya and Cassiel made their way out into the courtyard. One, looking quite pleased with herself. The other, looking quite pleased in general.

They glanced around for a moment before spotting their friends and hurrying up to meet them beside the wall. Tanya was carrying a piece of toast in both hands. Cassiel had the coffee.

“Good morning,” he said with a sparkling smile, offering a mug to each of them. “And how did everyone sleep last night?”

Katerina bit down on her lip to keep from grinning, while Dylan shot him a strained look.

“More than you did, from the sounds of it.”

The face flashed him a completely unapologetic smile while Tanya linked her arm through Katerina’s, settling down to eat breakfast on the stone bench. While neither girl made direct eye contact, there was a series of secret sideways grins as they each nibbled on a piece of toast.

*That’s one way to stake your claim.*

Of course, the princess did it by forcing the object of her affection to bare his soul and relive the dark horrors of his past. But to each their own.

“So, what’s on the agenda for today?” she asked, feeling significantly more cheerful than she had that morning. “Kite-flying? Making rude banners to wave at the army—”

“Actually,” Dylan shot her an apologetic look over the rim of his cup, “Cass and I were going to meet up with some of the shifters and start organizing a group to head to the village.”

Both Tanya and Katerina set down their toast at the same time. In the after-effects of the booze, they had quite forgotten that there was a plan brewing to keep the monastery up and running. And they had quite forgotten that they were not a part of that plan.

“Some of the shifters, you say?” Tanya asked sweetly. Cassiel was deliberately avoiding her gaze. “Well, that’s funny, because it just so happens that I’m a shifter myself.”

Katerina poked her in the ribs. *Traitor.*

Dylan’s lips twitched up in a fond smile before he shook his head gently. “All the shifters that don’t have a broken leg. You need to take it easy, Tan. Rest up. Get back your strength.”

“Not to mention, you don’t shift into an animal,” Cassiel continued apologetically. Katerina was surprised he’d dared to speak at all. But their men weren’t exactly the timid type. “I don’t think there’s a way to make it down that cliff in a human form.”

Tanya’s eyes cooled, and she looked like she was doing some serious re-planning of her evening agenda. “What does that say about you?”

There was a beat of silence.

Then Cassiel brightened with a coaxing smile. “That I’m a woodland prince capable of doing just about anything?”

Another beat of silence.

Then Tanya smiled in return. “A woodland prince capable of warming his own bed tonight?”

The fae’s lips parted uncertainly, but Dylan swooped in for a save. “Actually, there’s a project getting started I thought you two might be interested in. Rebuilding the bridge.”

“The one that Katerina cut down,” Cassiel added authoritatively.

The princess' head jerked up. "What? *Me?*"

"Yeah, we took a group vote and decided to blame that on you last night at the bar." Tanya took a sip of her scalding coffee. "Sorry."

Katerina rolled her eyes and folded her arms firmly across her chest. "Fine. Well, how exactly are we supposed to rebuild this bridge that *I*, so arrogantly, hacked into bits?"

Dylan's eyes sparkled with scarcely contained laughter.

"A group of monks is already gathering the supplies. Just rope and planks of wood. A lot of people from the village are volunteering to help. The carpenters will show you all what to do."

*Easy enough for even a princess to figure it out.*

That's what his sarcastic smile meant. Katerina returned it full-force with a glare.

"Yeah, I remember what the bridge was made of, thanks." One day, she'd learn how to knock that smile right off his pretty little face. "What I *meant* was how are we supposed to set it up once the army is gone? It's not like we can just carry it over to the other side."

As it turned out, she knew how to wipe the smile off his face after all.

None of the others noticed the minute hesitation. The slight tensing of his shoulders. The way his eyes flickered without permission to where Michael was gazing out across the courtyard. By the time they'd looked around, he had cleared his throat and was looking back with a steady smile.

"They have ways..."

It was a rather mysterious way to end what had been a rather straightforward conversation, but Cassiel and Tanya were too concerned with caffeinating themselves to mind. Only Katerina looked back down at her mug with a sigh.

She couldn't be angry with him. They'd made too much progress last night; he'd opened up so much that she couldn't complain. All she wanted to do was understand.

Why did everything have to be so hard with him? Why couldn't anything just be as straightforward as it seemed? Was there ever going to be a time when she looked at him and found answers, instead of an unending series of questions?

*No, probably not.*

If only she didn't care so much. If only she could brush things off like the others, or be casual, the way Cassiel and Tanya were. Then maybe she wouldn't be stuck feeling like this all the time. Then maybe she could finally get a little—

“That's some nerve you've got.”

Katerina and the others looked up in surprise to see a tall man standing at the foot of the steps, glaring up at them with four or five other people at his side.

“Looking down at the bridge you destroyed? Or the army you brought to our gate?”

*Okay, games aside, I'm definitely not claiming credit for the bridge thing.*

Katerina watched warily as the others slowly pushed to their feet. Dylan, in particular, was looking the man up and down, a flicker of dark anticipation dancing in his eyes.

“Not only have we apologized, but we've already worked it out with Michael.” The words took on a hard edge as they flew through the air. “So, I'm not sure what else there is to talk about.”

The man spat on the ground as an angry murmur filtered through his friends. “You think you're so special, don't you?” His teeth clenched with rage, and without him seeming to realize it his beefy hands curled up into fists. “You come here, bring this trouble to our house, and just expect to get away with it? Well, let me tell you something—it doesn't work that way.”

Cassiel shot out a cautioning hand but Dylan slipped past it, ghosting lightly down the steps until he and the angry horde were standing face to face.

“Please,” he said softly, “enlighten me, then.”

For a split second, nothing happened.

Katerina sucked in a breath, Tanya set down her coffee, and Cassiel's eyes closed for the briefest moment before opening once more. Dylan, however, was standing perfectly still.

Then all hell broke loose.

“You BASTARD!”

It was hard to see who threw the first punch. Hard to make out much of anything in the blur of movement that followed. All the princess could



tell for sure was all six men leapt onto Dylan at the same time. Leapt onto him with such fury she didn't see how he could possibly survive.

"Dylan!" she cried, sprinting down the steps without a thought as to what she might do next. Tanya was right behind, racing fearlessly into the fray, broken leg and all. "Dylan!"

There was a flash of color as Cassiel leapt off the parapet, racing to his friend's side. He didn't bother with the steps. Unlike the men they were fighting, he wasn't armed. But it hardly seemed to matter. The fae moved with such speed and skill that nothing could touch him. Twisting and turning. Punching and kicking. Until at last he reached the center of the horde.

"Enough," he panted, grabbing Dylan by the shoulders as he tried to drag him away. "This is no way to repay Michael's kindness."

But Dylan was beyond reason. Nor did he need Cassiel's help. The other flailing men might have leapt in on the action, but they had little to do with the matter at hand. This fight was between Dylan and the man who'd challenged him. No one else mattered. No one else even registered.

"Get Kat out of here," he ordered, dodging a punch as easily as if it was happening in slow motion. "Take her back to the rooms."

Cassiel ignored him, turning around swiftly to fight off the men coming from behind. More and more were joining every minute. A literal army against two lone men.

*And two lone women.*

Katerina jumped off the steps without thinking, landing squarely on the back of the nearest man. He straightened up in surprise as she wound her arm around his neck—the same thing she'd seen Cassiel and Dylan do a thousand times. Granted, she didn't have their strength, not enough to choke him out, but she was able to incapacitate him enough to get him out of the fight.

"Tanya!" she cried. "Get the guy in the blue!"

Despite the multiple weapons their attackers had brought to the fight, most all of them were still choosing to fight with their bare hands. All except a tall man in a navy cloak, who'd just charged straight into the brawl. He whipped out a knife at the same moment that he lashed it across Dylan's cheek—making the latter cry out in pain as he brought a hand to his face, turning around in surprise.

His face grew pale and his mouth fell open in shock.

“What the ...”

“Tanya!” the princess cried again, still holding on precariously to the man thrashing beneath her. “Get him!”

It was only then she realized that Dylan wasn’t looking at the man in blue. He couldn’t care less about the gash bleeding freely down his face. His wide eyes were locked on Katerina, staring as though he literally couldn’t believe what he saw.

“Kat—” he began, then he was hit over the back of the head. He turned around with a violent curse and with two blinding strikes, he’d rid himself of his attackers and spun back to the princess once more. “What the hell are you doing?! Get down—”

A sudden sound cut through the clamor. An animalistic growl that had no place among men.

For a split second, the entire brawl came to a sudden stop as those who were fighting spun around slowly to look at the giant wolf standing in their midst. He’d come out of nowhere, leaving nothing behind but a pile of clothes and a lethal-looking blade. Katerina’s eyes locked on the dagger before slowly returning to the wolf.

He clearly thought his teeth would do more damage.

At some unseen signal, all the men they’d been fighting suddenly melted away. Making a clear path between Dylan and the shifter. At the same time they circled around behind him, fencing him in. Forcing him to choose whether he wanted to finish the fight as a wolf, or as a man.

“Dylan, don’t,” Cassiel’s quiet voice echoed from somewhere behind her. “These people mean nothing. Just dispatch the beast and be done.”

A furious growl rippled through the crowd as his words, but Dylan didn’t seem to hear them. His eyes were locked on the wolf. Staring intently. His shoulders rising with shallow breaths.

For a moment, he was tempted. His fingers twitched and the air around him seemed to shimmer with anticipation. Every muscle was tensed and ready. His eyes flashed with deadly fire.

But then, a second before he could make the shift, a heavy hand clamped down on his arm.

“That’s enough, Dylan.”

*Oh, crap.*

It was Michael.

In all the commotion, no one had seen him approach. If they had, the fight would surely have never gotten off the ground. As it stood, the crowd of grown men, each with fresh stains of blood on their hands, had turned a sickly shade.

Katerina released the man she was holding and slipped to the ground in shock, hoping desperately that the ancient monk wouldn't turn her way. She didn't think this was what he'd meant when he told her to find productive ways to fill her time.

But Michael only had eyes for Dylan. While Dylan had frozen dead still.

"Get inside," he commanded softly. "My office. We're going to have a little talk."

What would happen next was anyone's guess. In all their time together, Katerina had never seen Dylan heed the authority of anyone. He was his own person. Answerable to no one. It would be a cold day in hell before he pledged that allegiance to someone else.

But Michael wasn't just 'someone else.' And he certainly wasn't that to Dylan.

Without a backwards glance, the ranger did as he was told. Leaving the fight behind. Leaving the man who had wronged him bleeding in his wake. He didn't stop moving until he reached the door on the far side of the courtyard. It was there he paused for a moment before slipping inside.

Michael stared after him, an indecipherable emotion clouding his eyes. When he turned back to the hushed crowd, that emotion lingered. Freezing everyone in place. "This is not what we do at Talsing Sanctuary. I expected more from every person here." His eyes swept over the crowd before he shook his head and walked away. "This is not what we do."

The group stayed perfectly frozen until he'd vanished through the same door, and then for a moment or two after. Then, without a single noise, they quickly dispersed. Vanishing upstairs and down hallways. Back to their rooms where they could lick their wounds in private. Hang their heads in shame. Think about what they'd done.

In the end only Tanya, Cassiel, and Katerina remained. They alone didn't have a place they were supposed to be, but at the same time none of them wanted to stay in the courtyard.

"Back to my room?" Tanya said tentatively, after a minute of silence.

Cassiel glanced down suddenly, as if he'd forgotten the others were there, before he nodded his agreement. "Yeah. Sounds good."

Together, the two of them started off across the courtyard. They were almost halfway to the door before Tanya turned around and called back to the princess.

"Kat, are you coming?"

Katerina nodded her head slowly, but kept her eyes locked on the smears of blood staining the ground. "Yeah, I'll meet you there in a minute."

The others paused a moment, then slipped quietly through the door, leaving the princess standing alone on the wet stones. Her eyes glassed over as she replayed every violent moment in her mind. Shaken by the skill. Stunned by how quickly it had happened.

A gust of wind swept her hair around her like a fiery cloud, but even as she stood there a plan was forming. One that was just beginning to reveal itself, piece by piece.

*Bridge-building will have to wait. Right now, I need to learn how to fight.*



## Chapter 6

Aside from Michael's mortifying intervention, there turned out to be another downside to getting into a fight at the Talsing Sanctuary; you had to see the people you were fighting every time you decided to open your door.

Katerina and the others kept a deliberately low profile for the rest of the day after the early morning confrontation. Skipping lunch. Ignoring the bell that summoned everyone to afternoon prayers. They planned to skip dinner as well, so Tanya shifted into one of the cooks they'd met earlier, and snuck supplies from the kitchen so the three of them could eat dinner in her room.

The three of them. Dylan had yet to return from Michael's office. In fact, neither one of them had been seen since that morning. A fact that was causing the princess no small degree of concern. The sanctuary was already rife with speculation that Dylan had killed their leader in some epic showdown. Either that, or Michael had cast him off the cliff to join what was left of the bridge.

Whatever the story tensions were running high, and the three friends felt it was best if they kept off the radar for a while. Keeping to themselves until curfew before heading straight to bed.

But Katerina didn't go to her room when the bell sounded. She made a little detour first.

"Hey, you still awake?" she whispered, knocking quietly as her eyes darted up and down the torch-lit hall. "Can I come in?"

There was a faint rustle of sheets, followed by the sound of light footsteps heading to the door. A moment later, a familiar voice filtered through the wall.

"I was wondering if I was going to..."

Cassiel opened the door with a radiant smile. A smile that was quick to fade.

"...see you tonight."

While he clearly wasn't expecting her, it was clear that he'd been expecting someone. His shirt was gone, his hair was artfully disheveled, and the glow of a dozen tapers lit the cozy room.

Despite the circumstances that had brought her, Katerina couldn't help but smile.

"Why, Cass, you flatter me!"

She slipped past him into the room, batting her eyelashes all the while. Taking in the sensual splendor as he cast a nervous glance up the hall and quickly shut the door behind them.

"Kat, what are...what are you doing here?" He crossed his arms a bit self-consciously over his chest. Not that it helped. The man was a living sculpture. The very definition of sex on a stick. Chiseled muscles. Flawless physique. Despite his attempts to cover up the candlelight still flickered tantalizingly across his bare skin, casting him in an ethereal glow as Katerina spun around on her heel, grinning ear to ear.

"Unless, of course, you were talking about Tanya."

He shifted his weight, looking as close to shy as Katerina had ever seen. "Did you need something? Is everything okay?"

She did need something. It was the entire reason she'd come. But although a part of her was vaguely aware she was undermining her own cause, she couldn't pass up such an opportunity.

"Wanted to *see* her, did you?" Probably not the word he was intending to use. "You didn't get to *see* her enough during the day?"

The arms came down with a dry look. In no possible dimension was the man shy. "Tell me what you want, or I'll drop you out the window."

The fae's sense of humor was better than most, but there were limits. You never knew when you'd crossed that invisible line. Katerina vaguely sensed it might be behind her.

"I need your help," she said plainly, getting straight to the point.

His eyes flashed with sarcasm. "You're off to a great start."

"I'm serious." In an act of supplication she perched tentatively on the edge of the dresser, ignoring the four or five candles that were placed there to set the mood. "Ever since I left the castle, I haven't been able to take care of myself the way I should. Sure, I've picked up some tips in terms of surviving out in the woods, but every time there's a fight I'm completely helpless."

She paused a moment, giving him the chance to disagree. But she knew he wouldn't. Cassiel wasn't one to sugarcoat the truth any more than Dylan was himself.

Sure enough, he simply stared back at her in the flickering light. Waiting for the rest.

"It's happened several times now," she said quietly, replaying each terrifying instance in her mind, "and then again this morning. I wanted to help. Wanted to protect the people that I..." Her voice trailed off and her throat tightened at the words she couldn't say. *The people that I love*. No, she couldn't say those words. But semantics aside, the fact remained. "...but I couldn't."

Her head bowed to her chest with a defeated sigh, then she lifted her chin once more. As determined as she was resolute.

"What happened today...it can't happen again. I won't let it."

*Which is where you come in.*

Cassiel had stayed very quiet during her speech. Reading between the lines. His bright eyes picking up on things that other people couldn't. When she was finished, he sat down on the bed.

"Why are you just deciding this now?"

It was a fair question. One she'd already asked herself many times.

"Well, I would love to have learned earlier than this. But at the castle, there was never any need. My brother was taught, but I was a girl. A female. My lessons were spent on... more specific things. *Like the crown. Like what I was to be like as queen*. She shook her head. "And from the moment I left, we've spent the days running. Running, and hiding, and trying very hard to keep to ourselves. It didn't seem like the right time to ask for fighting lessons."

*Fighting lessons.*

Just saying the words out loud sent sudden shivers racing over Katerina's skin. A fevered flush that was equal parts excitement and fear.

Cassiel was impassive. "And why are you coming to me with something like this, instead of Dylan?"

Another fair question. This one was more difficult to answer. In the end, the princess went for a half-truth. Praying like mad it would do the trick. "You know he'd never approve of anything like this," she answered

in what she hoped was a reasonable voice. “The man about had a coronary when I tried to take out that shifter today.”

For the first time, the hint of a smile danced across Cassiel’s face. “To be fair, even I couldn’t tell if you were trying to restrain him or if you simply wanted a piggy-back ride.”

“That’s what I mean,” the princess insisted fervently. “I don’t know *anything*.” Her voice fell several octaves as she stared entreatingly into his eyes. “You’ve got to help me, Cass. Please.”

The man didn’t do favors lightly. But, at the same time, the two had struck up an inexplicable bond. He considered a moment, then lifted his head with a simple reply. “All right, then, I’ll help you.”

A surge of overwhelming relief almost lifted the princess off the floor. Just knowing that the fae was in her corner improved her odds by about a thousand percent.

“Perfect!” she exclaimed, leaping to her feet. “Where do we start?”

His eyes widened in surprise, looking at her eager stance. “Now? You want to start right now?”

She hesitated a moment, remembering the late hour. “Unless you had other plans...”

His dark eyes flickered regrettably to the door before he pushed to his feet with a sigh. “No, it seems that I don’t.”

As he went around the room, clearing things away and regrouping the candles so the place was better lit for training than for sex, she bounced eagerly in the middle of the floor. Now that the moment was finally upon her, the adrenaline was flowing and there was no way she could possibly sit still. She was about to say as much, when he glanced over his shoulder with a final question.

“I’m assuming you don’t want me to tell Dylan about this?”

*That* made her pause.

The bouncing stopped as the smile froze on her face. She’d been so focused on simply getting Cassiel to agree to the task that it was something she honestly hadn’t considered. Of *course*, that would be a problem. The men were like brothers. Why hadn’t she thought of it before? “Is that—” she looked at him nervously. “Is that going to be a deal-breaker?”



“Quite the contrary,” he replied cheerfully, pushing the bed back against the wall. “I enjoy keeping things from Dylan. It’s one of the cornerstones of our relationship.”

*Of your completely dysfunctional relationship...*

Katerina kept that little observation to herself and straightened up eagerly as he came to stand beside her in the center of the room. His eyes swept briefly over her, and he adjusted her stance the way one might move a puppet. Spreading the legs, angling the shoulders, squaring the hips.

When he was satisfied, he stepped back with a little nod. “All right, so, the first thing you want to know is—”

With a burst of adrenaline, she launched a wild punch at his face. He caught it with a look of surprise. She blushed a million times over. And for an awkward moment, they just stood there.

“—how to make a fist.”

That smile came back again as he lowered it between them, then opened his hand so they could look at her own. At first, he clearly thought she was just messing with him. Then he held it up by the wrist, shaking it incredulously.

“What the heck is this?”

Her cheeks flamed bright red as she struggled to meet his gaze. “It’s a fist.”

He blinked, looking slowly between her and her hand. “You tuck your thumb under?”

She blushed again, but stared up at him with wide, innocent eyes. “To protect it.” Even now, the finger was itching to take cover. “Otherwise, it could get broken.”

There was a beat of silence.

It looked like it was taking everything the fae had to keep himself together. It looked like it was taking everything the princess had not to go sprinting from the room in shame.

But after a few seconds, Cassiel released her with a little smile.

“It’s exactly the opposite,” he explained calmly. “If you hit something like that with any amount of force, you’ll break your hand for sure.”

She glanced down nervously, trying it out the other way. “But wouldn’t it just—”

“Here.” He held up his palm with a look of endless patience. “Try it your way. Hit me.”

It felt strange to be invited, but she did as he asked. Nothing happened.

“Harder.” His lips twitched up, hiding another smile. “Like you mean it.”

Again, she tried. Again, nothing happened.

It wasn't until he took her hand in his own, striking it against his palm, that she knew what he meant. He was as efficient as he was strong. Using just enough force that she felt the tendons in her finger start to tighten and stretch. She pulled back with a flinch, but before the pain could really register he released her, taking a step back and holding up his hand once more.

“Do you see what I mean?” When she nodded, he gestured her forward. “Now hold your hand the right way, and let's try again.”



FOR THE NEXT TWO HOURS, Cassiel took her through the basics. It was a longer lesson than she could have hoped, and she absorbed more information than she could have possibly imagined.

The fae was a hard teacher. Hard, but fair. He never did anything unless there was a point to it, but he didn't shy away from the tough lessons either. On more than one occasion Katerina found herself flying through the air, only to come down hard upon her back. Each time, he would wait patiently while she caught her breath, then motion for her to get to her feet and try again.

She wasn't harmed. But she wasn't coddled either. Cassiel's style seemed to rest somewhere in the middle. He wanted to give the princess the confidence to try but prepare her for what she was in for at the same time. On that note, he didn't quite pull his punches...

“*Seven devils!*” she cursed, picking herself once more off the cold stone tiles. “You know, you could give me a little warning. I think you broke my spine.”

“You think the royal army is going to give you a little warning?” he asked evenly. But he helped her up with a fond smile, brushing a piece of

cracked limestone from her hair. "And I didn't break anything. That's something I very much would *not* want Dylan finding out about."

Katerina laughed, taking a half-hearted swing at him as the two circled around to begin sparring once more. "What's the deal with that anyway?" She surprised herself by dodging a punch, then countered quickly with one of her own. "One minute, you guys are bro-ing out. And the next, you're trying to kill each other."

"It's the only way we know how to love," Cassiel replied, tapping her beneath the chin to remind her to lift her eyes. "Look at my face, not my hands."

"I'm serious," Katerina giggled, hurrying to do as he asked. "The first time we met back at the hotel, I thought you were going to murder him right then and there."

Cassiel nodded, as if there wasn't anything unusual about that at all.

"Well, he deserved it." In a blur of speed so fast her eyes could scarcely follow, he slipped a hand behind her waist and flipped her once more into the floor. "Still does."

All the air rushed out of her body as she looked up at him with a rueful grin.

"But why? What could he have possibly done that was so bad?"

The quick back and forth came to a sudden stop as the princess realized she'd touched on a subject more delicate than what she'd intended. The sparring hands came down, and Cassiel paused in a moment of profound hesitation before turning his face away.

"He slept with my sister."

The silence that followed this simple statement was deafening. Getting louder and louder the longer it was allowed to go on. Finally, when it had become unbearable, the princess pushed to her feet with a quiet, "Oh."

For some reason, she would have never imagined Cassiel to have siblings. He didn't seem the type. And looking at the man now, she didn't want to imagine what heights of beauty any sister of his could attain. Still, it was hard not to ask the question.

Especially when it might answer so many of her own.

"So, he and your sister..." she paused casually, trying to act as though she was merely making conversation, "are they, like, a thing?"

Much to her surprise, Cassiel threw back his head with a sparkling laugh. It erased the tension still lingering in the room, and her heart slowed back down to a normal level. “It was years ago. Feels like another lifetime. So, no.” His lips curved up the way they did whenever anyone used a phrase created after the turn of the century. “They are not *a thing*.”

She nodded innocently, absentmindedly tucking her thumbs under as she raised her fists once more. Trying her very best to ignore the pair of piercing eyes that had fixed upon her face.

“Would it be so bad if they were?” Cassiel asked just as casually. He was circling around her with a hidden smile—a cat playing with its prey. “It might actually improve his mood.”

Katerina opened her mouth to respond, but at the same time she remembered that Dylan once cautioned her it was impossible to lie to a fae. They always knew the truth.

Instead, she came at him with a question of her own. “When did you meet my mother?”

The pacing stopped at once. So did the smile. For a long moment, the two of them simply stared at each other. Then Cassiel bowed his head with the quietest of sighs. “I met Adelaide as part of a diplomatic envoy, shortly after she and your father got betrothed.” His eyes drifted to the window as he remembered, lost in times gone by. “His position was fairly brutish and predictable, but she was the only Damaris I’d ever met who had a genuine desire for peace.” Those eyes softened with a smile. A smile he turned towards her daughter. “Then again, she wasn’t really a Damaris, was she? She was a Gray.”

Adelaide Gray. The name had vanished when she married into the castle. Katerina hadn’t heard it spoken aloud for a very long time.

She smiled back, somehow feeling both sad and happy at the same time. “You liked her?”

Cassiel’s eyes warmed and he nodded. “Very much.” The two sat down on the side of the bed, losing interest in their training session at the same time. “You actually remind me a great deal of her. Same eyes. Same...spirit.”

*Same spirit?*

Katerina looked up in surprise. Talk of her mother had always been scarce. After her death, the king had refused to allow her name to be spo-

ken. It made gathering information about the woman who was supposed to have raised her a lifelong challenge.

But the same spirit? By all accounts, her mother had been a firecracker. One of the only people in the world capable of putting her father in his place. A royal upstart who pursued her own agenda with such fierce passion that even the royal council was kept on its toes.

Much as she wished it was true, Katerina didn't see much of herself in that.

"Eyes, maybe." She tucked back her crimson hair with a wistful smile. "But I'm afraid the similarities stop at that."

Cassiel tilted his head curiously to the side, looking her up and down. "The girl who escaped an assassination attempt and fled the castle? The girl who braved an avalanche and took shelter in a giant's cave? The same girl who, for the last two months, has survived Dylan's ghastly personality and Tanya's cooking?" His eyes twinkled, and he shook his head with a little smile. "I wouldn't underestimate her."

A feeling of great warmth radiated out from the princess' chest; she ducked her head quickly, so he wouldn't see her grin. The fae may come off as haughty and intimidating to those who didn't know him, but he had shining moments as well. She would always remember this one.

"Come to think of it," she began coyly, "I think I *did* remember hearing something about the same girl throwing herself fearlessly upon a shifter's back..."

Cassiel nodded seriously. "Granted, I think he believed you were giving him a massage—"

"Hey!"

She shoved him as hard as she could, toppling them both off the bed in one fell swoop. Her head fell back in laughter at the look on his face—furious to have found himself on the floor—and she entangled her legs with his, purposely tripping him when he tried to get to his feet.

"You know how little effort it would take for me to snap your neck?" he threatened, kicking out with little regard as to where he made contact. "I'd be doing the world a service."

“Aww, you don’t mean that.” Katerina leaned against the base of the bed, settling into their fledgling brother-sister dynamic with a wide grin. “You’d miss me.”

“I’d miss nothing,” he spat, making a spectacularly failed effort to smooth down his messy hair. “The only reason I haven’t already turned you in is that your brother didn’t promise a reward.”

The two paused their angry back and forth long enough to share a fleeting grin.

It was strange, the way things worked themselves out. It struck the princess, while sitting there, that in a different world she and Cassiel might have been considered a perfect match. Both heirs to a large and powerful kingdom. A natural joining of two great houses to guarantee peace.

*...and wouldn’t that have been a disaster.*

“What are you thinking?” he asked inquisitively, unable to interpret her expression.

She flashed another grin, stretching out her sore and battered arms. “I was thinking what a nightmare it would have been if you and I had ever been forced into an arranged marriage. A prince of the fae, a princess of men. You probably would have been considered my top candidate.”

Cassiel shuddered dramatically but stopped trying to escape her flailing legs and settled beside her on the floor with a grin. “It wouldn’t have been so bad. As long as you didn’t mind me straying away from your chamber from time to time.”

“Oh, only from *time to time*?” Katerina repeated sarcastically. “We’d have to renovate the castle to add on rooms for your mistresses by the end of the first month.”

He threw back his head with a sparkling laugh, one that settled in his bright eyes. “But you’d like them all, I swear. It could be a built-in friend circle. And, of course, you’d be free to see other people as well,” he added graciously.

“Oh, well, thank you for that,” the princess laughed, hitting him with a pillow.

“Aw, come on, Kat,” he teased, playing as though it was real. “You know I’d still love you.”

“...in your own anti-monogamous kind of way.”

“Yes,” he agreed brightly, “like that.”

The two dissolved into laughter once more, when there was a quiet knock from the other side of the room. The door opened without invitation and Tanya stepped inside, pulling up short as she gazed down at the two of them in surprise. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t think the pillow fight started until later.” She raised her eyebrows with an amused smile as they pushed hastily to their feet. “I’m not interrupting something, am I?”

“Not in the *slightest*.” Cassiel gave the princess a not-so-discreet shove towards the door as his face cleared with a beaming smile. “I was hoping you’d stop by...”

The two shared a disgusting look as Katerina rolled her eyes, grabbed up her cloak, and headed to the door. They barely noticed she was leaving. It wasn’t until she paused in the doorway that she turned back and caught Cassiel’s eye.

*Thank you*, she mouthed, trying to convey everything she felt in just two simple words.

His eyes softened as he gazed back over the top of Tanya’s head. *You’re welcome*.

The two shared a fleeting smile, then he cocked his head pointedly towards the hall.

*Now leave*.

She closed the door behind her with a grin, head still buzzing from everything she had learned. From stealth attacks, to spinning kicks. Forbidden liaisons, to the background scoop on her mother. She was so completely caught up in the night’s events, she didn’t look where she was going and ran straight into something hard.

“Dylan!” she cried in surprise, looking up as a pair of familiar hands caught her. “Sorry, I wasn’t...” She trailed off, trying to catch her breath. “What are you doing here? It’s after curfew.”

“I could ask you the same thing.” His bright eyes flickered to Cassiel’s door before coming back to her, looking profoundly uncertain. “Were you just—”

“Cass, Tanya, and I were just hanging out,” she said quickly, emphasizing the second name as she tried to dispel any doubts. But, by the looks of it,

she'd only made things worse. Her flushed skin, messy hair, and disheveled clothes couldn't be helping matters much.

His eyebrows lifted ever so slightly, and that hesitation froze him in place. "The *three* of you?"

Their eyes met for a split second, then his implication suddenly clicked.

"What—no! Eww!" she cried, torn between utter amusement and an intense gag reflex. "We were just...we were just eating a late dinner."

That was true. The three of them had eaten dinner together.

...five hours earlier, mind you.

"We've been trying to keep a low profile since what happened this morning," she continued pointedly, trying to shift the attention away from herself. "Sticking together indoors."

A faint blush colored the tops of Dylan's cheeks but, to be honest, it looked as though he was all flushed. Whatever had happened with Michael had clearly taken a toll, and he was either unwilling or unable to discuss it even a second longer.

Instead, he nodded swiftly and headed to his room. "That makes sense."

He turned to pull open the door, but the princess caught him quickly by the sleeve. Staring up with wide eyes as he turned around to face her.

"Wait a second...are you okay?" He might not want to talk about it, but the guy had been missing all day. And he looked like he'd seen a ghost. "I was worried about you."

That instinctual defensiveness faded slowly from his eyes the longer the two of them stared at each other. After a few seconds, he lifted a finger and stroked it across her cheek.

"No need to worry. Everything's fine."

A trail of goosebumps followed his touch, and she dropped her eyes quickly to the floor.

If she hadn't known where things had stood before they got to the monastery, they were a complete mystery now. Every word, every touch, seemed to have a thousand different implications, and after their impromptu confessional the previous night Katerina was firmly convinced that she was never going to understand the world of men.

She was about to slip away off to bed, when the hand suddenly disappeared.



“Actually—it’s not.”

Her eyes lifted in surprise to see him staring down with a glare. A mask of anger that did little to hide the layer of protective concern buried underneath.

“I don’t know what you were thinking this morning, but you can *never* rush into a fight like that again.” His hands gripped firmly around the tops of her arms, unaware that they’d been throwing punches the better part of the night. “The entire point of everything we’ve done over the last two months has been to keep you safe. That’s not something I’ll be able to do if you go rushing into a brawl with every shifter you happen to meet. You need to be smart. You need to be safe.”

*Oh, Dylan, you would not like how I spent my evening.*

“Promise me.” He was staring intently into her eyes, forcing her to meet his gaze. “Promise me you won’t do that again. I need your word.”

A little chill ran through her, but she lifted her chin and looked him right in the eye. “Then you have it.”

He stared a second more before releasing her, looking satisfied. Without another word, he flashed her a quick smile and headed off to bed. She was quick to follow, not wanting to be caught in the hall after curfew. But a thrill of adventure stole over her as she vanished into the dark and uncrossed her fingers.

*Sorry, Dylan. That’s one promise I won’t be able to keep.*



## Chapter 7

“Get up, princess. I didn’t volunteer to waste my time.”

No matter how many times she heard it, Katerina would never get tired of that encouraging voice.

*Yeah, whatever.* She pulled herself to her feet with a glare, wishing desperately she could wipe that teasing, cocky smile right off Cassiel’s face. Unfortunately, it was a task easier said than done.

“You know, you should consider a career as an inspirational speaker,” she panted, trying hard not to sound as out of breath as she was. “Tour the countryside, lifting people’s spirits.”

“You know, I would,” he replied conversationally, “if only I could get past that pesky army who wants to shoot you in the face.”

She lifted her head in disbelief, only to see a mask of theatrical concern.

“Details.” He shook his head sadly. “They’ll get you every time.”

Over the course of the last two weeks, the two of them had fallen into a rocky rhythm. One that was equal parts bitter mockery and affection. Cassiel played hard and fought even harder. But Katerina was learning to keep up. In a way, it was like trying to outmaneuver your older brother. If your older brother was a famed warrior who had been alive for the last hundred and twelve years.

“You’d love that, wouldn’t you?” She spun around and kicked him right in the jaw. At least, she would have if he hadn’t caught her ankle. “If some random archer shot me.”

“Katerina,” he chided sternly, “I thought we agreed that if anyone got to shoot you it was going to be me. What do you think has kept me going all this time?”

Another spinning kick, followed by another deflection. At least this time she made contact. “You know once I get my throne back, I’m ordering your immediate execution, right?”

He grinned and rubbed his wrist, red from where her boot had smashed through. “And here I thought we were trying *not* to be like daddy.”

*Touché.*

If someone had told Katerina three months ago that she'd be taking jabs and punches from a prince of the Fae, she would have thought they'd lost their mind. If someone then told her she'd be returning them with jabs and punches of her own...

"Good!" Cassiel dropped the banter at once and switched into his 'trainer' voice, flipping back into the air to avoid the princess' sudden attack. "That's very good, Kat!"

The last fourteen days the gang had spent at the monastery had been a mixed bag. On the one hand, they were safe, well-fed, and sleeping on what technically passed as a mattress for the first time in what felt like years. On the other hand, the army wasn't going anywhere, and that bridge the four friends had been building was going to have nowhere to hang.

*Bridge-building. What a perfect metaphor for my life.*

The second she landed back on her feet, Katerina glanced down at her fingers—rubbed raw from twisting endless yard of rope. She and Tanya had ventured over together the morning after the notorious courtyard brawl. At first, they'd been terrified that the people already working there would simply bound them with the same rope they were using to secure the planks and throw them over the side of the sanctuary wall. But it didn't take long to find the kindness in the hearts and minds of the villagers, the inherent goodness that had united them all along.

In a strange way, the whole thing reminded Katerina of that night in Vale. The celebratory bonfire, complete with every creature—supernatural or not—gathered under the sun. Trolls were hauling up armfuls of cedar. Goblins and dwarves were carving out the holes. Little swarms of pixies tirelessly laced the endless twine together, while the shifters and men strung the boards on through.

It was a team effort. A team made stronger by its diversity. A team so fantastical and welcoming and warm, they made Katerina wonder what the five kingdoms had been like before.

*...before my own family ripped it apart.*

"Heads up."

The princess looked up just in time to see a streak of blond and silver flying her way. It was all she could do to raise her hands before his legs

caught around her waist, flipping her over onto the ground. He, of course, landed lightly on his feet. Staring down with a touch of amusement.

“Daydreaming, are we?”

Katerina stuck out her hand with a grin, forcing him to pull her back up. Yeah, the guy played rough. Every muscle in her body rebelled, and the second she was vertical she doubled over at the waist, crossing her hands in a defeated ‘time-out.’

“When am I going to learn how to do that?” she asked finally, still dazed by the effortless grace with which he moved his body. Still flinching when that staggering power was directed at her.

He raked his fingers through his hair, securing it in a little knot behind his head. “When you can stay on your feet for longer than five minutes at a time.”

She opened her mouth for a scathing retort, then surrendered with a shrug. “...fair point.”

It had become harder and harder to keep their nightly training sessions a secret as the days stretched slowly into weeks. They had to be done after curfew so as not to raise suspicion, there wasn’t much space in their personal chambers, and the boy who lived next door happened to be a wolf gifted with supernatural hearing.

On only their second night practicing, Dylan had heard the commotion and rushed into Katerina’s room, Only to find her and Cassiel panting on opposite sides of the room. In a blind panic, she’d made up a pathetic excuse about having seen a bat, and the entire thing dissolved into such a ridiculous jumble of lies that she and the fae didn’t practice again for another week.

But recently, they’d solved that little problem.

Apparently, they weren’t the only people at the monastery undergoing combat training. The monks held regular classes—teaching common people to defend themselves, and those gifted with magic to harness their powers—and they had taken to sneaking into one of the abandoned classrooms after the bell rang for curfew every night.

It was perfectly suited for such exercise. Padded floors. Mirrored walls. Plenty of space to spread out. By the end of the first night, the pair had upped what they were able to do about tenfold.

Of course, that meant Katerina's tired body was suffering tenfold the consequences...

"Did you really just call for a *time out*?"

Katerina snorted under her breath. Cassiel might try hard to blend in with the times, but the things at which he chose to take offense hailed back to an older era.

"What—they didn't have those back in the Middle Ages?"

Before she could straighten up, he flew towards her once more. This time he spun around at the last moment and came up behind her back, holding both hands hostage with one of his own as the other stretched slowly but surely across her neck.

"Don't panic," he soothed, gently strangling her all the while. "Think about what to do."

She tried to heed his words, but it was the most difficult lesson yet. The second his fingers pressed down on her windpipe, her brain shut down in borderline hysteria. Her lungs heaved and strained as they tried to gulp in even a breath of air, but his hand wasn't letting her.

She couldn't answer. She simply shook her head, eyes watering involuntarily as she tapped quickly on the back of his hand. It was their signal that a limit had been reached. A signal to stop. A signal that he'd honored every time.

Until now.

He glanced down impassively at her frantic tapping but shook his head. She felt the steady rise and fall of his chest behind her, breathing so easily while she could not.

"Not this time, princess," he said gently. "This is the most common attack used to incapacitate a woman. A lesson it is imperative for you to learn."

Her heartbeat jumped and skittered beneath his hand, but he spoke in a quiet, almost hypnotic tone. Taking her there with him. Centering her chaotic thoughts.

"All my weight is on my back foot, shifting our balance to the left. That's the only angle from which I can hold you. Now, calm down and think. What are you going to do?"

*Weight on the back foot...angled to the left...*

She tried to make sense of it. Tried to remember her training. But it was like trying to remember a dream after you'd already woken up. The longer she stood there, the faster it slipped from her fingers, the weaker her body got as she desperately fought for air.

She tapped on his hand again. Faster, this time. More urgent.

"I know you're panicking." His face came down beside hers; she felt his breath on her cheek. "I know all you want to do is run; the world's starting to go black. But I am the one off-balance here. I am the one in a vulnerable position. That puts you in control."

His hand tightened and the room spun.

"Now, what are you going to do about it?"

It happened before she was aware of it herself. Before she'd made the conscious decision to move. One second, she was standing there. Choking and desperate for breath. The next, the hand imprisoning her was gone. There was a quiet gasp as Cassiel went flying through the air before landing in a heap on the floor. Crumpled at her feet.

*Holy suffering mother of hotspurs...*

The room went dead quiet as the princess lifted a hand to her mouth.

*Did I just do that?*

Up was down. In was out. Black was white.

At first, she thought that Cassiel would be angry. They had been fighting for two weeks now, and he had never found himself the one smashing into the floor. But when he peered up at her a moment later, a beaming smile was stretched across his face.

"Well, look who finally decided to get in the game..."

The princess let out a burst of breathless laughter, thrilled beyond words, staring at her own hands like she couldn't believe what they'd done.

At the same time, the door opened behind them and a familiar cinnamon mohawk slipped inside. Tanya took one look at the scene in front of her before letting out a low whistle and lifting her hands for a round of congratulatory applause. "Well done! It usually takes a while to get him onto his back." She shot her boyfriend a mischievous wink. "Likes to be in control, this one..."

Cassiel got to his feet with a roguish grin as Katerina settled herself in one of the desks for a well-deserved break. Her throat was still throbbing

from being held with such unrelenting pressure for so long, but no matter how hard she tried she couldn't seem to stop smiling.

*I did that. He was choking the life out of me, but I managed to throw him off. Me.*

"I wasn't going easy on her either." For his part, Cassiel seemed just as thrilled as Katerina was. He was gingerly massaging his shoulder where it had smashed into the stone, but his eyes were dancing with unmistakable pride. "She did it all on her own. If she hadn't been able to, I'd decided to give up the ghost entirely and just let her die."

The princess laughed as Tanya smacked him in the chest and fished something silver out of her bag. She'd vanished a few minutes earlier, promising to return with snacks. And while it looked as though she'd eaten them on her way back, she had returned with a stolen flask of whiskey.

"Well, cheers to that!" She took a huge gulp before passing it o the fae. "I don't mind admitting that I'd be pretty lonely up here at this monastery if you were gone."

"Oh, thank you." Katerina joined them in the middle of the room with a rueful grin. "I'd hate for it to be a nuisance if I had died—"

A spray of whiskey spat in between them.

The girl looked up in alarm as Cassiel lowered the flask away from his face, looking as though he'd recently been poisoned.

"What...the bloody Mary is this?"

Tanya brightened up with an instant smile. "Oh, I made it myself! Grinelda in the kitchens got me some stuff to mix together. I call it *the lost cause*." She nodded brightly at the princess. "In honor of your training sessions."

The princess had been in the process of reaching for it, but she dropped her hand with a scowl. At any rate, she could smell it from where she stood. A strange mix of kerosene, welding oil, and Carpathian gin.

Cassiel cursed, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "It's the most disgusting thing you've ever made—and, Tan, that's saying something."

The shifter snatched it back, lifting it up for a tentative sniff. "It's not so bad." Cassiel raised his eyebrows, and she recanted. "All right, fine. It's terrible. I was just excited that it was something stronger than spiced apple

cider.” When the rim of the flask began to bubble and melt, she lowered it with a wistful sigh. “I should have known when Grinelda offered to help. We all know she isn’t exactly Team Damaris...”

Over the course of the last few weeks, the people of Talsing Sanctuary had divided into two groups: The people who supported the princess and her cause, and the people who thought the whole royal family was better off dead. Only Cassiel remained stubbornly on the fence.

Katerina remembered the exact moment it had happened. The moment when her royal secret had gotten out. Strangely enough, it hadn’t even been her fault. It had been something Dylan had done. She and the others had been sitting in the dining hall, at a table all to themselves. Little by little they’d begun to ingratiate themselves with the rest of the villagers, but that hadn’t yet extended to socializing during meals. And it all came to a screaming halt that day at lunch.

Annalisa, a young girl who worked in the kitchens, had just been walking over with a fresh tray of biscuits when the toe of her boot had caught on the wooden bench. Dylan jumped up to catch her just as she went tumbling, but in the process he leaned too far forward, and the queen’s royal pendant slipped out of his shirt.

A literal hush had swept over the entire room as a hundred pairs of eyes locked upon the magical stone. Dylan realized what had happened a split second later and stuffed it back into his shirt, but by then, it was too late. The pieces had clicked together, and the eyes of the sanctuary drifted slowly from Dylan to the frozen girl sitting in their midst. The one with the fire-red hair.

The next few days had been rough, but surprising as well. For every two people who despised her, Katerina was able to find at least one willing to give her a chance. It was a ratio she was determined to change. Little by little. Bit by bit.

She spent her days slaving away on the bridge project—helping repair the damage in any way she could—and her nights slaving away at her training. Preparing for all the damage yet to come.

“Watch your left.”

She looked up just in time to see Cassiel flying at her once more. Her arms flew up defensively and she was able to deflect his first attack, only to



have him come at her from the other side, smashing her into the floor ten times harder than the fae had. Apparently, pride could only stretch so far. The shoulder was hurting and the fae carried a bit of a grudge.

“What did I say in the beginning?” he asked impassively, ignoring the plume of dust that had sprung up in her wake. “Never let your guard down.”

The princess let her head drop back to the floor with a groan, blinking slowly as a host of stars danced dizzily before her eyes. “Actually, you assured me that you weren’t as vindictive as you might seem. I should have known it was a lie...”

The world slowly came back into focus as he offered a helping hand. At the same time, a not-so-helpful voice chirped cheerfully from the sidelines.

“You know, maybe you would fight better if you didn’t spend so much time on your back.”

A rush of pain shot down the princess’ legs as she pushed to her feet, and she shot Tanya a withering glare. Her contributions were never quite as encouraging as the shifter might think.

When asked about what Katerina had been doing in his room that first night, the traitorous fae had apparently decided to tell the truth. Tanya had been delighted by the entire notion and had immediately appointed herself in charge of the princess’ morale. Since then, she’d spent most every night ‘supervising.’ Perched in the center of his bed, her leg propped up on a sea of pillows, calling out instructions and critiques through mouthfuls of popcorn as the two slaved away on the floor.

Cassiel found this inexplicably charming. Katerina did not.

“It’s a shame that one ended with a punch to the face.” The shifter grimaced as the fight continued once more but offered the princess a thumbs-up. “I thought you almost had him.”

The princess spat out a mouthful of blood, determined to murder them both.

“You thought she almost had me?” Cassiel echoed with a suggestive grin. “I think you know it takes a little more than that.”

Tanya flashed him a witchy smile. “...there’s a lot of ego to work through first.”

“Would you like to try?” Katerina interjected pointedly, cutting short their teasing before it could get off the ground. “You think you can do better, be my guest. If not, shut the... just shut up!”

Tanya paused a moment, actually considering, then shook her head brightly. “Yeah, I don’t see either one of those things happening.”

The princess’ hands itched longingly for a blade, but the fae was quick to intervene.

“Let it go,” Cassiel advised gently, beckoning her forward with a twinkling smile. “Trust me, I understand the impulse. But let it go.”

Katerina rolled her eyes, but joined him in the center of the floor, marveling once again at how the shifter and the fae ever became a couple. On the surface, you couldn’t imagine a worse match. But just as it was sometimes better to let a wildfire run its course, the two completed each other in a strange way. The passion. The lust for adventure. The string of psychological neuroses that would have sent most anyone else running for the hills.

When the book closed on Cassiel and Tanya, they’d either end up killing each other or they’d outlast them all. Dylan and Katerina were already placing secret bets.

“The two-part combination,” Cassiel instructed, lifting his hands. “Do you remember?”

The princess thought back, then shook her head slowly. She remembered the broken finger from the first time she’d tried, but the salient details escaped her.

“Left-hand jab. Throw the elbow. Let the momentum carry you into a kick.”

*...and try not to break your finger.*

“That’s right,” Katerina nodded quickly. “I remember.”

These things usually happened very slowly. Despite his penchant for theatrics, Cassiel was a patient teacher and would always make sure she’d grasped the concept before shifting things back up to a normal speed. But this time, the princess was still riding high on adrenaline.

She’d just thrown a woodland prince into the floor. Victory was all but assured.

With a speed and recklessness that took them both by surprise she hurled herself towards him, throwing out the first jab in the process. It

grazed the side of his cheek as he shifted to avoid it, but by the time he did she was already whipping around her elbow as she spun into a high kick.

She'd never really understood before—the thrill of the fight. The rush of exhilaration that came when you threw caution to the wind and met your opponent head-on. She'd seen it in other people, of course. Seen flickers of it dancing in their eyes. But she'd never experienced it for herself.

Not until that very moment.

With a breathless cry she lifted into the air, her crimson hair whipping around in a fiery arc as her leg flew out with blinding speed. He caught it just an inch away from his face, but the princess didn't stop when she'd landed. Cassiel was skilled enough that she didn't need to worry about hurting him, and she had several other moves that she'd been aching to try...

"Good!" he shouted encouragingly. "That's good, Katerina! Keep going!"

Together, the two of them danced across the floor. A graceful blur of deadly force as she put everything she'd learned to the test. Laying it all on the line. Matching him blow for blow. Tasting her own blood, though she was too elated to care. Kicking and punching and laughing and twirling until she spun around to a sudden stop...

...right in front of Dylan Aires.

*Oh, crap. Maybe I should've had that drink after all.*



## Chapter 8

It was like all the air had been sucked out of the room. Like a shower of ice-cold water had poured down from the ceiling. Katerina felt the adrenaline itself cool inside her veins as she stood there before him, trembling like a school child caught cheating on an exam.

“This...” He took a step inside, gazing around the room with unconcealed shock. “*This* is what you’ve been keeping from me?”

Her cheeks flushed bright red, but she was unable to reply. She’d been a fool to think they’d just keep getting away with it. You didn’t pull things over on a ranger. Let alone *this* ranger. At the same time, she realized they’d let themselves get quite a bit louder than usual. A moment too late, obviously. Dylan must’ve heard the commotion all the way down in his room and came to investigate.

“You haven’t been avoiding me...you’ve been *training*?”

The word rang out like an accusation between them. Hard and sharp. Everyone, even Cassiel, dropped their eyes to the floor as Dylan shut the door behind him with a deafening bang.

*Get it together. He’s not in charge of where you go, or what you do. And even if he was, you’re not doing anything wrong. You’re learning to protect yourself. He should be thrilled.*

But even as she thought the words, somehow Katerina knew it wouldn’t be that simple. “The thing is, I didn’t think that you’d...” Her voice choked out with nerves, and she had to start again. “I knew you wouldn’t—”

“Your hand.”

She might as well not even have been talking. Dylan certainly wasn’t listening. He was coming to his own conclusions. Making his own decisions about what to do next.

“You said it had gotten caught in the rope. Working on the bridge...” His bright eyes flickered down to her recently broken finger, and she fought the urge to hide it in the folds of her dress. The first casualty of that two-

part combination Cassiel had been showing her. The one she'd been so thrilled to have mastered, just a few short moments ago.

"Yeah." She tucked her hair behind her ears, stalling for time. "Dylan I just—"

But Dylan had heard quite enough. And he'd seen even more. Without another word, he walked swiftly to the center of the room and punched Cassiel right in the face.

"Dylan!"

There was a sickening crunch and Katerina's hands flew to her mouth.

She happened to know how hard it was to do exactly that. And she happened to know the precise amount of force it would take to make that unforgettable sound.

"Dylan, he didn't do anything! He was *helping* me!"

The fae hadn't made a sound, hadn't said a word. He'd absorbed the punch silently and was staring back at his friend with an unshakable mask of calm.

Dylan, on the other hand, was a bit more volatile.

"What the... what did you think you were doing?" His voice dropped to an angry growl as the two of them stood toe to toe. "Teaching her to fight? Throwing *punches* at her face?!"

Cassiel lifted his head calmly, ignoring the drip of blood trickling down his face. "You don't think she should know how to fight? How to defend herself? With half the world out to kill her?"

Dylan ignored the obvious logic of this statement, a willing prisoner of his own rage. "I *think* that with half the world out to kill her, she shouldn't be fighting *us*." It was like the princess wasn't even there. She might have been the one who'd begged for lessons—and she suspected Dylan knew this—but every bit of his anger was directed at the fae. "I *think* that, of all the people in the world, she should be able to count on *us* to protect her. To keep her safe from freakin' harm!"

With his every breath, he was itching for a fight. But Cassiel was far too practiced to get drawn into something like that. And he'd known his friend for a very long time.

“You’re smarter than how you’re acting. You’re reacting right now,” the fae replied quietly, both refusing to escalate and refusing to back down. “If we were talking about anyone else—”

“What the heck is that supposed to mean?!”

*Yeah. What the heck is that supposed to mean?*

“Guys?”

Tanya stepped tentatively between them, holding up a hand on either side. The men refused to budge, but Katerina shook her head discreetly from the sidelines.

*Not now, Tanya.*

To be honest, she didn’t know if Dylan’s patience could handle any more of the shifter’s ‘helpful’ ideas. At this point, she wasn’t sure if she could either.

“It means you’re letting your feelings for this girl blind you to the obvious truth.” Cassiel’s eyes flashed, but he kept himself carefully under control. “She’s in trouble. As much trouble as one person can be in on their own. She doesn’t need three protectors—she needs a literal army to come stand at every side. *Every* little thing can help. *Every* little skill. And if you can’t see that, then—”

“This coming from the guy who wanted to kill her just a few weeks ago,” Dylan shot back angrily. “This coming from the guy who would’ve just walked away. The *only* reason you’re still here is that you don’t want to see her bloody brother on the throne!”

Katerina flinched, feeling each word like a physical blow. Was that true? She’d never understood why the three of them had been so quick to pledge their loyalty—the fae especially. At the time, they’d been living every moment under constant threat, so she’d been too grateful to ask.

Was that all there was behind it? That she was the lesser of two evils compared to Kailas?

Cassiel took a deep breath and dropped his eyes to the floor. Gathering his thoughts. Trying to sort through a century’s worth of conflict in just a few seconds time. For a moment, their little world seemed to stand still. Then he took another breath and lifted his eyes. “That’s how it started, yes. For both Tanya and for me.”

Without seeming to think about it, he reached out his hand. The shifter slipped hers inside without a second's pause. The two of them stared solemnly back at Dylan.

"I would've done anything in my power to keep Kailas from ascending to the throne. I would have given my life to stop it. Helping his less dangerous twin sister seemed a small price to pay."

*Less dangerous twin sister. So, I'm simply the better alternative. Thanks, Cass. Thanks a bunch.*

"But then we got to know Katerina," Tanya said suddenly. Despite her precarious position, poised in the middle of a fight, she stood there without a hint of fear. "Every day, every night. We spent the next three weeks wondering how a girl like her could possibly have Damaris blood."

"A girl delighted by the supernatural," Cassiel continued quietly. "A girl who would follow a crying child into the woods. She gave me her cloak that day after the storm..." His eyes softened, and his voice trailed off as he remembered. It was one thing to feel something in the moment. It was another entirely to put it to words. When he looked back up a moment later, that age-old conflict was finally settled. Damaris or not, he was suddenly sure. "I might have stayed because of Kailas. But I didn't walk away because of Katerina."

*Aw, I love you, too, Cass. Like a brother. Well, not like my brother. He's evil.*

More than anything the two had shared in the practice room those last few weeks, more than anything that has passed between them, it was those words that touched Katerina the most. Her eyes watered but she lifted her head high, more determined than ever to deserve his allegiance.

But the fae wasn't finished yet. He had one final blow to deliver.

"But that's not the real question, here, is it?"

The ranger lifted his head, looking as though he'd been shaken from a trance. Whatever he'd expected to find going on in this room, the trio was confounding his every expectation. After an open pledge of support to Katerina, he apparently didn't know what could possibly come next.

Cassiel's eyes danced as he turned from the ranger to the princess.

"Why did *you* stay, Dylan? Why didn't *you* walk away?"



IT WAS A GOOD THING the supply run the shifters were planning was happening in the next couple of days. At the rate the men were drinking, the entire monastery would soon be bone-dry.

“Do you think maybe you should slow down a little?” Tanya asked casually, looping a finger around the bottle to pull it discreetly out of reach. “Save some for the rest of the planet?”

Two pairs of hands shot out to stop her, putting the whiskey back in the center of the table.

“No.”

It was the first thing the men had agreed on all night.

After Cassiel’s rather pointed question, the practice room had devolved into a kind of metaphorical cauldron. Simmering at a dangerous rate. Threatening at any moment to boil over. If the entire thing had taken that opportunity to spontaneously combust, Katerina wouldn’t have been surprised.

Tanya had intervened with a universal solution. “*Let’s get a drink.*”

Of course, that had been about two hours ago. By now the entire table was littered with empty bottles of liquor and, judging by the men’s unrelenting pace, there was no end in sight.

“Are you ever going to talk to me?” the princess asked quietly, angling herself so that only Dylan could hear. “Or are you just going to sit there and try to drink yourself to death?”

Maintaining direct eye contact, the ranger defiantly drained the rest of his glass—looking as though the second option was perfectly fine with him. Kat sat back in her chair with a sigh, but no sooner had she done so than he answered in a soft voice.

“You promised me.”

There it was. The three words she’d been dreading since going to Cassiel that first night.

She’d expected it to be louder. Angrier. An accusation hurled with bitter venom across the table. But it wasn’t. It was quiet. Almost too quiet to hear. A low murmur, with room for no other emotion than a heartbreaking kind of betrayal.



But that betrayal, however well-intentioned, was misplaced.

"I promised to be smart," she replied slowly. "I promised to be safe."  
*And I crossed my fingers.*

His eyes flashed up as his hand tightened around his glass. She didn't know how he could possibly be so steady after drinking so much. She didn't know how he could even be sitting up straight. But the man was a statue. Piercing right through her with those impossibly sky-blue eyes.

"You *promised* not to be rushing into any more fights. You *promised* not to put me—"

"I can't always count on you to save me!"

The others looked discreetly away as the rest of the bar suddenly went quiet. There weren't many people out at such a late hour, but those who were slipped quickly out of their chairs, heading discreetly to the door. The people of Talsing might have developed a natural Damaris fascination, but that didn't mean they wanted to be collateral in whatever explosion was on its way.

Dylan stared at her until the last customer had vanished, a thousand different emotions dancing behind his eyes. When he finally did speak, it was like he was dragging the words out of himself. From somewhere deep in the darkness, where even he didn't dare to go.

"You think you can't count on me to—"

"No, it's not that." She shook her head quickly, horrified by his misconception, desperate for him to understand. "You saving me isn't enough. I need to be able to save myself."

The ranger shook his head sharply, but before he could reply the others slowly pushed to their feet, returning what was left of the whiskey to the bar.

"Don't start, Dylan. You know she's right." Cassiel's tone was strangely sympathetic, but it warned his friend to back the hell off at the same time. "What's the alternative? That she does nothing to defend herself and waits every time to be rescued? If you really cared about her safety, you should have been the one to initiate this. Not her."

The argument opened right back up, but this time Cassiel was having none of it. He simply nodded goodnight to Katerina, then leaned down gracefully and punched Dylan in the face.

“That’s for hitting me.”

He and Tanya left without another word. Leaving the tavern completely deserted except for the princess and the ranger. Both of whom were glaring each other down.

The princess and the ranger...*and* an unlucky bartender. A man who looked like he’d been on the verge of having a full-blown panic attack since the four friends stepped inside.

The unlikely pair might have finally had some semblance of the privacy they so desperately needed, but that didn’t make it any easier to say the words. For what felt like ages, the two just sat there. The clock ticked loudly between them. The tension was so thick it was hard to breathe. It had just reached a breaking point, when a trembling voice piped up tentatively from the corner.

“...you guys want some peanuts?”

Katerina and Dylan looked over at the same time, and the bartender nodded swiftly. Setting down his towel, he headed for the door.

“Yeah, I’m just going to go...be somewhere else right now.”

The door clicked shut behind him and Katerina let out a quiet sigh. She didn’t want to fight with Dylan. That was the last thing in the world she wanted. She only ever wanted to understand. But, as usual, they had found themselves right back in the middle of what felt like a perpetual war.

“Why are you so angry about this?” she finally asked, breaking the unending silence. “What could possibly make you so angry about me preparing myself for an eventual fight?”

He didn’t miss a beat. And the answer sounded strangely rehearsed. “Because I can protect you.”

Her temper frayed, and she slammed her glass down so hard that a little piece chipped off. “Cassiel’s right—that’s bull! This *only* helps, Dylan! It *only* helps to keep me safe!” All those pent-up emotions were coming to a boil. At any moment, they might burst free. “This fight is coming, and when it does I have to be ready! I have to be ready for whatever’s going to—”

**“BUT YOU SHOULDN’T HAVE TO!”**

The room went dead quiet as she stared at him in shock. Panting as though he’d sprinted a marathon. That signature calm abandoned him as those wide eyes fixed desperately onto hers.

“This fight might be coming, but *you* shouldn’t have to fight it!” he yelled. “You’re innocent in all this, you’ve done nothing wrong! And to take that away from you—”

He cut off quickly, stopping himself before he could say anymore. Never had the princess seen him at such a loss for words. At such a loss of control. It was as if all those delicate little threads holding him together had finally snapped. Revealing the man that lay inside.

“You don’t know what it’s like.” As loud as he’d been yelling, his voice was suddenly a hoarse whisper, barely making it across the table. “You don’t know what it does to you. Family fighting family. The kind of scars that will leave. You’ll *never* be rid of them. You can *never* get clean.”

Katerina had no idea what to say. She was scared to even move. The brave hero who’d been holding her up since she left the castle didn’t seem to realize that his hands were trembling.

“It’s all happening just the way it did before,” he murmured, running his fingers manically back through his hair. “We show up at the monastery for safe-keeping, now you’re starting to train...” A violent shudder ripped through his whole body, and he tried to steady himself with a deep breath. “This *shouldn’t* be your fight. And it doesn’t have to be. There are things I can do to stop it. Things I can do to protect you from...”

The entire world seemed to freeze as their eyes met across the table.

“...from turning out like me.”



## Chapter 9

Katerina left Dylan that night in the bar. All their cards were on the table and there was simply nothing more to say. At the time, she didn't even know if he realized she was gone. He just stared at the little candle in the center of the table. His eyes flickering with the light of the flame. He wasn't going to talk any more. The vault had closed, and he refused to let her in. He seemed lost in the past—or maybe drowning in it. Whatever it was, she was done. If he wanted to live his life in riddles and half mysteries, she wasn't going to fight it. He would have to come to her.

The next morning, she got dressed quickly and headed straight out to the terrace to begin work on the bridge—deliberately skipping the four friends' morning meal. She was in no mood for hangovers and chitchat today. Nor did she want to overanalyze every word or gesture that Dylan threw her way. She already had quite enough to think about all on her own.

*"It's all happening just the way it did before. We show up at the monastery for safe-keeping, now you're starting to train..."*

She folded her legs beneath her and took a seat on the damp stone. No one else was out so early—they were still eating breakfast in the dining hall—but there was always plenty to do. With the practiced hands of one who'd done it many times before, she picked up a coil of rope and began weaving it methodically through the wood. In one hole and out the other. Again, and again.

*You don't know what it does to you. Family fighting family. The kind of scars that will leave.*

The wind picked up and blew a few stray tendrils of hair around her face. The rest was falling down her back in two thick braids. Pulled out of the way so she could focus on her work.

*You'll never be rid of them. You can never get clean.*

Little beads of sweat trickled down her cheeks as the sun climbed over the alpine peaks and beat down upon her shoulders. The rope was noth-

ing more than a blur now. In one hole and out the other. Faster and faster. Again, and again, and again—

“You know it got your dress, right?”

The princess looked up with a start as a tall shadow spilled over the stones. She started with the shoes and squinted the higher up she got, until at last she got to a beautiful face. A beautiful face that was grinning down at her with two brightly-colored eyes. One brown, and one blue.

“My dress?”

Rose cocked her head and the princess looked down in dismay to realize the shifter was right. In her tunnel-vision haste, she'd threaded the rope right through a hole in the bottom of her skirt. One of the many souvenirs left over from their midnight race to the sanctuary. Arrows that had miraculously failed to hit their mark. Savaging her clothes instead of her skin.

“*Seven bells*,” she swore quietly, giving it a useless tug. It was already three planks deep. She'd have to tear out almost everything she'd done.

There was a sound of light laughter as Rose sank beside her on the stone.

“You know, for a princess, you certainly have a colorful vocabulary. I can't imagine they condoned that kind of language back at the castle.”

Katerina glanced at her quickly, then dropped her eyes back to the bridge. She hadn't spoken to the shifter since her secret had been revealed. Truth be told, she hadn't spoken with her since even longer than that. The two had fallen out before they'd ever really fallen in—sometime around the night when the little minx had made a play for Dylan Aires.

“Just tear it off.”

Rose reached for the dress, but Katerina yanked it away.

“No—don't.” The words rang out sharply between them, and she tempered her tone with a little sigh. “It's the only one I have. I can't just go ripping it to pieces.”

The sky-blue silk fluttered lightly in the breeze, one corner pinned down beneath the planks of wood. Katerina remembered the day she'd gotten it. Rather, the day Dylan had stolen it for her.

“*Of course, I stole it. You didn't think I actually went out and bought a dress, did you?*”

Typical Dylan.

A strange emotion flashed through Rose's eyes before she shoved the princess' hands aside and took the end of the rope for herself.

"All right, then, we'll untangle it."

It was Katerina's turn to flash a look, but the two of them lapsed into silence. One of them sitting numbly with her hands on her knees. The other, unwinding the rope from the wood with a lot more skill than had been used to secure it in the first place.

Only five quiet minutes later, the last of the planks fell away and the dress sprang free. It fluttered lightly back to the princess' side, embarrassed to have caused so much trouble, as each girl finally forced themselves to look the other in the face.

"Thanks," Katerina mumbled, with a hint of a blush. "You're actually a lot better with those knots than most of us who work here. You should really think about—"

"I wanted to apologize," Rose interrupted with no preamble, "for that night at the bar. I had too much to drink, and probably said some things I shouldn't have. Granted, you strike me as super over-sensitive, and with the way those guys look, *someone* should be fucking them. But it wasn't my place to impose, I didn't want to overstep, and thus, my much-delayed apology. I'm...*sorry*."

She shuddered, as if the word had physically pained her to say, but then nodded decisively just after, like it was a job well done. Katerina raised her eyebrows and couldn't help but smile.

"You okay there? You look a little sick."

The shifter exhaled as if she'd just undergone a great trial.

"I'll breathe through it. People apologize every day. There are seldom fatalities."

The two shared a look, then burst into laughter. Laughter that quieted with just as sudden shyness. Two pairs of eyes shot in opposite directions as they sat there on the stone.

When Katerina got up that morning, she wouldn't have thought that 'shy' was anywhere in Rose's repertoire. But looking at her now—fidgeting fingers and nervous, sideways glances—it was easy to see the girl wasn't nearly as confident as she seemed. Beneath all that leather and aggressive

sex appeal, she was just a teenager. A teenager armed with enough steel to singlehandedly take back the five kingdoms, but a teenager nonetheless.

"I've been here over a year," she said suddenly. "A whole year of just...nothing." Her eyes took on a wistfulness she didn't seem fully aware of herself. "You learn to content yourself with little things. To take in details. But it's a lot of staring out the window. Counting the chimes of the bell."

A sudden pang of sympathy tightened the princess' chest, and she felt her heart reaching out to the girl. Growing up in the castle, she knew exactly the feeling Rose had described. To have one's entire life reduced to a waiting game. Trapped in a permanent state of limbo. Unable to do anything but watch as the rest of the world went on without you. Your own life's story...passing you by.

Granted, the castle wasn't exactly the monastery. But in a strange way, the two were strikingly similar. In the end, it was just a different kind of cage.

"Yeah, I can understand that," she said quietly. The girl shot her a priceless look, and she laughed again. "Hey—you'd be surprised. The life of a princess isn't all it's cracked up to be. Just today, for example, I tied my only dress to a bridge."

The shifter lit up with a sudden smile. A smile that was a lot different than the ones Katerina had seen before. This one was unscripted. Relaxed in a way the others were not.

"Yeah, you're definitely not what I expected you to be." Rose shook her head thoughtfully, that smile still lingering on her face. "In fact, I'm having an unusually hard time figuring you out."

"What's there to figure out?" Katerina teased, giving the rope an extra tug as she threaded it through the first hole. "I'm a runaway princess who decided to take up construction and heights—"

"You're a Damaris on the run from the royal army, who won the allegiance of a shape-shifter, a wolf, and a fae." Rose's eyes twinkled as she held the board steady, picking up another as the princess tied the first knot. "So, your quirky new hobbies aside, *princess*, I think there's a little more to you than meets the eye."

Since running away from the castle and meeting her new band of friends, Katerina had made an unofficial study of the way people said the word. *Princess*.

Tanya said it merely as a place-holder. A word that could have easily been exchanged for any other as she demanded that Katerina surrender a larger share of the blankets or sample the latest disastrous attempt at cooking. Cassiel alternated, depending on his mood. At times, the title was a vile curse—as dark as one could imagine. At times, it was a sarcastic jab—a teasing reminder of that heavy crown and the weight that came along with it.

Dylan had his own way of saying the word. One that sent little shivers of anticipation up and down Katerina's spine. Whether it was a joke, a warning, or a whispered affirmation in the princess' ear, there was always more to it than met the eye. A layer of subtext, hiding just beneath the surface.

Katerina couldn't quite figure out how Rose said it. The word itself sounded strange coming out of her mouth. It was as though she was on the fence, waiting to be swayed either way.

“What happened to your hand?”

The moment passed, and the princess glanced down in surprise. She'd been frantically trying to come up with some brilliant existential answer for whatever truth Rose was trying to find. But the shifter didn't seem to require any sort of explanation. She just gestured to the princess' broken finger with a curious frown, picking up another plank of wood at the same time.

“Tell me you didn't rope that into the bridge, too.”

“No,” Katerina laughed, liking the girl more and more in spite of herself, “that was a left jab gone awry.” Their eyes met, and she hastily explained. “I asked Cassiel to teach me how to fight.”

“You did?” Rose looked genuinely surprised. Then impressed. “Well, that's a great idea. It kind of seems like everyone wants to kill you, right?” She gestured to the army with a casual nod of her head, then returned to the bridge. “Might as well do whatever you can to be prepared.”

Katerina stared at her for a moment, then turned back to the rope with a smile.

*Yeah, I like her. But I want to slap her at the same time.*



“At any rate, I’d be happy to help if you ever need another sparring partner.”

This time, the surprise was all Katerina’s. It was strange enough that the two were sitting there having a frank conversation. Now she was offering to help?

“Really? You would?”

“Absolutely.” The shifter twisted the rope around with a sudden grin. “Late-night workout sessions with a prince of the fae? Sweating it out with everybody’s woodland wet dream?”

*There it is.*

The princess laughed aloud and returned to her work. It was easier to get past the incessant flirting, now that she saw how harmless it was. It was even possible to play along.

“I’m afraid you might be disappointed,” she warned with a theatrical sigh. “Considering what a notorious womanizer that man is, he’s surprisingly monogamous.”

The girls shared a quick grin, but the shifter was already dreaming.

“You know what, Kat—you don’t even need to come. I’ll just tell you what happened at the end of every session. Give you my notes...”

She trailed off suddenly as the same shifter who’d instigated the fight with Dylan all those weeks ago made his way out onto the terrace. Thus far, Katerina and the others had been able to avoid him. He had classes in the first half of the day and trained in the other—so it hadn’t been that hard. But it looked as though that luck had finally run out.

Sure enough, he took one look at the princess before making his way slowly across the wet stones. His usual band of followers was looming tall on every side.

Both Rose and Katerina pushed to their feet. Staring cautiously all the while.

“On second thought, maybe you should go to those sessions after all.” Rose stuck her hands deep in her pockets. “It looks like you’re going to need all the help you can get.”

“Good morning,” the shifter said as soon as he got close enough. Despite the casual aggression to his stance, his face was covered with a huge smile. One that showed every one of his teeth. “Getting to work early, I see.”

“Well, you know what they say,” Rose started as she took a step forward, incidentally angling the princess out of sight, “the early bird...does something. Idioms were never my strong suit.”

The words fell on deaf ears, but the man pulled up short when he saw Rose. Clearly, he’d interpreted the lack of Katerina’s three friends to mean the princess was essentially ‘alone.’ He hadn’t imagined there might be someone else in her corner.

“Rose?” His pace slowed, and for the first time the men beside him faltered. “What’re you doing here? I didn’t know you were helping with the bridge.”

“You know me,” she smiled sweetly, “any chance for pre-dawn manual labor—I’m there.”

“You know this creep?” Katerina muttered under her breath, wondering why she’d skipped breakfast and strayed so far away from the gang to begin with.

“We’re in an alpine monastery.” Rose’s lips twitched up with a humorless smile. “Everyone knows everyone.” She raised her voice, so the conversation included the newcomers as well. “Kat, this is Randall. Randall, I believe you already know my friend, Katerina.”

*Friend?*

Katerina stifled her surprise and took great comfort in the word, coming to stand by her new friend’s side. It was still six to two. One of whom had only recently learned not to tuck her thumb under in a fist but, regardless, the pack of shifters was forced to pause. They had no wish to harm one of their own. Especially one as volatile and temperamental as Rose.

“I didn’t—” Randall hesitated, thrown off his game but unwilling to give up so easily. “I didn’t realize the two of you were friends.”

*Neither did I.*

A slender arm wrapped firmly around Katerina’s shoulders. A gesture that was as friendly as it was a clear warning. Randal stopped his slow advance as those surrounding him took a step back.

“More like frenemies, but I think we took a big step today. Don’t you, Kat?”

A wave of hysterical laughter bubbled up in Katerina’s throat, and it took everything she had just to keep it together. Saying a word like ‘frene-

mies' to a guy like Randall, especially in light of the present circumstances, seemed like throwing gas on the fire. But Rose somehow did it with a smile.

"What about you, Randall?" Her head tilted to the side, and all at once that sweet smile was as dangerous as it could be. "Are you *friends* with Katerina, too?"

The princess didn't know exactly how it happened. How the air seemed to chill and the gang of burly men in front of her shrank back at the words of one slender, smiling girl. But they did.

At the same time, the monastery bell chimed for morning classes to begin.

Randall's eyes flickered up to the clock tower as the doors to the sanctuary opened and the courtyard began flooding with people. The men standing around him melted away into the crowd until, at last, it was just the three of them standing there. None of them yet daring to move.

"Shouldn't you be getting to class, Rose?"

Randall tried to smile as well, but it simply looked as though he was baring his teeth. The princess stifled a shudder as her new friend stepped up to bat.

"Shouldn't you?" Her eyes danced as she cocked her head towards the main hall. "Tell you what, we can walk there together."

In a fluid movement, she left Katerina and wrapped her arm through Randall's at the same time. From a distance, it would look like nothing more than a friendly gesture. Only up close could Katerina see the amount of force she was using to keep him by her side.

"It's a date." He dipped his head in a gentlemanly sort of way before glancing over his shoulder at Katerina with a leer. "I'll be seeing you later, princess. Sometime when we can have a little more...privacy."

The word tickled her ear and Katerina seethed with rage as the two shifters vanished into the crowd. Never had she felt such unadulterated hatred of a single human being. Never had she truly understood the phrase, 'boils my blood.'

It was like there was an actual fire burning inside of her. Simmering deep inside her veins. Consuming her slowly from the ground up. It was only a matter of time before she lost control completely. Before the flames overtook her and there was nothing left to—

“Hey.”

The princess shrieked aloud as a hand came down upon her shoulder. Her heart pounded like a hammer behind her eyes, and a furious blush was soon to follow when she looked up and saw Dylan staring down at her with concern.

“Are you okay?” He lifted his hand slowly off her skin. “You’re burning up.”

The debilitating rage slowly subsided as she struggled to catch her breath.

“What? Oh—I’ve been out here. Working.” She gestured to the pile of planks and rope, shielding her eyes against the blinding sun, before looking up once more, suddenly on guard. “What do you want, Dylan? Because I don’t care what you say, I’m meeting up with Cassiel tonight—”

“You’re not going to spar with Cass anymore.”

She blinked and stepped back in surprise. She’d expected him to sugarcoat it. To try to reason with her, or at least pretend as though she had a choice. She hadn’t expected...*this*.

“Well, that’s just—”

“Let me finish.”

“No! This is complete bull! It’s not up to you, Dylan—”

“Will you please just shut up?”

“*You* shut up! I’m sick and tired of putting up with your condescending, superior—”

A soft finger pressed over her lips as he looked down with a slightly frustrated smile. “You’re not going to spar with Cass anymore...you’re going to spar with me.”



## Chapter 10

For fifteen days, Katerina had been stranded at the monastery. Fifteen days of staring at the massive army beyond. At the strangers within. Fifteen days of pushing her mind and body as far as they were able to go. But never once, in all those days, had she found herself as frightened as she was now.

“Would you stop looking at me like that?” Dylan glanced over his shoulder as he lit the last of the candles. “You’re making me feel like a monster.”

Katerina hastily averted her eyes, standing awkwardly in the middle of the room. “Yeah. Sorry.”

Shortly after the bell had rung for lights out, he’d come to her door and taken her to the same room where she’d been practicing with Cassiel. The same familiar room, but she suddenly felt as though she was standing in it for the very first time. The mats imprinted awkwardly under her feet. The air felt too warm. The mirrors reflected every glint of terror shining in her eyes.

*This is a mistake. This is a huge mistake—*

“First things first,” Dylan announced, dropping the matches and coming to join her in the center of the floor. “You’re going to want to take those clothes off.”

Katerina blinked slowly, feeling every nerve ending on her body come to life. “...excuse me?”

With a little smile, he reached down and picked a small pile of clothing up off the mats. Next to it lay two small canteens of water, and a roll of gauze.

“You can’t very well learn to fight in a dress, can you? Hardly appropriate.” He handed the clothes to her with that same quirky grin. “Try these on. They looked to be about your size.”

She accepted them robotically, staring down in shock. They were made of the same soft, worn fabric as most of his. A nondescript color somewhere

between brown and grey. The kind that let you move freely and blend in, no matter where you were.

There was just one little problem...

"Pants?" Her eyes darted up in shock as the legs unrolled with a flourish in between them, tumbling to the floor. "I've never...I've never worn pants before."

It would have been unthinkable. Not even the castle maids would stoop so low. Katerina had seen an occasional peasant farmer or two donning slacks as she'd ridden through a village, but the concept of *pants* was simply not acceptable for a woman. And definitely not a princess.

That being said...Rose wore pants. Tight leather pants that clung to her legs and caught the eye of every man within a ten-foot radius. Maybe there was something to them after all. And if they let her move more easily? If they helped her fight?

"Well, there's a first time for everything." Dylan's eyes twinkled as he looked her up and down, apparently trying hard not to smile, or laugh. "I imagine the two of us are going to have a lot of firsts in this room."

*What the heck is THAT supposed to mean?!*

At this point, Katerina honestly didn't know what was flustering her more: The pants, the innuendoes, the candles, or the twinkle in his eyes. Cassiel was one of the most hands-down beautiful people she'd ever seen, and the first time they'd sparred he'd taken his shirt off. Not once in that entire night, or any night after, did she feel the way she did now.

Like at any moment, she might lose control. Like at any moment, he might let her.

"Do you mind?" She summoned enough of her wits to twirl her fingers expectantly in the air, gesturing for him to turn around. "Nice of you to give me these *here*, not in my room." *Where I could change behind a closed door.*

After all this time, she didn't have to see his face to imagine the mischief in his eyes.

"You know what—I completely forgot," he answered innocently. "But you're right. That would've given you a lot more privacy. My apologies, princess."

She bit down on her lip and turned around with a smile, pulling loose the ribbons that held her dress and letting the fabric fall to the floor. From

the corner of her eye, she saw his entire body stiffen when he heard it land. She was naked. Just a few feet away. He was *very* aware of it.

But he was a good boy. He didn't turn around.

"Where did you get this?" she asked, stalling for time as she battled with the straps on the tunic. "Leftovers from your cross-dressing past?"

He chuckled, running his fingers through his hair. "I borrowed them from the laundress."

There was a pause.

"Borrowed?"

A much longer pause.

"...liberated."

*I should start making a list. Of the clothes he's 'liberated' for me. This, the dress... what's next?*

A few seconds later, the princess felt completely unrecognizable. The ruffles and royalty were put away. The delicate flower was placed on a shelf. She was a weathered traveler now. Ready for anything. A few shots of whiskey, and she might try passing herself off as a ranger for fun.

"Okay...I'm dressed."

Her crimson hair spun around her as she gave a self-satisfied twirl. For the first time in her life, ten bolts of fabric didn't twirl around to follow. She felt lighter. Free. Able to move and twist and bend in a way she'd never imagined possible. A little giggle escaped as she twirled again.

"I feel like I'm auditioning for a play." She held up the sleeves, looking down at herself with absolute delight. "Chimney sweep number five. Or maybe some kind of pirate—"

"All right, let's not get carried away." He pulled a leather cord from his wrist and swept back her hair, securing it in a gentle knot behind her head. She stared straight up at him, daring him to make eye contact, and he pursed his lips to restrain a smile. "You look adorable."

"*Fierce*," she corrected fervently. "I look *fierce*. Like a pirate."

"Okay, pirate." He took a step back onto the mats, casually raising his hands. "Let's see how fierce you can be."

Katerina felt her face pale as the reality of what was about to happen settled in hard. The thumb automatically tucked under. She forced herself

to remove it. “You know what?” She fell back a step, tripping over the canteens in the process. “Maybe we should actually save this for a better—”

“*Hey.*” All at once he was standing right in front of her, gazing steadily into her eyes. “What are you so afraid of? It’s just like working with Cassiel.”

A rosy blush colored her cheeks, and she dropped her eyes to the mat. “...it’s nothing like working with Cassiel.” She slowly brought her eyes up to his chest, not daring to go further.

Even so quiet, the words had a profound effect. The room fell awkwardly silent as Dylan found himself suddenly unable to meet her gaze. But only a second later, he was collected and sure. “Maybe it’ll be better?”

She lifted her eyes to see him staring down at her with a coaxing smile. A smile so boyish and charming and adorable it wasn’t long before she found herself smiling, too. The second that she did, his face lit up and he beckoned her forward once more. Eyes dancing with anticipation.

“All right then, princess—er, pirate.” Those hands of his were up again, ready and waiting. “Show me what you got...”

For a moment, they both stood there. Hands at the ready. Holding their breath.

Then, when it became clear nothing was going to happen, Katerina awkwardly cleared her throat. “...this is where Cassiel usually attacks me.”

Dylan stared at her for a second, then he surprised her with a sudden laugh. As sweet as it was disarming. “I’m sure he does. The guy is direct.” The princess nodded, bracing herself once more, but her opponent had no intention of moving. “But I want *you* to attack *me*.”

Katerina froze, at a loss as to where to even begin, and he stepped forward patiently.

“Don’t get me wrong, Kat. I want you to learn to *defend* yourself. This is about you being safe, not bold. The first move I want you to consider always is to run.” His eyes shone with the gravity of what he was saying. “But the best way to prepare for an attack is to come at it from the other side. To put yourself in your attacker’s shoes. That makes it predictable. That makes it a fight you’ll know how to win. Now, think; whatever Cass showed you—use it on me. Attack.”



For a moment, she considered. Then she took a deep breath and stepped forward.

*Two-part combination. You got this.*

With a skill and focus she hadn't possessed just two weeks before, Katerina flew fearlessly towards him and lashed out with her left hand. He dodged it gracefully, and she was in the process of throwing out her elbow to prepare for her kick, when all her movement came to a sudden halt.

"What—" She looked up in alarm, to find Dylan standing just inches away. He was holding her fist in one hand and her arm in the other. "I wasn't—"

"I'm guessing Cass always lets you finish the moves, since he wants you to learn them." Dylan nodded as though this was perfectly acceptable, then tightened his grip. "It's a good start, but it's not the way things will happen in a real fight. Now what would you do if I did this?"

Without a hint of warning he spun her around, slamming her back into his chest. She let out a gasp as a lock of her hair came loose. He was as graceful as he was strong. And the move reminded her strangely of something she'd see in a waltz. Something her dancing instructor would clap out on his wrist as she twirled across the floor.

Then his arms tightened around her chest, and she came back to the present.

"What are you going to do?" he asked quietly.

She ignored the way his breath tickled the back of her neck and tried to think. Cassiel had taught her how to flip someone over, but he was holding her too tightly for that. She could try to side-step away, but his boots had anchored hers into the floor.

"I haven't learned this yet—"

"This isn't about practiced movements," he interrupted gently. "It's about instinct. You can have all the lessons in the world, but nothing beats blind instinct when you find yourself in a fight."

Katerina froze for a moment, holding perfectly still. Then, with exaggerated slowness, she dug her elbow into the side of his ribs.

"That's right." She heard the pride in his voice and knew she had done well. "I'm wide open there, and it's a sensitive area. What else?"

Another pause. Then she tilted her head back until it was touching his.

“Do that hard enough—you’d break my nose. What else?”

One final pause, then she looped her foot behind his and turned around so the two were standing face to face. This time, she saw the pride firsthand. And the tender smile that went with it.

“That’s right, princess.” His arms tightened, and her heartbeat fluttered in her chest. “You have me standing here. What are you going to do next?”

She stared at him for a moment, losing herself deep in those beautiful eyes. Then she kicked him between the legs.

*“SEVEN HELLS!”*

The arms disappeared, and she sprang free, watching with a grim sort of satisfaction as he sank to his knees, head bowing towards the floor. Katerina of two weeks ago would have slapped herself across the face. Katerina of two months ago would have fainted dead away. But they were playing a different game now. The stakes had changed. And she had changed with them.

“I’d probably do something like that.”

Dylan stayed down for a few seconds, the tips of his hair skimming the mats as he struggled to catch his breath. When he finally straightened up, a little stiffer than before, the smile was gone but the pride remained. In fact, the pride was even fiercer than before.

“And you’d probably win.”

They were quiet for moment. Each staring at the other. Each feeling the subtle shift as the dynamic that had governed them before silently vanished.

Then Dylan lifted his hands and squared his jaw with determination.

“Again.”



FOR THE NEXT FEW HOURS, the rest of the monastery slept while the ranger and the princess engaged in the battle of a century. Flying back and forth across the room. Lost in their own world.

After the first few times Dylan threw her into the floor, Katerina realized that he had no trouble being rough with her. And after the first few times she caught him off guard and struck him in the face, she realized she had no trouble being rough either.

It was like ripping off a bandage. One she’d never known was there.

She and Cassiel had been learning the basic moves. Mastering the essentials, so she could one day put them into practice. Dylan threw her straight into the deep end.

Any reservations she might have had that made her unsure of herself, any hesitation before charging straight into a fight, melted clean away as he forced her to do it again and again. The fear of the unknown vanished into thin air as he methodically took her through every possibility. Stripping away the hypotheticals. Getting right down to the gritty reality and letting her see it for herself.

Physically, it was an experience unlike anything she'd ever known. She'd been shaken by the avalanche. Stunned by the woods. She'd been fundamentally depleted by the midnight sprint that brought them to the monastery walls. But this was different. This was an actual *fight*. Fist by fist, bruise by bruise, she was learning something here. She was hurting, but she was rising above.

And she had never felt more alive.

"I still can't believe you kept this from me." Devon shifted his weight and moved slightly to the right.

The sun was just beginning to rise over the tips of the trees, but the two showed no signs of stopping. Quite the contrary. They were moving just as quickly as when they'd first begun.

Katerina opened her mouth to defend herself, but Dylan didn't give her the chance. In a move so fast she could hardly see, he grabbed her by the wrist and flipped her over onto the floor.

"Of all the things for you to keep a secret..."

All the air rushed out of her body with a broken gasp, and she pushed to her feet with a scowl. Blowing her hair out of her eyes, she raised her fists between them.

"In case you forget, peasant, I'm under no obligation to tell you how I spend my time." She moved as if to come at him from one angle, then ducked cleverly to the side. "This is a business arrangement, nothing more." A sharp punch to his ribs, which earned her a punishing blow to the back of the head. "At any rate, it's not like you tell me everything..."

"I tell you a lot," Dylan countered, jumping back to avoid a kick to the jaw. She raised her eyebrows slowly, hands on her hips, and he surrendered the point. "...I tell you more than most."

Another blur of limbs, from which both leapt away. Panting.

"You didn't tell me you slept with Cassiel's sister."

The fighting came to a momentary stop as he stepped back in surprise.

"...that was a long time ago." His chest rose with shallow, rapid breaths as he stared with wide eyes across the floor. "He told you that?"

"Yes, he did. Because, unlike you, *he* isn't shrouded in mystery." Katerina made her way to the side of the room and retrieved the canteens of water, tossing one to him and keeping the other for herself. "Although, to be honest, I wouldn't have thought that some breathtaking woodland princess would be your type. I happen to know firsthand that you tend to avoid enchanting royalty."

For a second, Dylan froze dead still. Every inch of his body going rigid all at once. Then he realized she was grinning, and his body relaxed with a tentative breath.

"That's right...dazzling women with a kingdom to their name? I hardly see the appeal."

Katerina's eyes flashed but her lips twitched upwards, playing along with the game. "Don't be hard on yourself," she replied casually. "We're not for everyone. No, I would guess your type would be more along the lines of something you'd find in a zoo. Feasts on raw meat by the light of the full moon. Slutty little thing. Creepy eyes..."

The smile melted off his face, and for a moment he was dead serious. "I told you. I'm not interested in Rose."

Katerina threw her canteen at his, knocking it clean out of his hand. "Who said anything about Rose?" For a second, the two just stood there. Then her eyes danced with sudden mischief. "But it's funny that her name would come to mind..."

She skipped backwards across the mats as he moved forward with a huge grin.

"Oh, you're so dead."

They collided a second later, falling to the floor in a tangle of laughter and limbs. Hands grabbed hands. Legs pinned each other to the ground.

It went on for quite some time, growing more exhausted and ludicrous by the minute, until finally, in a massive show of strength, Dylan rolled on top—pinning her arms inescapably above her head.

It was here that they suddenly froze, the smiles still lingering on their faces. His dark hair tickled the sides of her face and she could almost hear the words. The same ones he'd been chanting at her the entire night.

*You got me here, princess. Now what are you going to do?*

She knew what she wanted to do. She knew it with every fiber of her being. But instead of acting on that impulse, her body relaxed with a quiet truth as she stared up into his eyes. "I missed you."

His grip loosened as his face lightened with surprise. Then uncertainty. Then some feeling Katerina was unable to place. He settled on sincere. "I missed you, too."

It wasn't until they said the words aloud that Katerina realized how true they were. When Dylan had caught her training the night before, he'd mentioned how he'd thought she was avoiding him. But, in hindsight, it was easy to see they'd been avoiding each other.

Since that fateful dawn where the monks had pulled them apart, there had been a distance between them. One that was hard to define. One that was impossible to ignore.

One that was chipping away at them, one piece at a time.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. For what exactly he was apologizing, Katerina wasn't sure. "Can we just...go back to the way things were before? Before they got so complicated?"

His breath washed over her face. His lips were hovering just an inch from hers. A shiver ran through her body as his hands tightened on her wrists. As he closed his eyes and leaned down—

*No.*

She pulled back, her body turning to stone.

"We can't."

The next second, she rolled over, dropping him on the floor, and quickly stood. Leaving the practice room behind her. Moving furiously down the hall. In such a blind rage that she hadn't even remembered to take her dress with her. That she'd left without seeing the look on his face. Without giving him a chance to say goodbye.

The flames of the torches flickered as she stormed past, dimming to a low whisper, then springing back to life the second she was gone. One by one, they counted down the doors to the end of the hallway, until at last she was at her own.

Of course, that's exactly when Dylan caught up with her.

"Katerina, just listen—"

She didn't think. She shoved him hard into the wall.

"No! YOU listen!" Her eyes shone with tears, but the last thing she'd ever do was cry. "I told you I LOVE you, Dylan! I told you I LOVE you, and you WALKED AWAY! There is no coming back from that! It's OVER! It's DONE!"

The memory crushed her all over again, and she took a step back. Shaking from head to toe.

She sucked in a sharp breath. "A part of me wishes I'd never met you. That it wasn't you in that tavern. That it was someone else instead. Then this would be easier. Then I wouldn't feel like—" She cut herself off quickly, refusing to say another word. She had given enough of herself to this wasted fantasy of theirs. It was time to move on. "There is no going back," she repeated, quiet as a grave. "That was your decision, not mine."

The lights flickered once more as she pulled open her door, slipping safely inside.

"Don't ever try to kiss me again."

The world went dark as the door slammed between them. Leaving her with nothing but endless shadows. And a memory of that haunted look in his eyes.

*Well, it's certainly over now.*

She sank down where she stood, leaning against the wall as her body shook with silent, wracking sobs. She felt so alone. Never had she felt so hopeless and dejected than at this moment. She angled herself to the window and questioned the darkness, her hand held up in question, arms shaking. *Why?*

The man she loved was standing on the other side of that door. Frozen in place. Looking as if his entire world had come crashing down. And she, Katerina, was the one who'd crashed it.

*But what else could I do? He doesn't love me back!*

A wave of absolute, gut-wrenching agony coursed through her body as a flame of light suddenly shot into the night sky. Illuminating the darkness. Chasing those shadows away.

The world paused. Katerina slowly lifted her head.

*...what?*

The light had been real. Her eyes still burned from it. But where had it come from? She didn't have any candles lit. And her window faced west. It didn't catch the sunrise, and even if it could the sunrise didn't look like that.

It had been like a meteor. A flash of light. A streak of flames like...

Her mouth fell open and her face went pale.

...like the ones coming out of her hands?



## Chapter 11

“**W**hat the...?”

When Katerina was little, she and her friends used to pretend they had superpowers. That they could use magic like all those fantastical creatures they read about in their stories. They would play for hours, shrieking with laughter as they ran through the trees. Wielding imaginary lightning bolts and fireballs. Flying high in the branches or melting invisibly into the underbrush. Summoning monsoons and changing into any number of frightening beasts.

The memories still brought tears of laughter to Katerina’s eyes. Looking back, they were some of the best days of her life. Pretending she had a power that no one else could see.

But...this? This was nothing like that.

“*Shit!*” she cursed under her breath, staring in horror at the flames snaking around her wrists.

At any moment, she expected to scream in agony. For the paralyzing shock to give way and the unbearable burning pain to set in. But that never happened. Instead, she simply sat there. Staring with wide eyes as the golden coils twinkled innocently in the dark. Like a fiery, incandescent bracelet that was beautiful to look at, but she was unable to take off.

*Unable to take off* being the key phrase.

“Stop it!” she whispered frantically, beating her arms against the floor. “Go away!”

*That’s right, genius. Let’s try talking to the fire. Maybe try stopping, dropping and rolling?*

Her inner voice scorned and disowned her as she scrambled to the bed, thanking all the heavenly powers that Dylan had happened to tie back her hair. A second later, she ripped the sheets off the mattress—throwing them over one of her arms as the other beat at it with all her might.

For a second, it looked like it was working. There was a muffled hiss and a plume of smoke rose out from the center of the blanket.



“Okay...it’s all okay.” She about cried in relief, slowly extracting her arm so she could begin work on the other. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

That’s when the blanket caught fire.

“What—no! No, no, no, no!”

The flames glistened and twinkled, mocking her as she jumped up and down on top of the smoldering fabric. She and her friends had done enough to strain the supplies of the monastery without setting the bedding on fire. And, given the royal army still sitting outside, the last thing she needed to explain was why there was a giant hole burned through the middle of her blanket.

Little bits of ash and singed cotton misted around her like an incriminating cloud, but she finally managed to put the flames out. The ones clinging to her arms were a different story.

“Why is this happening?!” She was so panicked, she found herself whispering aloud. Half expecting a voice to ring down from the heavens and answer. “Is this a prank?!”

Had that dark wizard decided to abandon his more concrete plans, giving in to basic trickery? Parlor games and mischief designed to wear down resistance and throw her off her game?

*If that’s the case...it’s working.*

As if to answer, the flames glowed even brighter. Sneakily lacing their way past her elbows as she stared on in dismay. Strangely enough, her tunic didn’t catch fire. Neither did her new pants, although she was sure she must have brushed her arms against them half a dozen times.

*STRANGELY enough? THAT’S what’s strange here?!*

“Okay, just think.” She sat down in the middle of the floor, holding her arms out to her sides like a pair of flaming wings. “You’re on fire. What puts out fire?”

It was a good thing the rest of the monastery was still asleep.

In the princess’ own defense, it’s incredibly hard to be discreet when half of your body is on fire. With all the subtlety of a rock through a window, she stole down the darkened hallways—casting the world’s strangest shadows as she went—and poked her head out the door to the courtyard.

She was in luck.

The bell had yet to ring to wake people for morning prayers, and as far as she could see through the mist there was no one else out on the terrace.

Keeping her arms pinned awkwardly to her sides, as if that somehow hid the giant flames leaping off her skin, she sprinted across the damp stones toward the sanctuary, coming to a stop right in front of its imposing oak doors.

*I mean no disrespect,* she thought nervously, glancing up at the steeple. *This is strictly business.*

Then she plunged her arms deep into the prayer fountain splashing merrily by its doors.

Torrents of freezing water poured over her skin, soaking through her tunic in a matter of seconds. There were chunks of ice floating in the water. Ice that usually melted by the end of the day—but, given that it was shortly before dawn, the little fountain was still well below freezing.

*Who cares if it freezes you. As long as it works!*

Katerina closed her eyes, hardly daring to watch as she reached all the way to the bottom, pressing her palms against the icy tiles. If anyone dared to ask what she was doing, she'd say she was stealing coins. Looking for fish. Communing with the water nymphs.

Anything was better than the alternative. Anything was better than, 'Oh, funny you should ask! My body just burst into spontaneous flames and I'm trying to put them out before I burn this whole monastery to the ground. Not that the inhabitants could possibly escape. Since my friends and I already destroyed that handy bridge in and out of the place..'

"Please," she whispered, bowing her head like a prayer. "Please be gone."

She opened one eye. Then the other. Then let out a stifled shriek as those incorrigible flames twinkled back at her. Rippling at the bottom of the fountain like underwater jewels.

"Oh, dear, I see someone's having a rough morning."

Katerina whipped around with a gasp, flinging an arc of freezing water droplets, only to see Michael standing behind her. Hands folded neatly in front of him. Head bowed with a patient smile.

"I didn't...I mean, I wasn't..." A look of childlike guilt flushed across her face as she rather uselessly hid her arms behind her back. "...I was looking for fish."

In hindsight, she could only imagine how it must have looked.

The sanctuary doors framed in the background. Her cheeks as red as her hair. Her tunic dripping down her freshly-stolen men's pants. And then, of course, there were those pesky flames. Peeking out from behind her, like an ironic halo that refused to go away.

Michael's eyes twinkled, but he didn't smile. Instead, he merely cocked his head towards the main building. So casual, you'd think he found deranged pyromaniacs trolling the church fountain every day. "Did you ever get a chance to see the library, like I suggested?"

Katerina blinked as another flame curled discreetly up her shoulder. Here she was, a walking bonfire, and he wanted her to step inside a room full of books? Was the man certifiable? Or did he just have a secret affinity for property destruction?

"Uh...no. I didn't." She tried desperately to act as normal as him, flinching slightly as that same determined flame tickled at the side of her ear. "Not yet. But I will. It sounds lovely—"

*"Katerina."*

She stopped shivering and stammering long enough to listen. "Yes?"

This time, he couldn't help but smile. "You seem to be having a bit of an... issue. Why don't we step into my office?"



IN THE LAST TWO MONTHS, since she'd left the castle, Katerina had faced her share of what the rest of the world would call 'dangerous' people. From the assassins who chased her out of the castle, to the vampires determined to drain her at the bar. From the giant, to the soldiers, to the shifters, to the spirit of a dead fae queen out for blood. The list went on and on, right down to the seemingly sweet village hag who offered to buy one of her eyes. Truth be told, her own friends, her gallant protectors, were probably some of the most dangerous ones of all. Given their interesting backgrounds, she was sure the world would spare them no judgement.

But in all that time, she'd never met anyone who put her on notice like Michael.

There was something quite otherworldly about him. This coming from a girl who'd recently made some leaps and bounds into the realm of the supernatural. Something that went above and beyond anything she'd ever seen. And it wasn't just the fact that she felt as though he'd been around for as long as the mountain upon which he lived. It wasn't the fact that she'd never—not for a single second—understood the reason behind his intentions. It was something more than that.

It was his aura. The very essence of him as a person. He looked like a man but wasn't. He looked like he was fifty years old but wasn't. She wasn't quite sure what he was.

Perhaps she could have taken a cue from his office.

As the two slipped through a stone doorway carved into the wall of the sanctuary Katerina came to a sudden stop, staring around with wide eyes as she tucked her flaming arms carefully into the folds of her cloak. The office itself was simple. Desk, chair, modest window. It was the walls that caught her attention. The collage of brightly colored finger-paintings that covered the walls. Not an inch was spared. It was as though some kindergarten class had made the place their holy mission.

"Did you...paint these yourself?"

*Probably best to break the ice. Start with a joke. Then we'll talk about the fact that my hands are on fire...*

Michael shut the door, glanced over his shoulder in surprise, then burst out laughing. With the stately air of a headmaster or priest, he settled himself behind the desk and gestured for her to take the other seat. She did so hesitantly, keeping her arms carefully elevated above the wood.

"I've been working on them for years."

The princess blinked, realized he was joking, then forced a quick smile. This was her ice-breaking strategy, after all. It was best to play along.

"No, the children of the local villages make these for me." He pushed to his feet again and peeled the closest one off the wall. "Their first act of entry into Talsing."

"Their first act of entry?"

Katerina frowned in confusion, then reached out to examine the painting for herself. She remembered the fire a second later, blushed, then read from afar as he flipped it over.

The front may have been a child's painting, but the back was a different story. It was a cry for deliverance. Plain and simple. Written in a parent's worried hand.

**Michael,**

**We beseech you to take Sarah, age five, under your guiding hand. She is a sweet girl with promise and potential but has attracted the kind of attention from which her mother and I are no longer able to protect her. Any help you could give would be forever appreciated. We will send funds as soon as available. A thousand thanks.**

They didn't sign their names. Whether that was because they were worried the letter would be intercepted, or because they simply couldn't force the signature to send their daughter away, the princess would never know.

Her eyes lifted slowly to the hundreds of other paintings all over the office. Imagining the tear-stained words and pleas for sanctuary written on the other side.

"They're all the same?" she asked quietly, forgetting for a moment that she was on fire.

Michael nodded briskly, pinning the letter back in its place on the wall.

"Every one of them. Usually, not a month goes by when a child doesn't knock on the door to the monastery, searching for salvation. But the weather has been unusually cold, and we haven't had a new arrival for some time."

*Attracted the kind of attention from which her mother and I are no longer able to protect her.*

Katerina's lips parted as two and two suddenly clicked. "These children. They're all magical, aren't they? Gifted with supernatural abilities?"

It reminded her of something Tanya had said that night after they'd been drinking in the tavern. How a great deal of youngsters had been sent away from home for protection in sanctuaries like Talsing. Sent away by parents willing to do anything to keep them off the royal radar.

"Most of them, yes." Michael nodded curtly, sinking back down into his chair. "We get a few from time to time whose parents simply cannot afford to feed them."

A sudden image of a castle tea party flashed through Katerina's head. They had them every other Sunday. Tables laden with food so rich and

decadent, the guests never made it through a single platter. Most of it got thrown away.

“And these parents...they send you funds?”

Again, Michael shook his head, continuing in his quiet, gentle manner. “Never. Even if they tried, we would never accept them. The safety of the children is our top priority. It’s the main reason we need to repair the bridge. As of now, they have no way to get to us.”

Katerina’s face paled as her skin went cold. That morning, her own problems had seemed insurmountable. But faced with this tragic new wealth of information, they paled in comparison. At least she wasn’t starving. At least she didn’t have a starving child. “We’re working on that as quickly as possible, I promise, but what are we going to do once it’s finished?” The image of a little girl, stranded and alone on the wrong side of the mountains, burned into her very soul. Stealing her breath and trembling her hands. “Even if we can get the army to leave, we have no way to hang it! It’s not like we can just carry it to the other side—”

“The army will leave eventually,” Michael interrupted calmly. “And you just worry about building the bridge. When it’s ready, I’ll hang it myself.”

“But how?” Katerina demanded, refusing to be reassured. All those happy finger-paintings were glaring down at her. A hundred pairs of eyes she would never see. “Dylan said that, you said that, everyone keeps saying to take that kind of thing on faith. But this is serious! You said it yourself: those kids need to get over here. How are you supposed to—”

A gust of wind hit her right in the face. Followed by something softer. Something that felt like the whisper-light touch of—

“...feathers.” She stared up with wide unblinking eyes at the man standing before her. The exact same man who’d been speaking to her a moment before, except for one little difference.

The giant pair of wings that had sprung from his shoulders.

“You have...you have wings.”

An astute observation. Dylan would have made a sarcastic joke. But it was all Katerina could do to string together a complete sentence. How was it possible to live in a world where these kinds of things kept happening? Where your friends turned into three-foot goblins, or savage forest beasts, or even something that looked disturbingly like a casually-dressed angel.

"...and I thought it was strange that my arms were on fire..."

Michael stared down kindly, and all at once the wings disappeared.

"Fire?" He cocked his head to the side, eyes twinkling in the morning light. "What fire?"



"HOW IS IT POSSIBLE?"

Katerina raced to keep up with Michael's long strides, scampering two steps for every one of his. The torches flickered beside them as they swept down the long corridors, but there were already people afoot whose job it was to put them out. Dawn had arrived. The endless night was over.

"Just tell me how it's possible," she begged again, tripping slightly as he came to a stop and started fiddling with the knob on a large arched door. "One second, I was trying to drown myself in the fountain so I wouldn't burn the monastery down, and the next—"

"You'll soon know how it's possible," Michael reassured her for the millionth time, pulling on the brass handle and stepping back to let her inside. "Patience, child. All will be revealed."

She swept past him, impatiently drumming her new flameless fingers against the sides of her pants, and then, for the second time in less than an hour, she froze to a complete stop. Her eyes widened as they adjusted to the softer lighting and she rotated in a slow circle as she gazed around the room. If you could even call it a room. The thing was like something you'd see in a fairytale.

Row upon row of ancient parchments. Level upon level of leather-bound books. They were stacked from the floor to the ceiling. And, given the monastery's unique architecture, that domed ceiling stretched all the way to the sky. A wheeled ladder had been fashioned to allow one to spin about in a circle as they searched for what they wanted, but even the ladder didn't begin to cover it.

*I suppose when Michael wants a book that's too high on the shelves, he can just fly up to grab it.*

Katerina's lips fell open and she turned around to see him silently reveling in her awestruck reaction. Michael might love the monastery, but this library was his pride and joy.

"It's incredible." She spoke before he could even ask the question, rotating in a slow circle to take it in all over again. There were books on every subject you could possibly imagine. From botany to mythology. History to science. Bohemian poetry to the technicalities of building a ship.

"It's exactly what *you* need."

Katerina glanced back in surprise. "What I *need*?" She loved the idea of the library, but unless there was a tell-all book about extinguishing one's own arms she didn't see how it would help her. "What do I *need* in the library?"

With a steady smile, Michael paced forward and extracted a piece of parchment from its place on the shelves. It was so old that half the letters had faded almost completely off the page, but Katerina was still able to make out the heading. A single name, written in slender, looping script.

### **Adelaide Gray**

The princess' fingers tightened on the paper, tracing the edges as if it were the most precious thing in the world. She didn't know how long she stood there. She had all but stopped breathing by the time Michael placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Answers," he replied quietly. "That's what you need from the library. Answers."

He swept out the door without another word. Leaving her standing in the middle of the floor. Pausing only to glance over his shoulder with a little smile. "I'll be back in a few hours. Take all the time you need."





## Chapter 12

**W**hen Katerina first saw the parchment, she expected something like a personnel file. One of those dossiers the castle used to keep track of everyone. But what Michael handed her read more like a diary. A rain-soaked, tear-stained, ink-smearred diary. She wondered how it had possibly ended up in his hands. This was her mom. *Her* mom.

For the next few hours, she soaked up every bit of information she could find. Reveling in the mere sight of her mother's handwriting. Trying to decipher water-damaged words, most of them so lost to the ravages of time that they were beyond help. But there were a few entries that remained perfectly clear. One of them stood out to Katerina.

**January 11,**

**I almost did the unthinkable today. I almost told Marcus. I wasn't planning on it. We were sitting down for lunch, the same as we do every day. But the twins had gone down for an early nap, so for the first time in a long while the two of us were alone.**

**I almost told him.**

**Staring across the table, I could imagine myself telling him. I could imagine the utter relief I would feel. The unspeakable joy of not having to carry this secret alone. He was my husband, my king. At one point, he had even been my friend.**

**Surely, he wouldn't turn me away like the others. Surely, he would understand.**

**Then Sir Lansbury walked in and announced they'd caught two renegade shifters attempting to flee the border. They were being dragged to the dungeons that very minute.**

**I looked at Marcus. Looked for any bit of empathy. Any trace of the man I had married still lingering in his eyes. But there was nothing.**

**That man is gone. And this secret is mine alone to keep.**

The edges of the paper were singed, as if they'd been held too close to a fire. Katerina stared at them as a host of tears sprang to her eyes. As that secret of her mother's became hers to share.

*Adelaide Gray was a supernatural. A shifter. As her daughter... does that make me a shifter, too?*

The door opened and closed behind Kat, but the princess didn't need to look up to see who it was. This was his library, after all. And he'd read that parchment long before she had.

"She never said what she shifts into..." Katerina whispered faintly, speaking as though in a daze. The question occurred to her for the first time as she looked up into Michael's eyes.

He nodded thoughtfully and settled himself at the end of the table. "Maybe she didn't yet know. It's clear there were no others like her. She hid it very, very well. Whatever it was, it was powerful. She didn't even need to shift before starting to tap into its magic."

Katerina looked slowly from the parchment to her own trembling hands. He nodded again.

"Yes, my dear. Those beautiful flames. The ones you were trying so hard to hide. That's your mother's magic flowing through you. It's a part of who you are. It's in your blood."

For a split second, she didn't want it to be. For a split second, she felt a stab of that blind panic that her mother had to have been feeling every day. The feeling of being trapped in one's own body. A helpless prisoner to forces too powerful to escape. Too dangerous to control.

"You put them out yourself, you know." Her head jerked up again, and she saw Michael staring at her with a kind smile. "They vanished the second you were sufficiently distracted by the needs of others. It's why I brought you to my office. It's why I showed you those finger-paintings."

The simple logic of the plan slowly dawned on her, but the larger points remained vague.

"But how did you know that would happen?" she whispered, tucking her thumbs under as she curled her fingers into fists. Frightened that, at any moment, the whole nightmare might start up again. "I didn't know myself. I don't even know how they got started—"

“Every shifter is different,” Michael interrupted gently. “But the laws that govern them are fundamentally the same. Your magic is connected to your emotion. For better or for worse. It’s a thin line, but it’s one you can learn to control.”

Katerina flashed him a dubious look, and he chuckled softly.

“Think about it. What were you doing the first time the flames appeared?”

Her face flushed as she thought back to the night of sparring with Dylan. To the moment he’d tried to kiss her, and her fierce rejection as she pulled away. To the way her heart felt like it was breaking inside her chest as she sank to the other side of the door. Knowing that she’d just closed it forever. Knowing that the future she wanted so badly was never meant to be.

*So that’s the key? I just need to be blindingly, unspeakably sad to make these powers work?*

Her heart flinched preemptively in her chest.

*...sounds awesome.*

But even as she thought the words, she realized they weren’t true. The first time she’d felt the fire hadn’t been with Dylan. She’d felt it building up in her hands when she wanted to fight Randall. Consuming her from the ground up. And even earlier—when she and Cassiel were banging on the sanctuary door. Her eyes widened as she remembered the shower of sparks when she struck the metal. She’d attributed it to a trick of the light. Maybe it was something more.

*But I can’t control it.* Her whirlwind of chaotic thoughts ended with a simple, but inescapable truth. *It’s just another way I’m going to hurt the people around me. The ones trying to keep me safe.*

“This isn’t a curse.”

Michael might have been a shifter himself, but Katerina could swear the man could read minds as well. No sooner had that hopeless despair settled over her than he got up from his chair and moved forward to take her hand.

“It is a *gift*.”

Katerina’s eyes watered, and for a fleeting moment a part of her dared to hope. But that moment passed, and she pulled away with a quiet sob. “No,

it isn't. Maybe it's supposed to be, but mine isn't. Just look at what it did to my mother. Just look at what it's already doing to me. I could've burned this monastery down. I could have hurt anyone who came too close—"

"That's because it's brand new, child." Michael's eyes softened, and he stared at her with a lifetime's worth of patience. "Do you think Dylan knew how to turn into a wolf when he came to our gates? Do you think he could control it? The first time he grew claws, I thought the poor kid was going to have a heart attack." He chuckled quietly at the memory before leaning forward to take Katerina's hand once more. "But he learned. He'd been learning for years without realizing it before he came to the sanctuary, and he continued learning for years after he left. You will learn, too, child. I promise. This isn't the nightmare you fear. You see? I'm not afraid to touch you."

She looked down at their connection with a self-pitying sniff but took very little comfort in it. She imagined it would take quite a lot to make a man like Michael afraid.

He chuckled again and walked back to his seat. "I can see already you're going to be just as stubborn as he was. No doubt there will be many trips to the fountain by the time you're through."

She felt herself blush, but for the first time Katerina also felt a glimmer of something she thought had vanished the second she saw the flames. Hope.

"You really think that will happen?" she asked softly. "That there will be a time when I can control it? When I'm through?" She stared up at the man in earnest, laying every card and quiet vulnerability she had on the table. "This place can help me do that?"

Michael stared at her intently, as if there was a bigger picture she had yet to find. As if she'd stumbled onto the ultimate question without realizing it herself. "This is a place people come for guidance. For clarity." He spoke slowly, weighing each word before letting it go. "But the answers you seek? The magic you hope to control? That's something you brought with you. It's something you've always had."



KATERINA LEFT THE LIBRARY with a single thought on her mind. One that had been stuck on a loop ever since she'd picked up the parchment. Growing stronger and stronger with each moment.

*Dylan...I have to tell Dylan.*

It didn't matter that she'd been up training through the entire night. It didn't matter that her clothes were still soaked from her impromptu dive into the prayer fountain. It didn't even matter that their epic sparring session had ended in heartbreak and tears.

From the second she found out there was magic inside her, there was only one person in the entire world that she wanted to tell. That she *needed* to tell. She couldn't wait a second longer.

Unfortunately, there was a maze of unfamiliar corridors to get through first. And within a matter of seconds the princess was hopelessly lost.

"Son of a harpy!" she cursed and made the same turn she could swear she'd already made half a dozen times before, coming to stop beneath a suspiciously familiar painting of the Black Forest. She should have just asked Michael to walk her back to the courtyard, but she'd left in a rush, and after revealing that one has some great and unknown power lying inside them it's probably best not to follow it up with, "That may be true, but I still can't find my way outside. Care for a walking buddy?"

A few more seconds of wandering and she found herself right back where she started, in the hallway outside Michael's office. She was about to give up altogether and knock on his door for help, when the door opened and the last person she'd expected to see slipped out into the hall.

"Tanya?"

The shape-shifter whirled around in surprise. Surprise that tripled when she saw the princess standing there. Soaking wet. Leaving a trail of sooty water in her wake. "Kat, what are you doing here?"

An echo of her rather strange morning flashed through her head, and the princess felt the sudden need to deny. "Me? Oh, nothing. Just stretching my legs a little before—"

"You're lost, aren't you?"

"...no."

The shifter pursed her lips, then cocked her head in the opposite direction back down the hall. Katerina lifted her chin and followed silently

along, refusing to give anything away. Just three short minutes later—plus two doors Katerina would swear weren't there just moments before—and the two were back in the courtyard, squinting into the afternoon sun.

It was only once they were there, staring out over the magnificent vista, that the princess realized the obvious question. One she'd completely failed to connect just moments before.

"What were you doing in Michael's office?"

Tanya froze dead still, caught red-handed with no way to deny it. At first, it looked as though she might try anyway. But she gave up before she started, bowing her head with a defeated little sigh.

"I've been working with him." The princess shot her a questioning look, and she forced herself to continue. "He's been helping me. Ever since that day in the forest, the day I grew those wings...I didn't know I could do that." Her eyes warmed at the very thought of it before cooling suddenly. "I haven't been able to do it since."

Katerina's mouth fell open in shock. In the last few weeks, there had been several major life events that had fallen through the cracks. Collateral damage of living on adrenaline, running for their lives. But Katerina remembered all too well the moment her lovely friend had sprouted a pair of life-saving wings. In fact, she had the sudden suspicion she'd seen the same wings just hours before. "You and Michael...you've been training?"

It was the last thing in the world she would have expected, but in a way it made perfect sense. Tanya Oberon wasn't the kind of person to waste an opportunity. As long as they were trapped in a monastery with a mysterious magical guru calling the shots, she'd take full advantage.

Tanya blushed a delicate shade of pink, one that made her look surprisingly fragile in spite of the jagged mohawk tumbling down her back. "He and I have similar gifts. I know that the bridge is the top priority and everything, but now that my leg is better I was hoping he could help me—"

"Holy hot cakes!" Katerina exclaimed, looking down at the shifter's knee. "Your cast is gone!"

Tanya studied her for a moment before shaking her head with a slow smile. "Jokes aside, you are seriously one of the least observant people I've ever met."

"I'm just saying—"

“Yeah,” Tanya grinned, “the cast is gone. I got it off a couple days ago.”

“How is that possible?” Katerina frowned at the brace around her knee, as if she could see through it to the muscles and tendons below. “That was a horrible break, Tan. After Dylan pulled you out of the snow, we could see the bone...”

She shuddered at the very memory, but Tanya shrugged dismissively.

“Shifters heal a lot faster than people—we’re wired differently. So are fae.” She shot the princess another teasing grin. “That’s why it’s a good thing *you* didn’t get all that hurt during the journey, you delicate little flower. We never would have made it to the monastery in time.”

*Shifters heal a lot faster than people—we’re wired differently.* Katerina looked down at her broken finger. A finger that was broken no more. *Dylan...I have to tell Dylan.* “Hey, do you know where Dylan is?” she asked quickly, ignoring Tanya’s teasing jab as she glanced around the courtyard, like he might be lurking in the shadows. “I really need to talk to him.”

“Dylan?” Tanya followed her gaze for a moment, slowly turning back around, her eyes tight with an emotion the princess didn’t understand. “It’s too late for that.”

Katerina stopped her roving search at once, pulse quickening in her chest. “What do you mean it’s too late? Where is he?”

Tanya stared at her for another moment. Before looking over the side of the mountain. “He’s gone.”



DYLAN AND CASSIEL HAD been warning the girls they’d be leaving to replenish the monastery’s supplies. They’d been planning the expedition for days. Rose Macado, little instigator that she was, delighted in reminding the others of it every chance she got.

So, Katerina had no idea why she was so surprised when it finally happened.

“—just don’t see how you could let them go off without us,” she raged, gripping the edge of the northern most wall as she glared over the cliff. “And today of all days...”

Tanya rolled her eyes. She was as wound up as the princess but had a slightly more mature way of showing it. Or...less mature. Depending on how you interpreted the flask in her hand. "First off, I didn't *let* them go off anywhere. They set out before the sun came up; I didn't know it was happening." She took another swig, ignoring the burning taste that followed. "And second—what the hell is that supposed to mean? Today of all days. Today is just like any other."

*Except that today I found out I'm a fire-wielding shifter.* Katerina's face paled with sudden horror. *And last night Dylan didn't get a wink of sleep.* She shook her head. "Isn't there a way we can get in contact with them?" she asked, standing on her tiptoes as she stared down the jagged mountain cliff. "We could send a raven, or...or maybe we could use the seeing stone again. They've already been gone for almost five hours; what if something's wrong—"

"*Hey,*" Tanya said, grabbing her firmly by the shoulders, "you know there's no way we can check in on them without alerting the enemy to their position, and you also know that, of all the people in the world, our guys know how to take care of themselves."

An image of Dylan and Cassiel fearlessly facing down the royal army flashed through her head, and Katerina nodded with a begrudging, "Yeah, I guess."

Tanya snorted, holding out the flask. "In the meantime, I say this as a friend: Drink."

The princess did as she was instructed, gulping down the burning liquid with a wince.

"That's the spirit." The shifter took back the flask with a smile. "Hey, look on the bright side—Rose is with them. Maybe she'll fall into the ravine or get eaten by a bear or something."

Katerina laughed shortly, feeling considerably better as the whiskey warmed her blood. "You know...she's actually not all that bad. Rose, I mean. I think she might be one of the good ones."

Tanya looked at her doubtfully. "The last time we talked, you said her eyes were fake."

The princess blushed. "...I wasn't myself."



For the rest of the afternoon the two girls stood on the highest parapet, scanning the mountain below for any sign of their friends. A band of other shifters had gone along with them, shifters who had friends back at Talsing, and it wasn't long before a little crowd joined their cause.

Minutes stretched into hours. Hours stretched into what felt like years. The sun was starting to drop behind the trees, tinting the sky a vibrant shade of gold, and all of Talsing had come out to wait.

"You know...Cassiel better have brought me back some kind of present."

Katerina turned to Tanya in surprise. The two of them hadn't spoken in quite some time, each lost to their own worried little trance as they gazed blankly into the trees. "A present?"

The shifter nodded soundly, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "For our anniversary. We've been together a month as of today."

Katerina's first reaction was surprise. Her second was straight-up confusion. "A month?" she repeated. "It hasn't been nearly a month. The first time you guys hooked up wasn't until the night after we woke up here at Talsing—"

"Yes, *technically*." Tanya nodded patiently. "But that's not how you judge anniversaries. I'm going from the first time I ever undressed him in my mind."

Worried as she was, the princess couldn't help but laugh. Of course, that's the way Tanya chose to commemorate their relationship. Not that Cassiel would have any idea that was the case...

"You know," she advised softly, "you might want to give him a word of warning. It isn't fair for you to expect the guy to have guessed what was going on inside your—"

A sudden flicker of light caught her eye. The glint of the setting sun against metal. Tanya saw it, too. They stopped talking at once and peered intently over the side. Searching for any sign of their friends. Any clue that the mission had been a success and they were on their way home.

...it came in the form of a scream.

"Run!"

There was a collective gasp from those gathered on the wall as a bloodied figure stumbled out of the trees. He was followed by five more after that. One of them wasn't moving.

"What's happening??" Katerina tried to shriek, but it came out as a whisper instead. Her nails dug into the stone railing, splintering to little shards as she gazed desperately over the edge. Trying to make out individual faces. Trying to spot her friends amongst the crowd. "What..."

A second later, she saw them. The reason for all the blood. The reason for all the haste. Six people had set out from the monastery that morning. Five shifters and one fae—each one more than capable of evading the royal army. Each one more than capable of taking care of themselves.

But they had discovered a hidden secret for which none of them could have been prepared.

...the royal army had shifters of its own.

*"RUN!"*

The voice shouted again, louder this time, and Katerina was able to see who it was. It was Randall—of all people. The permanent look of arrogance on the shifter's face had been replaced with one of abject fear. A second later, that face went blank as a knife was lodged in the side of his neck.

There was another scream, this time from right beside her, as the people of Talsing came alive. Shouting and crying for their friends to hurry. Beating uselessly against the wall with their hands. Throwing stones and pieces of plywood—whatever they could do to help, though they were far out of range. Yelling for Michael. Always for Michael. Where was he??

A second later, a giant shadow fell over the crowd.

Katerina looked up with the others to see a gigantic eagle soaring over top of them. An eagle the size of ten grown men. It swooped down towards the bloody field, lethal talons outstretched, and a second later it lifted one of the Talsing shifters into the air.

The princess looked on in horror, but the crowd gasped in relief. Then she understood.

*Michael.*

Talsing's sacred guardian did nothing to attack, merely to protect. With a mighty swoop of its wings, the eagle dropped the shifter safely inside the sanctuary walls and went back for another, but it was clear to see

they were running out of time. Already, the shifters from the army were closing rank, and the Talsing warriors were running out of time.

“Tanya, we’ve got to—”

Katerina grabbed for her hand, but Tanya was already gone.

With a fearsome shout the girl threw herself over the edge of the cliff, sprouting wings herself as she swooped down into the field of battle. She nearly collided with a tall blond figure, who almost fell over in surprise, but a second later they were fighting side by side.

*Well, that’s one way to advance your powers. Just spike that adrenaline through the roof.*

The sound of steel on steel echoed through the air. Across the mountain peaks, there was a distant roar—like an unruly sea. The army was cheering their people on, screaming for blood. Every few minutes, one of the men on both sides would disappear into a pile of clothes, and a raging wolf would spring up in his place. Biting and tearing. Going in for the kill.

Talsing was fighting bravely, but it wasn’t enough. And still, Katerina had yet to find—

*Dylan.*

Her eyes locked onto him across the field. Somehow seeing every detail, despite the great distance between them. He was sprinting back up to the monastery, feet flying across the grass with every bit of strength he had. But he was falling behind. And he still hadn’t shifted.

A second later, Katerina saw why.

It was Rose. The person who wasn’t moving when they burst through the trees. The person who was currently flung across Dylan’s back, slowing him down, risking his life. It was Rose.

*...No!*

Wolves were closing in from all sides. Tearing at his flesh. Ripping at his clothes. He was trying to fight them off as best he could, but there was only so much he could do with a body slung over his shoulder. He worked with his knife, one-handed, and never broke his stride. But it still wasn’t going to be enough. More of the army’s shifters were appearing every moment, and there was only a brief window of opportunity to get back to Talsing alive. A window that was closing fast.

*Not if I can help it...*

Looking back, Katerina didn't know what made her do it. Didn't know what instinct it was that propelled her forward. One second, she was standing there. Wringing her hands helplessly. Trying not to cry as the love of her life fought for his own. The next, she was climbing up a crooked set of steps, not stopping until she'd gotten to Dylan's old spot on the highest tower.

The wind picked up as she stepped out onto the ledge, lifting her hands into the air. "Take cover!" she screamed.

Dylan looked up the second he heard her voice. Right as the first flames started dancing in her hands.

Cassiel and Tanya looked up a second later, freezing in momentary shock.

For a moment, all was quiet. An unnatural hush fell over the people of Talsing and the soldiers waiting on the other side of the cliff. Even the eagle seemed to be holding its breath.

Then Katerina Damaris let loose a wave of fire the likes of which the world had never seen.



## Chapter 13

The strange thing about dreams is you play by a different set of rules. The landscape may look the same, but the players are different. You instinctively understand the subtle shift. You instinctively know what's possible, and what's not. What you're capable of, and what you aren't.

Poised upon that stone ledge, her flaming arms stretched up to the sky, Katerina suddenly realized there weren't many things in the world that were beyond her reach.

A literal ocean of fire swept over the battlefield. Streaming from her hands. Sparking in her eyes. Hitting her targets with deadly precision, while sparing the lives of her friends. There was a sound of distant screams as the royal shifters who were still able fell back towards the forest. A whispered hush fell over the monastery, while the army on the other side was dead quiet.

Across the distance that divided them, Katerina imagined she could see Dylan's face. The way his lips parted in shock as the first wisps of golden fire lashed the air by his side. The way his blue eyes widened in wonder as they made the slow journey back to the girl standing on the ledge.

Then all was lost to smoke.

The battle was effectively over. The shifters of Talsing were racing back, unchallenged, to the monastery gate. The shifters of the royal army were fleeing for their lives, back to the woods.

The fight was finished, but Katerina was not. The wind stirred her crimson hair into a fiery cloud as her eyes locked upon each of the retreating warriors. The ones who had done her friends so much harm. The ones who would not live to see another sunrise.

Waves of hate welled up inside her, stronger than anything she'd ever known. Burning in her veins. Rushing down her slender arms before pouring from her palms into the world beyond. The screams of the royal shifters grew more and more desperate. Parts of the mountain had started to catch on fire. The flames danced in Katerina's eyes as she took down one after an-

other. Delighting in the way their feeble bodies crumbled beneath her open hand. Reveling in each tortured cry before savoring the chilled silence that followed. *How dare they try to hurt my friends! They were going to kill Dylan! NEVER!*

It was a power unlike anything she'd ever known. Her first taste, but she was suddenly certain she could never be without it. Suddenly certain she could never get enough.

*Why stop with the shifters? Her head tilted almost lazily to the side as she brought her hands together, doubling the blinding burst of fire. Why not turn to the other mountain? To the army waiting on the other side? Doesn't matter how many people there are, they all want me dead. Why not end this right here and—*

“Katerina.”

The fire disappeared as she turned around with a startled gasp. She'd been so intent on her murderous prize, she hadn't even seen the massive eagle fly up behind her. Disappearing in a whirl of feathers to reveal the solemn figure of a man.

“Michael,” she gasped. A sudden weakness deadened her muscles, and she found herself panting for breath. “I didn't see you...” She lifted a trembling finger and pointed over the wall. “The shifters, I have them on the run, I—”

“The shifters are finished, child. The battle is over.” His voice was steady, but a look of extreme caution lit the backs of his eyes as he offered a hand. “Come. Let's find your friends.”

Everything he was saying made sense. Every impulse she had was to follow. But some uncertain emotion made her hold back. Made her look at the hand as if it was the enemy, not the gentle offering of a friend.

“I...” She held back, completely unaware that the heels of her shoes were just inches from the edge of the wall. “I don't...”

A sudden voice called her to attention. Echoing up over the scorched stones. He was frantic but determined. And very, very much alive.

“*Dylan!*” She was off like a shot. Leaving Michael standing on the ledge behind her. Leaving the smoldering remains of the battlefield smoking in her wake. Her feet couldn't seem to move fast enough as they flew down

the crooked steps, and by the time she reached the courtyard her eyes were swimming with a sea of unshed tears.

There he was. Standing amidst the chaos. A curl of smoke still rising from his arms. In the flurry of chaos that had taken over the monastery, he was the only thing standing still.

The second their eyes met they came together. She ran without thinking into his outstretched arms. It seemed silly now, that she'd thought something like words could come between them. That anything in the world could hold them back.

She buried her face in his jacket as his hands came up over her head. They tangled in her long hair, anchoring her close as his chest fell up and down with silent, jerking breaths. His skin was hot to the touch, flushed from the flames still writhing on the battlefield, and when Katerina finally pulled back her cheek was wet with blood. She lifted an uncertain hand.

"Are you...are you okay?"

Her eyes roved frantically over his body, searching for a wound, but whatever had happened he didn't seem aware of it himself. His eyes were fixed solely on her face. And for one of the first times since they'd met, she couldn't begin to interpret his expression.

"I'm fine," he said slowly. There was a pause, during which his eyes flickered surreptitiously down to her hands before locking onto her once more. "...what about you?"

*It's caution, she realized. That's what his emotion is. The same caution as Michael.*

She wanted to reassure him. Wanted to tell him that everything was going to be okay. That she'd only used her devastating power to save his life. That she was still the same person.

But all those words fell short.

Instead, she simply stared at him. Too overwhelmed to speak. Too tired to stand. Too scared to do anything other than linger in his arms, praying that terrible caution would go away.

He took one look at her face and nodded shortly. More to himself than to her.

"Come on," he said quietly, leading her quickly away from the ever-growing throng of people.



KATERINA MAY HAVE SPENT the last two weeks living in the monastery but her days were strictly planned out, and she'd followed a very specific route. There were still places she'd never gone before. The little garden, blossoming behind the sanctuary wall, for example. It was brand new.

"Who the hell are you?"

The princess tore her eyes away from the delicate blossoms and stared at Dylan with abject fear. He had waited until they were completely alone to ask the question. Waited until they were safe from the gaze of probing eyes. But now that they were, he couldn't hold it in a second longer.

"*Katerina.*" He took her by the shoulders, staring deep into her eyes. "Who are you?"

At this point, she should have been grateful that he didn't ask *what* she was. After her little fire display, he would certainly have been entitled. However, despite the validity of his question, a spark of anger burned in her chest. *He* wanted answers, did he? Well, join the freakin' club.

"Who am *I*?" she repeated, just barely holding on to her temper. "Who the hell are YOU?"

A flash of uncertainty danced through his eyes, but it was quickly overshadowed by that habitual anger. The anger he wore as a cloak to ward off such unwelcome intrusions.

"You really think this is the time—"

"This is *exactly* the time!" she shouted, shaking from head to toe. She didn't know the answer to his question, but that wasn't going to stop her from asking hers. The time had come to put all their cards on the table. They'd held these secrets long enough.

Dylan stood in front of her, not moving, not offering anything.

"Why did the fairies send me to you?" she demanded, firing each question like an arrow, pointed straight at his heart. "Why do you happen to know the names and lineage of every duke and earl in the kingdom? Why was Cassiel worried I had specifically sought *you* out, when we first met?"

Dylan paled a little more with each question, retreating into himself. "Katerina, I don't—"



“You cannot hold a person responsible for the sins of their family.” She quoted the exact words he’d said to her that day at the glen. The day she’d told him her real name. “If anyone knows that, it’s me.”

It fell between them like an accusation, burning hard and true.

“What does that mean?” she insisted. “Who are you, Dylan? No lies—tell me the *truth!*”

“The *truth—*” He pulled away suddenly, shivering like a little boy. Eyes huge and uncertain. Breath coming in broken gasps. A wave of absolute fear washed over him, then left, leaving him perfectly still. “The truth is that you’re not the only royal on the run.”



## Chapter 14

“My name is Dylan Hale.”

The princess and the ranger sat on a bench in the garden. The uproar following the fiery end to the supply run was still raging, but in their little part of the monastery things were quiet.

Dylan was shaken, yet strangely calm.

He'd held out for as long as he could. Counted on that infallible strength to save him. Prayed for a miracle that would allow him to walk away. But his time had run out. When he finally spoke that impenetrable shield was gone, and he was unexpectedly quiet.

“I'm the only son of Aldrich Hale. Crown prince of Belaria.”

Katerina pulled in a quick gasp but maintained a carefully neutral expression.

Belaria was the cautionary tale. A once-prosperous kingdom which ignored the cries of people begging for reform. A once-prosperous kingdom destroyed in a grisly, violent revolution. Katerina remembered hearing her father talk about it when she was younger. Hearing him lament the royal family and plot with his council as to how best to help their cause. It was one of the only times in her life she had seen him express any kind of solidarity or compassion.

“You made it out before...” She trailed off at the look on his face, feeling as though she'd been dunked in cold water. “I mean...you made it out?”

Dylan bowed his head, eyes fixed on a thin crack spider-webbing up the stone tiles. “I grew up knowing that the people hated my family. I was too young to understand why, and the palace has a way of shielding you from such things. But that tension was always there. When I got older, saw the things they were doing, the people they really were...I started to hate them, too.”

The air was thick and warm, but he shivered. He couldn't seem to stop.

“When I was fourteen, I ran away. I didn't want to be part of the oppression I saw going on around me—part of the system.” He paused for a

moment, like he wished the story ended there, before continuing in that same quiet voice. "A week after I left, I heard the news. There had been an uprising. The entire royal family had been slaughtered."

Katerina held her tongue, but her control ended there. Silent tears poured down her face as she reached out to take his hand. Crying where he could not. Showing heartache and feeling, while his face was like cold stone. He glanced down at their intertwined fingers, then back up at the tower.

"The fairies found me. Half-dead. Brought me here. Told me to wait out the storm. For six months, that's what I did. Six months and it just about killed me."

*Literally.*

Katerina pictured a little boy sitting on the high stone ledge. Gazing out over the mountains beyond. A boy without a family. A king without a throne. So lost and broken and alone that the only thing he could think to do...was jump.

"Michael urged me to go back," he said suddenly. "To take the throne and rule in a different way than the rest of my family. To rule for good. The people didn't hold their sins against me—I would be welcomed back with open arms. But I...I couldn't do it." He took a deep breath and pulled his hand away. Suddenly ready to be finished with the story. Suddenly ready to rush to the end. "I became a ranger instead. Changed my name, my accent. Did everything I could to get lost in the world. I was lost so long that everyone stopped looking." He suddenly lifted his head and turned to Katerina. "Until a few years later...I met you."

The princess sat numb on the bench, trying to absorb everything she'd just heard. In a strange way, it made perfect sense. In a strange way, it was like a part of her had always expected it.

The first thing she'd noticed about Dylan was the way he stood out. Even in the grimy tavern, half-drunk and fighting off vampires, it was clear the man was something more. He might have changed his name, dropped his accent, but there were things about him that no amount of time could ever erase. It was a quality; that's what the people back home always used to call it. A royal quality that one could neither gain nor lose. You either had it or you didn't. It was in your blood.

Dylan's grace and charm, the way he clipped certain vowels, his inexplicable knowledge of the world, right down to the way he held a wine glass. She should have known. Maybe she did.

"When Marigold sent me to find you," she said softly, peering up hesitantly, "she said I needed to be with someone who could keep me safe. Someone who had done this sort of thing before..."

Dylan laughed shortly, dark hair swinging into his eyes. "Real subtle, fairies are." The hint of a smile lingered in his eyes as he shook his head. "A runaway prince and an exiled princess. I'm sure she found a poetic kind of symmetry in that."

Katerina smiled back. Even wider when she imagined her own experience, but with a fourteen-year-old Dylan instead. Choking down Marigold's tonics. Fighting off Nixie when she tried to braid his hair. But the smile faded as another quiet truth clicked suddenly into place. "That night in Vale..."

Dylan bowed his head with a sigh. It was a night he'd clearly gone back to many times, she realized. "How could we be together? Tell me. How?" Those blue eyes tightened with unspeakable pain as they found hers. "Because I can't see it. You want, more than anything, to return to your castle and take your place on the throne. I want, more than anything, to stay away. How could we be together? A princess whose crown has been stolen and a prince who's spent his entire life trying to bury his own crown."

Katerina felt like she'd been hit in the face. Like some icy hand had twisted the knife. But, at the same time, a slow smile crept up her cheeks. Finally—*at last*—it all made sense! Every strange gesture, every fleeting look she didn't understand. A thousand secrets and deflections. A thousand misdirections and nights lost to over-analyzing his every move. It all finally made sense!

"...are you smiling?"

The smile froze as Katerina looked up with a start. "What? No. No."

"You are!" He was enraged. "I can't believe it! You actually are!"

She tried to get it under control, to no avail. "No, I swear I'm not. I just—"

"You finally get what you want. I finally break down and tell you all those answers you've been dying to hear, and you sit there grinning like some Carpathian chimp!"

"Because of *you!*" she exclaimed, throwing up her hands. "Why couldn't you have just told me all that from the beginning? Why keep it a secret—"

"Oh, I don't know," he shouted back, "maybe because I'm bloody in love with you!"

There was a moment of silence.

*Well, that's one way to say it...*

The words echoed between them as the heated back and forth ended abruptly. It was quiet for a few seconds before Dylan finally broke it, his eyes locked safely on the ground. "I'm in love with you...but the only thing I know for certain is that the two of us can't be together." The words seemed to rip out of him, tearing off pieces as they went. However, no matter what the cost, his voice was firm. "Why would I tell you? Why wouldn't I have tried to stay away?"

Katerina understood what he was saying, but it wasn't as simple as all that. And it certainly wasn't a decision he could make for her. Not that he'd exactly risen to the occasion. Her eyes sparked as half a dozen stolen kisses flashed through her mind. "Oh, and a fine job you did staying away."

His head jerked up as his eyes burned with accusation. "Well, it's not like you make it easy! Falling off cliffs, getting attacked in the woods, looking up at me with those big dreamy eyes? You're lucky it wasn't worse!"

"*Worse?!*" Her eyebrows arched in astonishment. "Think about what you're saying!"

He let out his breath with a frustrated sigh. "I know, and I'm sorry. I don't mean it like that; it's just—"

"No. It's just nothing!" She pushed to her feet, unable to sit a moment longer. "It's all well and good for you to keep your little secret, Dylan. For you to keep your reasons to yourself. But *I* was the one left out in the cold! *I* was the one who said that I love you, then watched you throw it back in my face! Me, not you! *I'm* the one who suffered all the consequences of *your* decision!"

“You think I haven’t suffered?” He pushed to his feet as well, towering over her from just inches away. “You think this has been fun for me? Sleeping beside you *every night*, knowing I can never have you? Walking beside you *every day*, watching us grow a little further apart? You have no idea how many times I almost told you. How many times I almost—”

“Then why didn’t you?!” She grabbed the front of his jacket, trying to shake the answer right out of him. Another smear of blood stained the tops of her knuckles, but she was too upset to notice it. “Why didn’t you just tell me the truth—”

*“Because it would be over then!”*

The garden fell deathly quiet as his face crumpled in pain.

“It would be over,” he said again, softer this time, “and any chance we had would be—”

She didn’t think. She kissed him. A kiss that put all others to shame.

His eyes flew open in surprise as she locked her wrists behind his neck, pulling him down so she could reach. He closed them and pulled her up instead, lifting her effortlessly off the ground as his arms circled around her back with a force that threatened to crush her.

*He loves me. I don’t care what else he said...he said that he loves me.*

A radiant smile flushed her face as the kiss deepened and their bodies melded into one. Her skin tingled with sparks of electricity. Her blood flew hot through her veins, heating her fingers as they twisted into his hair. It was too much, and not enough all at the same time. Her heart was pounding, her head was spinning. It was so overwhelming she thought she might faint—

*“Ow.”*

Cold air rushed between them as Dylan pulled back sharply, staring down at his chest. The princess’ face paled as she quickly hid her hands behind her back.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized immediately. “Did I burn you? I’m so sorry.”

“No, it’s...” He reached into his shirt and pulled out her mother’s pendant. It was glowing as fiercely as she’d ever seen. She could feel the heat from where she stood. “It’s this.” He gingerly held it away from his body, fingers wrapped around the chain. “Has it ever done that before?”

“No. Never.” Katerina reached for the stone with a frown, holding it lightly in the palm of her hand. It may have burned him, but to her it felt as natural as could be. “Maybe it’s on the fritz or something. Got smashed when you were running up the...” She trailed off when she realized that he was looking not at the pendant, but at her own hands. Hands he had seen do so much damage. Hands that had recently been wrapped in his hair.

“Katerina—”

“I don’t know what I am.” She answered the question before he could ask it, lowering those hands slowly to her side. “That’s the truth, I promise.” She tentatively lifted her gaze to his, searching for any kind of hope. “But I think...I think that I’m something like you.”

He hesitated a moment, weighing his options, then his lips twitched up in a smile. “Well, *I’m* delighted.” His finger slipped beneath her chin, tilting up her face as he leaned down for another kiss. “There are worse things to be...”

That’s when the first flaming arrow fired over the gate.



## Chapter 15

“DYLAN!” They heard the shouting before they even made it out of the garden. Before they’d taken a sudden step back, staring down in unison at a rose bush that had burst into flames.

Their heads snapped up at the same time. Then they started running.

In one corridor and out another. Pushing past people, who were just as frantically pushing past them. Katerina was vaguely aware that they seemed to be moving against the tide, but at this point it hardly mattered. The courtyard was where the action was happening. The courtyard was where the screaming had started. It was also where they’d left their friends.

“DYLAN!” They heard it again the moment they stepped outside. “KAT!”

Cassiel and Tanya were standing in the middle of the terrace, the only people not moving in a sea of blurred faces. Behind them, the outer wall of the monastery had caught fire. Some people were trying to put it out, while others were taking cover from the swarm of flying arrows. At the moment, however, neither problem was their immediate concern.

“Dylan!” Cassiel yelled again, in confirmation this time. He darted swiftly through the crowd, dragging Tanya along with him. “You’re all right?”

The two men shared a silent look, and the question was compartmentalized for another time. In the meanwhile, the fae nodded swiftly and cocked his head to the wall.

“We’ve got a problem.”

It seemed the castle’s best archers had finally arrived. Not only were they able to hit the outside of the monastery, but their lethal arrows were flying over the top of the wall. A problem all by itself, only these arrows were covered in—

“...flames,” Katerina whispered.



The four friends watched in silent horror as the pile of cedar logs for rebuilding the bridge caught fire. A moment later, the curtains inside the dining hall started to burn.

“Yep. Seems someone gave them the idea.” Tanya jerked her head instinctively as a flaming arrow whizzed past her cheek. “You can end a battle quickly if you just set your enemies on fire.”

The princess glanced over nervously, but Tanya flashed her a grin. On her other side, Cassiel was harder to read. But he gave the princess a hand up as she and Dylan joined them on the ledge.

Sure enough, it looked like the entire royal army was aflame. Their swarm of red and black uniforms had vanished completely under a smoky cloud. A cloud that was steadily growing bigger and closer as volley after volley of fire-tipped arrows headed their way.

“We’re not going to win this,” Katerina murmured, realizing the truth in the words the second they passed her lips. “All of us, all these people...are going to lose.”

Dylan set his jaw, glaring viciously over the high walls. “Not if I can help it.”

A second later, he leapt back down into the courtyard. Joining the dwindling group of people racing buckets from the well to those areas most affected by the fire. Many areas had already been given up on—engulfed in the burning flames. Faster and faster they ran. Little buckets of water, spilling drops onto the tile. It would not be enough. It would not be nearly enough.

“Cass, get down here and help!”

The fae stepped forward automatically to heed Dylan’s call, but paused as he looked out over the desperate scene. One look at the grim line of his mouth, and Katerina knew she was right.

This fight was already over. As long as the arrows kept coming, they were going to lose.

She thought of the villagers she’d come to know since her arrival. Grinelda, down in the kitchens. The lisping bartender who ran the tavern. She thought of the finger-paintings and all those children who came to this place seeking refuge. Rose was fighting her way towards them through

the fire. In the background, she thought she saw Michael standing in the smoke.

*I can't let it happen. No matter what, Talsing Sanctuary cannot fall.*

Just like that, it was decided. It was as though a power greater than herself had taken over. It guided her movements. Squaring her shoulders. Steadying her step. Her eyes flickered to the faces around her—the best faces she knew. She bid them all a silent goodbye, edging her way backwards up to the little ledge. The one where Dylan had sat as a child, staring over the endless peaks.

His was the last face she saw. Smearred with soot and blood. Calling out some desperate order she couldn't seem to hear over the ringing in her ears. A fleeting smile passed over her face as she stared at him. Immortalizing it forever. Then she turned her back and climbed onto the ledge.

It wasn't done with any fanfare. It wasn't done as anything more than a simple necessity. An answer to a question. A quiet solution to save their lives. The princess stepped to the very edge of the wall and gazed over the cliff. It was what she had to offer. The only sacrifice she could make.

“KATERINA!”

She half-turned to look over her shoulder. A part of her shouldn't have been surprised. A gust of wind swept through the cloud of smoke, and for a split second she saw Dylan standing there. For a split second, the two of them locked eyes.

He was terrified. There was no other word to describe it. And not for himself, although he was at the top of the army's most-wanted list. Not even for the people of Talsing, who were all about to lose their lives. He was focused on one life. On a certain girl he would have given his own life a million times over to save.

He didn't say a word. He just shook his head. Staring with wide eyes through the smoke.

*Don't. Please.*

It was written all over his face, clear as day.

The princess smiled and pressed her fingers to her lips. Then to her heart. Then, before she could talk herself out of it, she turned back towards the cliff. Another gust of wind swelled up around them, tangling her hair as she stared into the abyss. She said a silent prayer, a silent farewell.

Then she took a breath...and jumped.

*You don't get to choose your stars.*

Katerina's mother had told her that once. She was only a little girl, sitting on the queen's lap as she played with the royal pendant. Batting it back and forth. Delighting in the shards of ruby-tinted light that danced along the wall. Adelaide smiled at her daughter and said the words again.

*You don't get to choose your stars. But there is a reason those stars chose you.*

The princess never understood the meaning of those words until that very moment.

*...there is a reason those stars chose you.*

A girl jumped over the cliff that day.



A DRAGON FLEW UP IN her place.

It was a feeling unlike any other. A sudden mending of what Katerina didn't know had been broken. A sudden completion of what she hadn't realized she'd been without.

A sense of belonging. Calming that aching storm within her heart.

There were distant shouts and cries from both sides as she flapped her powerful wings, feeling the air rush up beneath them as she took to the skies.

Her muscles, so slender and weak as a human, stretched out strong and lean. Her skin had shed its smooth ivory and was covered in a thick armor of ruby scales. Her piercing eyes roved over the mountains, trying to decide what to do with it. With the raging fire that was building up inside.

*If I let the army live, they'll burn the monastery to the ground. Killing everyone inside. If I let the army live, they'll never stop coming. They'll never stop fighting. Everyone I've ever loved will be lost.*

The world tilted sharply to the side as she angled her body around for another pass. From so high up, the soldiers looked like little figurines. The kinds of toys that she and Kailas used to play with as children. They looked much different up close. They looked angry. And afraid. *Very* afraid.

In the end, she had to close her eyes. She knew it had to happen, but she couldn't make herself watch. It didn't matter. Eyes closed or open, her body seemed to know what to do.

A shower of arrows ricocheted harmlessly off her shining neck as she glided low along the frosty embankment. The first time, nothing happened. The second time, she let loose a deafening roar and a wave of deadly fire spewed from her mouth.

The tents went up in flames. The people were soon to follow. An entire battalion, destroyed in less than a minute. Those who were able ran for the trees. Those who had more sense tried to take cover. They were few and far between. There was no escaping a dragon's fire. It sought you out like it had a mind of its own. Bringing a swift and brutal justice to everyone in its path.

Smoke curled in the air and remnants of the fire danced in her eyes as Katerina left the burning army behind her and circled back over the ravine. Freed from the constant onslaught of arrows, the people of Talsing had been able to get the fires mostly under control. The monastery was saved, at least for now, but it wouldn't be enough to change her mind.

As long as she stayed there, the place would always be in danger. As long as she and her friends remained, the entire sanctuary would live under constant threat.

It was something she could no longer allow.

She came down as lightly as she could. Perched upon the landing where she and her friends used to stand watch. Taloned claws gripped the edge of the crenulated stone as she lifted her head and waited, staring calmly at the mass of shell-shocked people scattering in her wake.

Slowly, very slowly, three tentative faces ventured out from the crowd. They were followed by a fourth. One that surprised Katerina but seemed to fit at the same time.

Together, Tanya, Cassiel, Dylan, and Rose made their way towards her. Moving as one would when approaching a wild animal. Their eyes bright with wonder and fear.

"Is it really her?" Tanya whispered, staring incredulously at the long, whipping tail.

Katerina bowed her head as Dylan took a step forward and nodded.

"It's her."

He alone was looking at her without a trace of fear. He was shocked, astonished, bewildered, uncertain, and a whole host of other things. But afraid...he was not.

"Something like me?" He cocked an eyebrow and ran a tentative hand along the smooth curve of her neck. "I'm afraid you have massively overestimated me, Your Highness."

He and Katerina shared a secret smile as the rest of them anxiously hovered behind.

"I say we stab it. Just to be sure." The others turned to Cassiel in disbelief and he shrugged defensively, his hand on his blade. "What? It's a bloomin' dragon! A nightmarish beast! If it's really Katerina, then she won't kill us when we're through."

*Wanna bet?*

Two curls of smoke rose threateningly from her nostrils as Dylan glanced back with a grin.

"No one's stabbing anyone. But if I'm not mistaken...we're leaving?" He phrased it as a question and turned back to search her eyes.

She nodded slowly, lowered a wing, then cocked her head with a fiery grin toward the horizon.

Tanya lifted her eyebrows, and even the all-confident Rose took a step back. "Wait. She wants us to..."

"No," Cassiel shook his head firmly. "Absolutely not."

Dylan turned around again, keeping one hand on Katerina at the same time. "Come on, you little coward. You know she's right. We can't stay here anymore. It's time to leave."

The fae took a step back, the face of a dragon reflected fearfully in his dark eyes. "Not in a million freakin' years," he murmured, backing away another step. He wasn't entirely sure that his friend was buried beneath those scales. And even if she was, he wasn't entirely sure it would matter. "I do a lot of things for you, Dylan, but that's too much."

"Oh, come on," Tanya teased, stepping up onto Katerina's steady wing. "You're not going to let me go by myself, are you? What if she decides to eat me along the way?"

Cassiel lifted a hand to stop her, literally frozen with indecision, before he took a deep breath and reluctantly followed suit. “I have a bad feeling about this...”

Katerina blew a cloud of smoke at him, and he kicked out with his foot. “Stop that! Bad dragon!”

Rose was close behind, eyeing the princess with a look of extreme caution. “So, you and me...we’re cool, right? That whole apology bit worked?”

Katerina snickered—as well as a dragon can snicker—and stooped closer to the ground so the shifter would have an easier time climbing up. She did so nervously, and settled at Tanya’s side.

In the end, the only person left was Dylan. The only person who required no invitation.

With the slightly manic grin of an adrenaline junky whose greatest fantasy had just come to life, he sprang lightly onto her back and settled down—the wind in his hair, the horizon in his eyes. “So, where to, princess?”

*Good question.*

One powerful beat of her wings, and the monastery vanished beneath him. Disappearing into the misty haze as she turned her eyes towards the sunset and took flight.

Where to? She wasn’t sure.

But, for possibly the first time in her entire life, she wasn’t afraid to find out.

**THE END**



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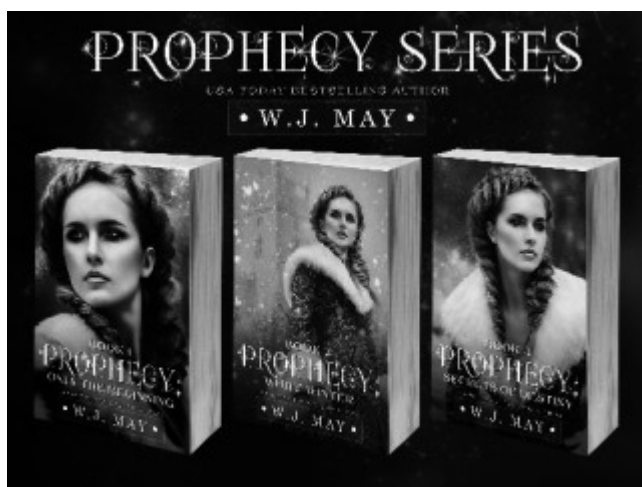
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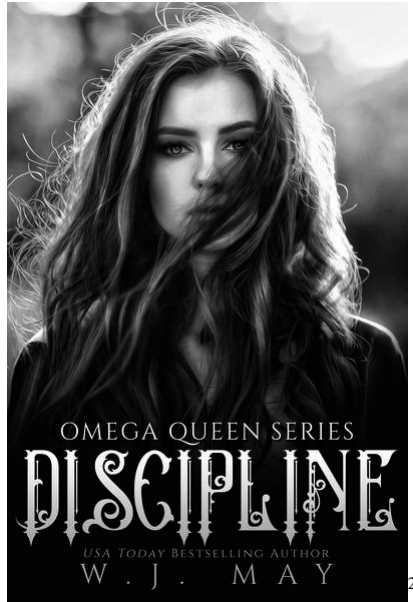
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Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Author-WJ-May-FAN-PAGE/141170442608149?ref=hl> \*Please feel free to connect with me and share your comments. I love connecting with my readers.\* W.J. May grew up in the fruit belt of Ontario. Crazy-happy childhood, she always has had a vivid imagination and loads of energy. After her father passed away in 2008, from a six-year battle with cancer (which she still believes he won the fight against), she began to write again. A passion she'd loved for years, but realized life was too short to keep putting it off. She is a writer of Young Adult, Fantasy Fiction and where ever else her little muses take her.

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