

THERE IS NO OTHER BOND LIKE THAT OF A KING AND HIS COMPEER.

THE COMPEER

ROYALS OF RODINA
BOOK I

Jamie Applegate Hunter

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The Compeer

The Royals of Rodina

Book One



Jamie Applegate Hunter

The Compeer

A Royals of Rodina Novel

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DEDICATION

To my mom, the reader; my dad, the musician;
and my brother, the asshole:
I miss you all.
I wish you could see me now.

Map of Rodina



KINGDOM CRESTS

Winter Kingdom



Summer kingdom



SPRING KINGDOM



AUTUMN KINGDOM



HISTORY

In ancient history, the mortals abused their world, sowing the seeds for their own destruction. The seasons were not as they should be: the tides rose too high and the deserts too hot. The gods were displeased and could no longer watch their beautiful creation be destroyed.

They descended unto the world to warn the purest of souls that the water would rise and new land would emerge. The chosen were told where to find their new home, leaving the rest to perish in the Great Flood of the Gods.

To ensure the remaining mortals would never ruin the precious gift they were given, the four gods created immortal rulers in each of their likenesses. One born of Winter, sculpted by ice; one born of Spring, planted by earth; one born of Summer, forged by the sun; and one born of Autumn, carried by wind.

These four rulers would possess the power of the land to keep the order and protect their new world they called Rodina.

PROLOGUE

Most people wake up not knowing it will be the day to change their lives forever, while others wake up and decide it will be the day they make the change themselves. Sometimes Fate has a hand in their destinies, and sometimes it does not.

Winnie Hayward contemplated the validity of Fate as she walked along the edge of the road leading to the tiny village of Anorak. She turned thirteen a week prior on the Winter Solstice, and her mother agreed she was old enough to make the trek to the market on her own.

She enjoyed the quiet walk through the dense forest because sometimes she liked to be alone, away from the loud noises that always filled the large inn and tavern, Hayward's Place, that her family owned.

When her father died, her mother took over running the business, keeping his love for meeting new people alive. It was far removed from the village, but still close enough to the main road to attract patrons who passed by. Sometimes she loved meeting the new people that traveled through, but other times she wanted peace and quiet.

"Well, ain't you a strange looking one?" A whistle pierced the air and she whipped around to see two men walking toward her. The one who had spoken smiled viciously and licked his lips like he had found his next meal. He was missing one of his front teeth, and his clothes were so filthy it looked as if he hadn't bathed in a fortnight. His friend seemed just as grimy with greasy hair and a dirty appearance. Winnie shuddered.

She gave a nervous smile and quickened her pace as her heartbeat began to hammer in her chest.

She could hear their footsteps match her speed before the other man said, “Why don’t you come with us, darlin’?”

As they began to close in on her, she veered to the right, darting into the woods. Her mother told her not to venture into the forest because the wild beasts and hunters could mistake her as prey, but she needed somewhere to hide.

She could hear the men ambling behind her, laughing as if it were an amusing game. She ran faster than she ever had before, her dress snagging on branches as she pushed through the trees. She wasn’t sure how long she had been running, but her legs started to ache, and her lungs began to burn. She knew she would not be able to make it much farther, and panic started to rise in her chest.

She choked out a sob when she heard the men calling out for her again. When she looked back to see if she had time to hide, a strong hand reached down, yanked her by the arm, and slung her over the rear of a monstrous horse. She was about to scream, but a calming voice stopped her. “It’s ok, little dove. You’re safe with me.”

She lifted her head to look at the man and nodded. He had kind eyes, a fierce build, and looked to be the age of her mother, or maybe grandfather. It was hard to tell. His red hair and beard had begun to streak with grey, but the crinkles around his brown eyes were subtle.

She swallowed, somehow knowing he wasn’t going to hurt her. She heard the men’s taunts grow closer, and fresh tears streamed down her face as her eyes searched the direction from which she had come.

“Stay here,” the man commanded, giving her a stern look that she’d seen on her mother’s face many times before. “Do not under any circumstances get off of this horse, do you understand?”

She wiped her eyes, nodded, and righted herself behind the saddle.

The mysterious man jumped down and met her assailants halfway. When they saw him, they stopped abruptly and put their hands up. “We’re just here for the girl. She’s my niece,” the toothless man stammered.

“No, I am not!” she practically screeched from atop the tall steed.

Quicker than her eyes could track, her savior darted toward the men with a dagger in each hand. She hadn’t seen him pull the weapons out, and her mouth dropped open in awe. He cut one man’s throat before spinning behind the other, holding one dagger to his Adam’s apple and the other to

his gut. His movements were like a dance, and she was completely mesmerized.

The toothless man trapped in his hold looked at her with wide eyes. “Please! I didn’t mean it. I’ll leave her alone, I swear it.”

The bearded man let out a humorless laugh and whispered, “Oh, I know you will.” Faster than a lightning strike, he pulled his daggers in opposite directions and ripped the toothless coward wide open.

Winnie was speechless as she stared at the grotesque men who lay dead on the forest floor, their blood staining the leaves around them. She shuddered but could not make herself be sorry. “Thank you,” she rasped out.

The grizzly of a man silently stalked back toward her and wiped the blood from his blades across his pant leg. He sheathed them in the holsters at his hips and swung his leg over the horse before kicking the beast into a trot.

Once they reached the road to the village, he jumped to the ground and hoisted her out of the saddle. “I think you should go right home. Can you do that for me?”

She looked in the direction of the inn. “Yes. I’m at Hayward’s Place not far down that way,” she said, pointing. He followed her outstretched arm and turned back to study her face.

“Straight there,” he said, his voice stern as he mounted his horse and steered his way back into the woods.

As she walked home, she sensed the man following her along the edge, concealed by the trees. She smiled to herself and somehow knew the gods sent him to watch over her that day.

It was then that she vowed she would never be weak or afraid again, and that if Fate existed, she did not need its help. The next man who tried to hurt her would suffer at her hand, of that she was sure. With a newfound purpose, she marched home with her head held high.

CHAPTER ONE

Ten years later

The beautiful woman sobbed against her gag as she struggled to free her wrists from their bindings. If she could free her arms, she could find a way out of here. She wasn't sure where they had brought her, but she would find her way back to the capital and find help.

Her attempts proved futile, and she hung her head, letting her cries of desperation rack her body.

She was cold, dirty, hungry, and wanted to go home. The door of her makeshift cell opened, and she snapped her head up to see a mountain of a man with lifeless eyes stalking toward her.

She tried to back away but was met by a cold wall of rock. She began to cry harder when he yanked her by the elbow and grunted, "Walk."

She followed him through a series of tunnels that had something wet trailing down the walls. It was pitch black, save for the torch the monster was carrying in his meaty hand and a few more torches on the walls.

When they reached a large cavern, she was thrust to the middle of the room, scraping her knees as she hit the hard floor. She surveyed the room for possible exits and saw a throne made of dark stone against the far wall. Upon it sat a beautiful man, and she gasped. She wasn't sure which king he was, but she'd recognize the unmatched perfection anywhere.

Had she offended another kingdom? Why was she here? Frantically she scrambled to her feet and started to plea for her life around the dirty rag in her mouth. The king motioned to her jailer, and he freed her of the gag. She whimpered before looking back to the king with watery eyes.

"Your majesty, I apologize if I have offended you. Please tell me my offenses so I can atone for my sins." She fought to keep her voice steady, latching on to the last of her dignity.

A cruel smile played across his handsome face as he stood and meandered across the stone floor toward her. "Don't worry, my pet. You

will give me what I need soon enough.” He turned and motioned to an opening that she had not seen. Another gruesome guard dragged her husband and son across the room, and her heart seized. Both were gagged and bound, fear written all over their faces.

Another strangled sob escaped her throat at the sight of her family. She looked back to the king and whispered frantically, “What is this?”

“This,” he said, motioning to her family, “is to make sure you do as I say.” The confusion must have shown on her face because he walked closer and ran a surprisingly tender hand down her face before gripping her chin. “You will *willingly* marry me.”

She choked on her breath in disbelief. For a duchess to willingly marry another king was to be cursed by the gods. No one had done it, so the punishment was uncertain, but every conduit bride was warned the morning before entering into the contract marriage. She looked from her family to the king, and her lower lip began to tremble. “Please, anything but this.”

The king gave a tight-lipped smile and, without taking his eyes off her, motioned behind him. Without hesitation, the guard slit her husband’s throat. Her screams echoed through the great cavern as her son struggled against his restraints to get to his father.

“I agree! I agree,” she screamed, closing her eyes. “Just please, don’t hurt my son.”

The king nodded with a sinister smile. “That’s more like it.” He nodded to her guard, signaling to free her hands. They itched to slap the king across his face but refrained. Her son began yelling around his gag for her not to go through with the blood-bonding ceremony.

The king grabbed her hand in his and cut a slit over her palm, opening her previous scar. He did the same to his own hand before pressing their bleeding gashes together and recited the oath, “I bond my blood to thee. My power is your power. My home is your home. My land is your land. Under the gods.”

She chewed the inside of her cheek, drawing blood, and fresh tears streamed down her face as she repeated his words, “I bond my blood to thee. My power is your power. My home is your home. My land is your land. Under the gods.”

She felt a surge being pulled away from her and began to panic. This wasn’t supposed to happen; she’s supposed to feel his power surge *into* her. Her eyes shot to his, and his cruel smile sent a chill down her spine. She

tried to yank her hand back, but he squeezed his fingers around hers, holding strong. “Let me go! Something’s not right!”

“Shh, my pet. It will be over soon.”

Her vision started to blur as she fell to her knees, his grip on her hand becoming painful. Excruciating pain cut through her chest, stealing her breath, and slowly, she felt the last of her life drain from her body.

CHAPTER TWO

Winnie leaned on the bar top, amused at her friend's animated enthusiasm. Emmy Traxus had been her best friend since she started working at Hayward's Place five years ago. She wandered in without a penny to her name, asking if they could use extra help, and the two had been inseparable ever since.

She glanced around the great room of the tavern to survey the guest tables for empties. The room was moderately-sized, with small, rectangular wooden tables scattered around. There were double glass doors that led to the back courtyard and a large wooden door that opened to the building's foyer. A great stone fireplace sat in the middle of the far wall, with flames roaring in the hearth.

"You are going to look beautiful in anything you wear, Emmy. I don't know why you need a new dress," Winnie said and pushed up from the bar and started to dry the freshly-washed mugs in front of her.

Emmy looked scandalized. "You cannot be serious! It's the Equinox, Winnie. Josef Yezmen does not want to be seen with someone in an old drab dress!"

Josef Yezmen was a mousy young nobleman who came through the inn last week from Eridu, the Winter Kingdom's capital, and was immediately taken with Emmy.

She's beautiful with shiny dark brown hair, hazel eyes, and smooth, amber skin. Her legs are long, and her shape is curvy. Men constantly drool over her, so for her to catch the eye of a wealthy traveler was no surprise. When Josef invited her to attend the Spring Equinox Gala in Uruk, the Spring Kingdom's capital, she almost burst with excitement.

Winnie released a sigh. "Alright. I will go with you, but only if you agree to stop by the smithy with me. I want to see if Clarence has anything

new."

Emmy rolled her eyes. "You and your weapons. I will never understand it. A lady doesn't need to defend herself. That's what we have men for. It's not like you know how to use them anyway."

"What do you have us for?" Chazriel, Winnie's older brother, asked as he sauntered into the room and took a seat at the bar.

Emmy perked up at the sight of him and began to bat her lashes shamelessly. Chaz was handsome with golden hair and eyes that look either blue or green depending on his clothes, just like their mother. He fought in the king's battalion, and the many years of warrior training had honed his body to be something most women desired. Emmy had been infatuated with him since the day they first met.

"Hi, Chaz!" More eyelash flurries. "I was telling Winnie that men will protect us women, of course. She doesn't need to keep collecting weapons like some brute," she laughed, giving Winnie a playful glare.

Chaz turned to Winnie with a knowing smirk. Emmy and their mother did not know that he had been training with Luther and Winnie for years.

Luther deGrey is a general in the Winter battalion and had become a father figure to Winnie and her brother. Ten years ago, when she was thirteen, she would climb the warrior training facility's stone wall to memorize their training exercises. She would later hide in the woods behind the inn and practice what she had seen that day.

The training arena was large and oval-shaped, with a rectangular courtyard attached at the back. The men wore their fighting leathers most days but would sometimes don their armor for sparring.

The Winter armor was a brilliant silver, with caps on the shoulders and metal that swirled around the arms to the wrists. Breastplates with the crest of Winter, a frozen tree, covered their chests, and scabbards lay across their backs. She was not sure how they fought in the heavy equipment, but their movements were just as fluid as they were without them.

One afternoon when she was shimmying back down the wall, Luther caught her and demanded to know why she was spying on the warriors. With all the courage she could muster, she planted her feet, lifted her chin, and said, "I'm training like a warrior. I want to be able to cut a man down if he dares lay an unwanted hand on me."

He must have seen something in Winnie, or maybe took pity on her, because he gave her an amused look and offered to train her instead.

Shortly after their chance meeting, he made good on his offer, and they set up a makeshift training circle in a clearing behind Hayward's Place. Targets hung from trees alongside practice sacks that were often ripped to shreds by swords and arrows, and some parts of the forest floor were worn down from their frequent sparring.

One afternoon, Chaz followed her into the woods to see where she always snuck off to. When he found her with Luther, he asked if he could train with them if he swore not to tell. Luther reluctantly agreed and told the siblings there would be no fooling around and that it must be taken seriously.

A year later, when Chaz came of age, he joined the battalion and was assigned (not surprisingly) to Luther's regiment. Though he was training with his battalion, he continued his training with Winnie when he could.

Winnie brought herself back to the present and zeroed in on the flirting between her brother and Emmy. Chaz shook his head at Emmy's declaration about women with weapons and splayed his hands on the bar. "She isn't like you, Em. She will never be into pretty dresses and fancy hair. Accept it, or you'll be sorely disappointed."

Emmy blew out an exasperated breath, "She is gorgeous and would catch any man's eye if she tried instead of fiddling with swords and daggers."

Winnie felt a pang in her chest. Despite having a pretty face, her pale blonde hair and light grey eyes were considered odd in their village. She took after her father, and while she loved him, she wished she had taken after her mother instead. Men did not request her company, and she doubted they ever would.

She cleared her throat and looked pointedly at her friend. "When do you want to leave?"

"Leave to go where?" Francis Rowntree, a tavern regular, asked as he walked in.

Francis had been coming to Hayward's Place almost every day since she was a girl. He's older with rosy cheeks and blue eyes that twinkle. He walks hunched over like his body has seen better days, but something told her he was not as frail as he looked.

She was unsure what he did in the mornings for a living because he would never tell anyone when they asked. He loved to gather patrons around the fire in the evenings and weave tales of history and magic like a royal storyteller. It was one of her favorite things about him.

"To get a dress for the Spring Equinox Gala. I was invited to go, isn't that wonderful, Fran?" Emmy was bouncing again, and Winnie noticed Chaz staring at her with an indiscernible look.

Francis took his normal seat at the bar top and pointed to a pitcher of ale. "Spring Equinox, eh? Have you lassies ever heard the history of the Galas?"

Chaz, Emmy, and Winnie exchanged an amused look. They had heard most of his stories many times but always obliged him anyway.

"I can't quite remember. Do you know it?" Winnie asked with a smile.

Francis took his ale from Emmy and nodded. "Course I do. As you girls know, there is a Spring King, a Summer King, an Autumn King, and our Winter King." He looked at each of them for confirmation.

They all nodded, and he continued, "Then you also know that each king is duty-bound by the gods to regulate our seasons and weather. Their powers are tied to the very land we stand on. That's how the entire land of Rodina can experience the different seasons throughout the year."

They all nodded again.

"What you probably do *not* know is that while each king has power year-round, during the season that they control, their power surges through them at a greater capacity to control the climate of to which they are tied. They cannot contain the power on their own and are required to take a conduit bride for the three months of their season. The conduits cannot wield power, only hold it as a vessel so the land can pull from them both. The Spring King must marry before midnight of the Spring Equinox, the Summer King before the Summer Solstice, the Autumn King before the Autumn Equinox, and the Winter King before the Winter Solstice.

"If they do not take a bride, their great power is passed to the next seasonal king in the rotation, who must immediately wed. That king will then usher in his season early." He took a big gulp of ale and smacked his lips.

"However, if they *do* marry in time, all is well and stays in order. The next seasonal king then hosts the Gala that begins at sundown the night

before their Equinox or Solstice, where they wed their new bride, and the king who is relinquishing his control terminates his marriage to his. The control is transferred at midnight, and the Gala goes on until sunrise. It's all ceremonial and a pompous display of wealth if you ask me." He nodded hard with his final statement, signaling the end of his story.

The three murmured their appreciation for his impromptu lesson and thanked him for sharing his wisdom. They already knew this information, of course, but it's still a wonder to hear the odd, yet interesting history of their land.

Emmy and Winnie quickly grabbed their satchels and headed toward the village. They could have taken the horses but preferred to walk instead since Winter was coming to a close and the snow had begun to melt. The road on which the tavern was located passed through Anorak to Eridu and was lined on both sides with tall evergreen trees.

Emmy was rambling about the different fabrics she wanted for her dress, but Winnie wasn't paying attention because her thoughts had turned to the strange marriage rituals of the kings. She could never figure out why women flocked to Eridu and fell at King Thaddeus' feet, desperate to catch his eye.

She supposed it was because each woman who wed a king was given Queen Regent's title during their season and the title of Duchess once they terminated their marriage. They also received payment for the rest of their lives and had male suitors from all over ask for their hand in marriage afterward.

But she did not understand it. Who would want to marry for money and a title instead of love? She wanted a marriage like her parents had. Her father passed away from an illness when she was a child, and her mother never remarried. She always said that he was her one love, and she would never find another.

"Are you listening to me?" Emmy's voice dripped with annoyance. "You look like your head is in the clouds."

"I was thinking about the Gala and how much fun you're going to have. I wish I could join you." Winnie forced a smile with her white lie. She normally was not a deceptive person, but Emmy was excited about going. She did not want to spoil her mood.

Emmy gave her a sympathetic look. "One day, you will go to your own Gala, Winnie. I know it!"

They stepped into the seamstress's shop and rang the bell on the counter. Gilda, a willowy woman with black hair, dark brown eyes, and sharp features, bustled from the back room. She was pretty in a homely sort of way and looked to be a bit younger than Winnie's mother.

She greeted them with a wave and welcoming smile. "Hello, girls! What can I do for you today?" She turned a conspiratorial look to Winnie. "More dresses with hidden pockets?" she asked, wiggling her eyebrows with a wicked grin.

She had been helping Winnie make dresses to conceal small weapons since she was fifteen. "Not today, I'm afraid. Emmy was invited to the Spring Gala and needs something brilliant to wear."

"The Spring Gala! I always knew your beauty would get you places," Gilda gushed.

Winnie felt the weight of jealousy settle in her stomach like a sack of rocks and looked down at her plain, dark blue dress. She had Gilda make the arms and bodice form-fitting for better agility, and the top melted into the long skirt that she kept in thinner layers with hidden slits for easy running. You could only see them if she was in a full sprint or kicking. She supposed she could put in more effort to look lady like. With a sigh, she turned her attention back to the women as they motioned excitedly in conversation.

"I'd like a lower cut neckline to accentuate my assets and sleeves that bell out from the elbow. Let's do gold fabric with white floral patterns that run the length of the entire dress," Emmy chattered excitedly, clapping her hands.

Gilda nodded as she scribbled furiously. "I have just the fabric for you. Come with me, and we'll get your measurements." They disappeared to the back room while Winnie admired the different silks that hung on the walls and wondered if she should have at least one pretty dress made, just in case.

They left the dress shop, and Winnie pulled Emmy to Clarence's smithy on the corner. She could not contain the smile that transformed her face into that of a child when she spotted the row of daggers on the wall.

"Back so soon, little dove?" Clarence walked from the back with his hands in his apron and a sly grin on his face. When Luther first brought her to the smithy, she had been shocked to learn that the humble blacksmith

was the man who had saved her when she was a girl. He recognized her immediately, and they had been thick as thieves ever since.

"You know I can't stay away for long. Do you have anything new?" she asked as she drifted to admire the swords on the opposite wall.

He walked through a swinging door and called over his shoulder, "Actually, I do. I made these just for you." He emerged from the back, holding a fine leather quiver filled with silver-tipped arrows.

She gasped as she ran across the room to take one out and inspect it. "These are beautiful, Clarence," she breathed. They were thicker than normal arrows with large, serrated tips. Emmy snorted behind her.

"These should do a good amount of damage, should you ever need it," he said, shooting Emmy a glare.

"How much do I owe you?" Winnie asked as she dug into her satchel for her coin purse.

"These are a gift. I meant to get them to you by your birthday on the Winter Solstice, but they weren't ready yet." He handed her the quiver with a nod.

She could feel the gratitude pooling in her eyes and threw her arms around his shoulders. "Thank you, Clarence! I won't forget this." She pecked his cheek before pulling back.

"Anything for you, little dove," he smiled warmly, sitting back down to finish forging the sword he had been working on.

He had called her 'little dove' since that fateful day in the woods, claiming her hair was the color of dove feathers.

Emmy linked their elbows and began chattering away about her dress on the trek back to the tavern.

"When did Gilda say it would be ready?" Winnie asked when Emmy paused to take a breath.

"In a fortnight. I wish it were sooner, but she said the flowers would take some time. It will be cutting it close to the equinox, but I don't mind waiting on such a beautiful piece," she said dreamily, looking off with a distant smile.

Winnie also grinned as she touched the leather strap of her new quiver. Today turned out to be much more pleasant than she had expected.

CHAPTER THREE

Winnie glanced over her shoulder as she weaved between the trees in a full run. She saw Chaz quickly closing the distance between them and pushed herself harder. Her pale blonde hair whipped through the air like a cape the faster she pumped her legs. Luther wanted to make sure she could outrun someone if necessary and would often make her sprint through the forest until her brother caught her.

She saw him closing in and veered to the left to grab a low-hanging branch. As he rounded the bend, she swung around the tree and tackled him to the ground with a roll. She righted herself to make a getaway, but he grabbed her ankle and yanked her leg out from under her.

They both lay on their backs, panting for breath and laughing. "You're getting faster, little sister," he commented, tilting his head to meet her gaze.

She sat up, brushing the leaves from her hair. "And clever too. You never saw me coming around that tree. Maybe you're getting rusty," she teased, climbing to her feet and extending her hand.

"I was going easy on you," he said, jumping up. "You're faster than half the warriors in my battalion, you know. It's not your fault I'm a perfect specimen."

Winnie rolled her eyes with a smile. "That ego of yours is going to get you slapped one of these days." As she said it, she popped him in the back of the head and took off toward the clearing.

"You're going to pay for that!" he bellowed as he sped after her.

When she broke into the training circle, he tackled her from behind, and they both tumbled to the ground. He pinned her with a knee on her stomach and picked up a handful of dirt to sprinkle on her face. Sputtering, she swatted at his hands to stop the earthly assault.

"Don't make me separate you two." They both whipped their heads toward Luther, who was shaking his head with his arms crossed. His mouth was in a thin line that he used to suppress his smile. They both grinned like cats and shuffled to stand.

"You should have seen me. I grabbed a branch, swung around, and knocked this ogre to the ground," she motioned to Chaz and walked to the metal box that contained her larger weapons. "And look what Clarence made for me." She lifted the new quiver and arrows.

Chaz moved to inspect them with Luther and gave an appreciative nod. "These are nice. Be sure not to cut yourself," he added with a smirk. She gave him a light shove.

Luther finally looked up and met her gaze. "He must think you're something special to give you such a unique weapon," he observed, placing the quiver in the box. "And he's correct. You fight as well as most of my men."

Her chest filled with pride. "It's because I was trained by the best, so thank you, Luther."

"Hey! What about me? I train you when the old man is gone," Chaz said incredulously and crossed his arms.

Luther kicked out his leg, knocking Chaz to the ground before standing over him with a grin. "This old man can still take you down, son. Don't you forget that." Without another word, Luther waved goodbye and untied his horse from the nearest tree to leave.

He was never one for goodbyes and always left as quickly as he came.



Emmy rushed into the tavern, looking like she had met the king himself. "Gilda delivered my dress this morning, and it's wonderful!" She gave a happy squeal, ran through the back hallway, and motioned for Winnie to follow.

Winnie, her family, and Emmy lived in the house attached to the back of Hayward's Place. There were four bedrooms, two bathing chambers, and a parlor.

Emmy disappeared into her room with Winnie on her heels. Her bedroom was all frilly bedding and floral wallpaper. She'd decorated it herself with things she purchased in Anorak, and Winnie was always impressed with her creative eye.

Emmy motioned to the dress that hung from her armoire, and Winnie gasped. It was exquisite and would look perfect with her friend's warm complexion. "It's gorgeous. You're going to outshine everyone at the Gala," she assured.

"Oh hush, I can't compete with the noble ladies who will be attending, but it *is* a beautiful dress. I can't wait for everyone to see me in it." She held it to her and swished the skirt with a faraway look in her eyes.

Winnie had a feeling that by *everyone*, she meant Chaz, and smirked. "Come on, we better help with the dinner rush, or mother will have our heads."

Suki Hayward, Winnie and Chaz's mother, was as jolly as they came but hated tardiness above all else and wouldn't hesitate to box someone's ears for the smallest infraction. She was a tiny woman with slim features and golden, greying hair that she swept back in a tight bun.

When the girls came rushing into the kitchen, she pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes, looking between the two. "You girls are up to something."

"Emmy's dress for the Spring Gala was delivered, and she showed it to me," Winnie said, jerking her thumb toward their rooms.

Suki's eyes lit up. "Oh, Emmy, I can't wait to see you in it, sweet girl." She turned back to the stove and began to stir a large pot. "Start loading plates, girls; the guests will be down looking for food any minute."

Free food and ale came with each room they rented out. It was something that attracted travelers to their inn, keeping them busy year-round. The girls worked in tandem, loading plates with beans, meat, and bread before carrying them to the guests trickling in.

"Miss Emmy, are you ready for the Gala? It's in a few days, no?" Francis asked as he peered over his mug from his usual spot at the bar.

"Yes! My dress came in today. Will you be here that morning to see me off, or do you have mysterious things to do?" she asked as she lowered her voice and leaned over the bar with a conspiratorial look.

He grinned and shook his head. "I'll be here, lass." He placed his utensils on his plate and sat back. "You girls don't want to miss my story tonight. It's an interesting one."

They both giggled, and Winnie smiled. "We wouldn't dream of it."

Later that evening, Francis was perched by the fireplace with curious men, women, and children circled around him. "Tonight, I'll tell the tale of the gods and their kings." He moved his gaze to look at every face as Winnie stifled a laugh at his over-the-top theatrics.

He continued, "There are four gods in the heavens: Heims of the ice, Ver of the earth, Aestas of the sun, and Autumnus of the wind. Displeased with the world's state, they combined their powers to eradicate the Old World and create the new. To keep the humans from destroying the land like the ones before, they created four kings and bestowed upon them power like their own. This is how we have perfect seasons year-round and order throughout our kingdoms. You see, no one would dare cross the mighty kings of the gods lest they want to be struck down."

Gasps and excited whispers filled the room.

The small crowd he accrued leaned forward and hung on his every word. Winnie shook her head and finished cleaning the bar top. She had heard all his stories many times before and often wondered if they were fallacies or truth.



Emmy walked into the dining hall in twirling gold skirts with her hair pinned back in the latest fashion. She was breathtaking, and Winnie told her as much as she glided around the room, soaking up praises. Chaz walked in from the front entrance and froze when he saw her. She turned to meet his gaze and smiled shyly with a small wave.

Winnie looked between them and wondered when they would stop playing coy and admit their feelings for one another. It just seemed silly at this point.

He cleared his throat. "You look beautiful, Emmy. The palace won't know what to do with you."

She gave another flirtatious twirl and looked at him through lowered lashes. "You think so?"

"I know so," he said, his voice deep.

"You would be beautiful in a potato sack, lass. Any lad would be lucky to have you," Francis said and raised his mug in cheers.

A few moments later, Josef entered the tavern and smiled broadly when he spotted Emmy. "You look stunning, my dear. I will be the envy of every man at the Gala." He placed a kiss on the back of her hand with a slight bow. Out of the corner of her eye, Winnie saw Chaz's face turn murderous before he turned on his heel and stalked to his room.

Emmy threaded her arm through Josef's elbow, waved goodbye to everyone, and floated to the immaculate carriage out front.

Uruk was an eight-hour ride directly north and was located close to the Winter border. Eridu was a six-hour carriage ride from Anorak in the same direction. The Summer capital, Zoris, and the Autumn capital, Kore, were much farther than the other two. Winnie's family only owned two horses and one wagon to carry supplies from the village. She could never make the trek to Eridu, let alone another kingdom, on horseback, mainly because she wasn't a talented rider.

She always daydreamed about what the Winter capital looked like. Is everything elegant, or does it look like Anorak with a magnificent, frozen palace?

Maybe one day, she would finally make the trip and try to catch a glimpse of the notorious Winter King himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Seated at a pretentiously adorned table with floral vines carved into the trim, King Thaddeus, known as Thad to those close to him, pushed his dark hair out of his face and surveyed the luxurious dining hall of the Spring Palace.

Vines coated the walls, and a sweet flowery smell hung thick in the air. He was at the traditional Gala brunch with the other kings and their personal guards, and most of the current company looked as thrilled to be there as he was.

He switched his attention to the head of his own personal guard, Henry, who stuffed a jelly-coated pastry into a large crepe and crammed it into his mouth. Sticky red goo coated his lips as he grinned from ear to ear before taking another bite, making Thad roll his eyes. "Why do you insist on trying to rot your teeth from your head?"

Henry had been the head of his personal guard for the past six years. He quickly worked his way up the ranks with his impressive skill, and Luther deGrey, Thad's most trusted general, recommended him for the job. He and Henry quickly became friends, and now they were practically brothers.

Henry wiped his mouth and flashed his perfectly white teeth. "Look at these," he bragged, tapping a tooth with his finger. "The gods blessed me, so why should I waste it?" He picked up his sugar concoction and shoved the rest into his mouth.

"Thaddeus, are you starving your guards now?" Silas, the King of Spring, teased from the other end of the table.

The Spring King smiled and shook his head, but Henry only glared back. Silas, like all the kings, looked perpetually young and ethereally handsome. Old enough to be respected but young enough to be desired, his

dark, golden skin was flawless, his nose strong and narrow, and his dark, hunter green eyes always danced with amusement.

Thad leaned back with a laugh. "He has the appetite of a boy coming into manhood."

He took a long drink of ale and snickered when Henry mumbled under his breath, "I'm a grown man with exquisite taste."

Henry was the only person in all the four kingdoms of Rodina who disliked Silas. He said his eyes did not match his face, but Thad wasn't sure what that meant. He suspected Henry only disliked Silas because he'd been told the history between the Winter and Spring kings.

Thad once fell in love with a woman and thought her to be his *compeer*, also known as a gods-blessed soulmate. They were betrothed and planned to marry during the Winter Solstice Gala that year. But a fortnight before the wedding, Silas bedded her without knowing who she was, and Thad was forced to find another wife. The conduit brides are always kept a secret until the night of the Gala, and Silas could not have known who she was.

Thad was angry at Lana and her alone. While the kings are not brothers by blood, they are brothers by heart, and he could never be angry with Silas for something he unknowingly did. *Lana* told him she loved him above all else and then betrayed him for the first handsome face to tempt her. He swore that day he would never be made a fool again.

"Where is your personal guard, Silas?" Larkin, the King of Summer, inquired with a smirk. "Don't plan on anyone trying to kill you today?" The Summer King had tan skin, golden blonde hair, and eyes the color of the ocean. He was the sun personified and as laid back as they came.

The royals laughed at the inside joke they have had for centuries. The kings are immortal, but there was still civil unrest from time to time, and while they could not die from a mortal wound, it was still painful. For that reason, they kept personal guards, not because they were afraid of being murdered.

All the kings were respected among their people, but each were known for certain traits: Silas was the charismatic Spring King who drew people in; Thaddeus was the brooding, mysterious king of Winter whom people rarely saw; Larkin was the carefree, easy-going Summer King, and Archer was the hard-handed, strategic genius king of Autumn.

Silas gave a good-natured laugh. "Come on, Larkin. I've always thought the personal guards were unnecessary. You know that. It's not like we can be killed." At his words, Henry's knuckles turned white around his napkin.

Archer dropped his silverware and sliced his words across the table, "We *can* be killed. It'd do you well to remember that."

The table stilled into an uncomfortable silence. "Archer, only three kings together can kill another. Surely you do not mean to take out this handsome face," Thad chuckled and waved a hand around his head.

"Everything is a joke to you three. Unfledged, all of you," Archer bit out, his voice dripping with annoyance.

Larkin stood and pinned him with a dangerous look. "Then let us get this celebration over with so you can crawl back to Kore and leave us to our *unfledged* vices." With that, he motioned to his guard and stormed from the room.

Silas dropped his napkin on his plate and stood. "Well, that was entertaining. Archer, I am sorry if we have offended you. Please, stay and celebrate with us. Come, let me introduce you to my bride," he said and motioned with his hand toward the door, prompting the Autumn King to follow.

Thad and Henry exchanged a look. *What was that about?*



Thad stood in front of Tillian, his current conduit bride, and ran the dagger down her palm. She gave him a small smile and winced. "I'm sorry. It'll be over soon," he promised.

She nodded her head and pressed her palm to his.

Their hands were flat together in front of their bodies as he recited the words of the breaking ceremony, "I break my bond to thee. My blood is my blood. My power is my power. My home is my home. My land is my land. Under the gods."

She repeated his words, and he felt the familiar snap of the bond being severed. "Do you feel ok?"

"Yes. I feel a little empty, but nothing too bad." She turned her brown eyes to his with a small smile. "It's been a pleasure serving you, King Thaddeus."

He bowed and kissed her hand. "As you, Duchess Tillian."

Later, when both the ceremonial bond-breaking of Winter and the marriage of Spring were over, Henry and Thad walked through the expansive Gardens of Spring. Tall hedges covered with flowers created a sort of maze, hiding people out of sight.

"Your palace is better than this bee-infested hell hole," Henry griped and swatted at an insect.

Thad smirked. "You just hate Silas. Don't take it out on the garden."

He shrugged and changed the subject, "I'll miss Tillian. I may hide in the privy later and cry myself senseless." He slapped a hand to his chest and feigned a pained expression.

He sometimes hid his real emotions with humor, and Thad's chest squeezed for his friend. Henry always formed a familial-type friendship with the women and hated to see them go at Winter's end.

"All jokes aside, it's always nice to have a woman's touch during the Winter season," Henry remarked.

Thad avoided his gaze. "I enjoy the company of the brides most times." He made a face. "Except the year I married Marlena. She did nothing but complain."

Henry nodded with a laugh. "I'm glad I missed that one," he said, cutting his eyes to Thad. "Have you thought more about searching for your *compe*-"

"No," he snapped.

His mind unwillingly drifted to Lana. She had grown up in the Spring Kingdom and moved to Winter with her father when she was sixteen. She always said she missed the sweet scent of Spring but could never bring herself to leave her father alone in Conso, a village outside of Eridu.

'Good.' Thad would say. *'I would never have met you, and a world without you is a sad world indeed.'* Her beautiful cornsilk hair and hazel eyes shone in the sunlight as she laughed in his lap. She ran her smooth

hand down his face and whispered, *'I love you more than Spring, Thad.'* He would always respond, *'I love you more than Winter, tulip.'*

The memory stung, and he rubbed at his neck to rid his throat of the emotion stuck there. Her betrayal left a cut in him that had yet to heal. A hundred years and he wasn't over her, and in a hundred more, he still wouldn't be.

They quietly emerged from the garden and watched the crowd of wealthy nobles showing off their children to each other like prized cattle. Nobles often used the Galas to secure marriage contracts among the upper class.

Thad shook his head and groaned, "I'm ready to leave. I've been in my palace receiving these money-hungry people for too long."

Henry scoffed, "It's been three months, not three years. Besides, not all of them are bad."

"You're not the one with men trying to sell their daughter's virginity to you or women shoving their bosoms in your face at all times."

"Don't threaten me with a good time. I'd love to have bosoms shoved in my face," Henry said with a sly grin.

Thad shook his head. "You're a scoundrel. How many children do you have these days?"

Henry raised his middle finger in response. "I'll have you know I have none. Just because I enjoy a good romp in the hay does not mean I'm an idiot. Besides, half of my ventures are men; no risked pregnancies there." He swiped a glass of wine from a server's tray and drained it in one gulp. "Don't act like you don't bed your fair share in your off-seasons," he challenged. "Speaking of which, I'm going to find a little fun now."

Thad watched him leave and surveyed the crowd. His eyes landed on Luther deGrey conversing with a group of other generals. He approached them with a polite smile. "Gentleman. Good to see that you all clean up well. I was beginning to think you only owned leathers."

Luther chuckled and slapped a hand on his shoulder. "I could say the same for you, your majesty. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"It's been pleasant enough," he said and cleared his throat. "General deGrey, may I speak with you for a moment?"

"Of course." Luther turned to the other men. "Excuse me."

Thad led his general to the maze. He and Henry discovered the garden's discretion and used it to discuss sensitive matters of which Luther

needed to be informed.

Once they were safely out of earshot, he stopped and turned to the older man. "Another duchess has gone missing, and I need your help."

Luther cursed under his breath. "What do you need for me to do?"

"I need you to travel to the other kingdoms in disguise. Ask around and see what you can find out. Maybe other townspeople have seen or heard something. Four duchesses missing are four too many," Thad said heatedly.

Luther rubbed his chin. "What kingdoms?"

"All of them. One from each."

The general blew out a breath. "I'll leave in a fortnight."

Thad nodded and exited the garden to melt into the crowd.

CHAPTER FIVE

"She's beautiful and has a lovely laugh, your majesty," Beatrice, the Winter King's matchmaker for the past twenty years, said to him with a smile. "I think you'll like her."

He licked his lips and stood. "Well, let's meet my future wife."

The doors to the throne room opened, and a beautiful blonde woman entered, escorted by her father. He met them halfway and gave a slight bow. "You must be Miss Seren Longspeak," he said politely, kissing her hand. "I'm Thaddeus."

She curtsied with a shy smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you, King Thaddeus."

He turned to her escort and stuck out his hand. "You must be her father?"

The man gripped his hand with a hearty shake and bowed his head. "Yes, your majesty. Anton Longspeak."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both. Mr. Longspeak, if I have your blessing, I'd like to take your daughter on a stroll around the palace to get better acquainted."

"Of course, your majesty. It'd be an honor." The man bowed and retreated through the giant glass doors.

Though the palace was made of mostly glass, it was not transparent. Instead, it looked as if someone trapped clouds between the layers. He thought it was all pretentious, but the first kings created their dwellings before he was born. It seemed wasteful to scrap it all and start again.

He held out his arm to Seren and led her through the courtyard to the sculpture garden. There were statues of past kings and queens created from the same glass as that of the palace. They were all beautiful, and he would often come out to look at his mother and father when he felt lost.

He shifted his gaze to his bride-to-be. "Tell me about yourself."

Her laugh tinkered through the air as she rubbed a hand down her skirts. "There's not much to tell, your majesty. I grew up in Eridu with my mother, father, and two sisters. I am the youngest, and I enjoy reading and tea with other ladies in our circle." She tilted her face to his expectantly. "And you, your majesty? What do you like to do?" He saw the familiar spark of desire in her eyes and hid a smirk.

While he hated the tradition of forced marriage, he could admit that a lady's company in his bed was a nice perk of the arrangement. He would never force himself on a woman. The women were well aware that the marriage required consummation on the wedding night, and they always wanted in his bed more than once.

"I like to hunt and fight. I spend most of my time in the arena training with my personal guard and the Eridu regiment warriors. I'm not much for books, but I'd like it if you'd read to me from time to time." He flashed her his most charming smile. "And please, call me Thaddeus."

While the conduit brides *wanted* to marry him and did not consider it a punishment as he did, he tried to make their stay pleasant. He would appease her as much as he could without getting too close. It was why he required the women to call him by his full name instead of his nickname. It served as a reminder not to lose himself to them.

"I'd like that," she giggled. "*Thaddeus*."

"I see you found yourself a looker, your majesty." Henry appeared from around a statue with a crooked grin and kissed Seren's hand. "Henry Ashdown, at your service."

She giggled again. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Ashdown."

Thad motioned to his friend. "Henry is the head of my personal guard. Don't let his happy demeanor fool you; he's vicious with a weapon. You will always be safe with him."

She looked at Henry with wide eyes. "I appreciate that, Mr. Ashdown."

"Call me Henry," he smiled before turning to Thad. "Lunch?"

"Yes, Seren and I have to finalize arrangements, and we'll be right there."

Henry did a sharp salute. "Aye, aye, captain!"

Anton and Seren sat across the large oak desk in Thad's office. The room contained a conference table for council meetings and a couch when he needed to hide out and take a nap.

His fingers were steepled as he searched both of their faces. "It's important that you tell no one in Eridu we are to marry. It is for your safety; some will murder to have the chance to be a conduit bride."

They both nodded, and Anton sat forward. "We understand, your majesty. I would never do anything to endanger my daughter's life. To be frank, I didn't want her to apply for the position, but it was something she wanted."

Thad looked to Seren. "And you understand the danger you're putting yourself in for the next nine months until the Winter Solstice?"

She lifted her chin. "Yes, I do. The risk is worth it." Her eyes were intense, and he was impressed with her determination.

"Very well. Someone from my council will contact you before the Solstice and tell you when and where you will be picked up for the Gala."

She scooted forward in her seat and lowered her voice, "Will I see you before then?"

He did his best to avoid her gaze. "No, most likely not. I travel in my off-seasons to enjoy the rest of the kingdom."

"I understand," she lamented. "It will be an honor to serve you and our kingdom, your majesty."

He smiled. "Thaddeus."

CHAPTER SIX

"I've never seen anything more beautiful, Winnie. The Spring Palace looked like a garden come to life. Vines with every flower imaginable covered the walls inside and out, chandeliers made of bronze branches hung from the ceiling, the carpet that led to the throne was made of feathery-soft grass, and King Silas' throne was chiseled from a sort of petrified wood made to look like an enormous tree trunk. It was spectacular," Emmy sighed with a faint smile on her face.

She had talked about the Gala nonstop since her return, and Winnie thought it was nice to hear about things she could only ever imagine.

"Wait until you see the Winter Palace, lass. Everything is made of unbreakable glass sculpted to look like ice. It's a sight to see," Francis said and tapped his mug for another.

She gave him a sad smile. "I'd like to see Eridu someday, but I can't imagine making the trip. It's too long and hard."

"Why is my sister talking about long and hard things?" Chaz slapped his hand on the bar with a grisly look on his face, and she jumped. Emmy giggled, her cheeks turning pink, and he shot her a smirk before turning his attention back to Winnie.

"Did I hear someone say long and hard?" Edwin Melhart asked, strutting across the room.

Edwin was Chaz's best friend and another warrior in Luther's regiment. He was a little shorter than Chaz, lean and muscular with olive skin that Winnie had thought about licking more than once. His amber eyes caught hers with a smirk.

Her cheeks heated along with Emmy's. "Gods! I meant the ride to Eridu. You two have filthy minds that need to be scrubbed with soap." She shook her head and disappeared into the kitchen to grab their lunch,

embarrassment coloring her skin. Not that she did not have those thoughts herself, but she didn't want *them* to know that. She sat their plates down with a scolding look and chewed her lower lip to hide a grin.

Edwin flashed a charming smile before he mumbled his thanks and dug into his potato. Sometimes she thought she saw interest in his eyes when he looked at her, but she never had that sort of attention before and wasn't sure. She did not want to mistake his intentions for something else and humiliate herself for life.

Chaz and Emmy were deep in conversation, and Edwin slid down the bar, posting up next to Francis. "Winnie, you look nice today. Is that a new dress?"

She snapped her head up to look at him, then back down at her simple maroon dress. It was new, but she was surprised anyone noticed, least of all him. She guessed the compliment was a testament to how ghastly she usually looked and smiled timidly.

"Actually, it is. Gilda delivered a few yesterday. Thank you for noticing." She filled his mug and began to wipe the bar top despite having just done so.

"I always notice you," he said, casually, as if he had not made her heart stop in her chest.

Astonished, she slowly lifted her gaze and met his stare. She wasn't sure how to respond, so she simply nodded before returning to the kitchen.

As she walked around the tables, she snuck peeks at him while he laughed at something Francis said. He was dreadfully handsome in his fighting leathers, and she often wondered how he looked outfitted in his full armor.

She had never seen him fight but had heard Chaz praise him on more than one occasion, meaning he was very skilled. She was lost in thought, staring at him when he looked her way and smirked.

She turned away, mortified at being caught, and hurriedly finished serving the guests before she hid in the kitchen once more.

"What are you doing back here?"

Winnie jumped at the sound of her mother's voice.

"I... everyone is served," she stammered. "I was taking a rest, is all." She wondered if her mother bought her lie, but quickly realized by the look on her face that she had not.

Her mother swatted a rag at her. "Get back out there. You know how restless the guests can be if they run out of ale, and Emmy can't handle the lunch rush alone." Winnie nodded and trudged back through the swinging doors.

Chaz and Edwin were standing to leave when her brother spotted her and waved. "We have more training at the arena this afternoon," he said, giving her a pointed look. "I won't be able to take that walk with you today."

She understood his double meaning. No training with her today.

She nodded. "Have fun with Luther. See you at dinner."

Edwin looked back before pushing through the door. "See you later, Winnie."

She blinked several times, confused by his extra attention today. *What did it mean?* She was still staring at the door when Francis interrupted her thoughts, "Seems someone fancies you, lass."

She blew a loose strand of hair from her face. "I doubt it. He's just being kind." She gave a slight shrug. "Besides, I'm not beautiful like Emmy, and Edwin could have any girl in the kingdom he wanted." She began to wipe at the bar again to keep from fidgeting.

Francis studied her, and his voice softened. "You don't believe that do you, lass? You are a beautiful girl worthy of a king. Don't you ever forget that."

Heat pricked the corners of her eyes, and she feigned indifference. "You don't have to say that. I know my looks are strange and not something the men around here want. It's ok." She careened around the counter to gather dishes from tables to avoid his scrutiny.

She did not need his pity.



Winnie stabbed her sword through the makeshift practice dummy, pouring all her frustration into her thrust. Her movements were smooth and her balance perfect as she arched her sword and brought it down with

deadly precision. Pleased with herself, she went through the motions that Luther had drilled into her memory since childhood.

Sweat trickled down her forehead, and her shoulders began to ache, signaling she had been practicing too long. Lowering her sword, she deposited it into the weapons box and locked the lid before taking a seat on top. After her breathing evened out, she grabbed her waterskin and drank it dry.

Her mind drifted back to the earlier conversation with Francis. She began to wonder, not for the first time, if she should ask Gilda to make her more appropriate dresses for a lady. She was of marrying age, and while she did not *need* a husband, she wanted the companionship that came with one.

The village festival was coming up soon, and it would be nice to have something new to wear. She stood and wiped her sweat with the back of her arm before heading back home to think about what kind of dress she wanted for the upcoming celebration.



A few weeks later, Emmy gushed over the dress hanging from Winnie's armoire. "You did it! I never thought I'd see this day," she teased and dropped the skirt she was examining. "What made you change your mind?"

Winnie's cheeks warmed. She was embarrassed to tell her that Edwin's attention from weeks ago made her believe she could look anything other than odd.

"I'm not a street urchin. I've just never needed such an outfit before," she grumbled as she pulled off her plain dress to slip on her new one. "But tonight is the Ver Festival, and I wanted to look nice, even if it is only for the people in Anorak."

Emmy grinned and helped her lace up the back of her bodice. The dress was a deep shade of blue with silver detailing that trimmed the collar and fitted sleeves. Silver rope crisscrossed over her breast and disappeared under the fabric, tying in the back. The skirt was fuller than she was used to

but still had her familiar slits and dagger sheaths sewn into hidden pockets. *She could look like a lady and still protect herself.*

"There," Emmy announced, patting Winnie's back when she finished the bow. "Let's start on your hair." Her friend circled to stand in front of her with an appraising look. "I'll pull it back in a loose chignon with tendrils framing your face. You're going to break hearts tonight!"

The dress made her feel beautiful, and a thrill raced through her body.

Once Emmy finished fussing over her hair, Winnie lightly touched a loose wave by her face. She wondered if she could find dye in the village to darken her tresses like some of the older women did to cover their grey.

She dropped her hand and turned away from the mirror at the silly thought.

When the two girls stepped out of the tavern, Chaz and Edwin were waiting by the road. Earlier that day, the men offered to escort them to the festival, which Winnie assumed was at her mother's request.

Edwin offered his arm to her before bending down and whispering in her ear, "You look radiant tonight." He smiled warmly, and her stomach flipped.

The festival was beautiful. Lamps hung on ropes across the main road from building to building. A group of musicians played lively music while the townspeople clapped and danced around. Vendors lined the streets with food and drink, and the townspeople milled about talking like old friends.

She stared in awe, for she had never seen anything like it in her life. Having always been teased as a girl, she usually avoided public gatherings.

Edwin squeezed her hand gently. "Have you never attended one of the festivals before?"

She shook her head and continued to drink it all in. "No," she finally breathed. "It's beautiful."

"Yes, it is," he murmured. "Would you like to dance, Winnie?"

She nodded and let him lead her through the sea of bodies.



"Seems we arrived on the perfect night," Henry said as he dismounted his horse. Thad nodded his head as they tied up their horses before blending into the crowd of the Ver Festival in Anorak.

"Praise the gods; they have turkey legs," Henry said, heading for the nearest vendor. "Come on, don't slow me down. There's food to be had."

He rolled his eyes and followed his friend. "They better have ale too," he grumbled. "It was a long ride."

"Boohoo, you big baby. It was only six hours," Henry called over his shoulder while he paid the vendor and took an enormous bite of the meat in his hand. With a mouthful of food, he pointed the drumstick at Thad. "Last year's village was farther away than this one."

Thad paid for his ale and took a long drink of the frothy goodness. He was glad to get away for a while. His advisers could handle any minor problems that arose and knew where to send word if he was needed. He hadn't been to Anorak in almost forty years and forgot how much he enjoyed the small mountain village.

They weaved their way through the crowd, looking at different carts and watching the villagers celebrate the night away. He felt a sense of pride as he observed his subjects enjoying themselves.

This was another reason he liked to travel under an alias. He was able to see how his kingdom was faring and that things were being taken care of under the town's leaders. They would not act the same if they knew who he was, and it was better this way. Most people did not recognize him, and those who did, he paid handsomely to forget his face.

"This village has some beautiful women," Henry observed. "The mountains do a body good." He watched the dancers while he ravaged his turkey leg. "You think they have donkeys here? I've heard they use them to travel up the mountains. I want to ride one."

He snorted. "You'd scare them away the minute they laid eyes on you. The donkeys too."

"People can't resist this," his guard said, motioning to his torso. "Training keeps me delicious."

Henry and the rest of the king's guard and warriors were all in impeccable shape. They had to be to endure the grueling training set forth by the generals. That was why Thad liked to train with them. If the need ever arose for battle, he'd fight alongside his men. He could not ask them to fight and then hide in his palace.

A flash of blonde hair caught his eye in the crowd. No, not just blonde, but a blonde so pale it *almost* appeared white. He had never seen hair so fair and moved closer to get a better look at the maiden it belonged to.

He could not see her face from his current position and tried to maneuver to a better spot. She was dancing with a man who looked at her with adoration while they laughed and hopped around.

When she twirled his direction, he caught sight of her face, and his entire body froze. It felt as if electric ice surged through his veins with every flash of her smile. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen; she looked like one of his glass sculptures in his garden. He could not take his eyes off her as she laughed and spun. Her graceful movements were like a poem come to life.

Cursing under his breath, he shook his head to clear his traitorous thoughts. It did not matter if she were taken or not; he would never entertain someone that drew him in with such fervor. He would need to keep his distance for the duration of their stay.

"She's a pretty one," Henry observed, walking up behind him. He looked sideways at Thad with a knowing smirk. "Interesting hair. You can switch your conduit bride anytime you want, you know. You have up until the Winter Solstice to do it." He turned his mug upside down over his mouth and finished the ale in one gulp.

Thad laughed but didn't take his eyes off the woman. "I've already made a deal with Seren. I don't need to find another." Henry lifted his other hand with a second mug of ale and drank his fill.

The music switched to a faster pace, and Henry sat his empty mug down before giving Thad a mischievous look. He bounced backward and lifted his other half-full mug into the air with a loud whoop. Before long, he was in the middle of the crowd, riling them up with deafening cheers. He

had always been the life of the party no matter where they went, something Thad admired about him.

Thad walked the party's perimeter and spotted a tuft of fair hair making its way through the crowd. He watched her lithe movements as she navigated her way to the outermost edge of the festival. *What was she doing?*

Intrigued, he followed her to the village's farthest boundary and could hear her mumbling to herself. *Strange.* He knew he should keep his distance, but he could not help being drawn to her. He reasoned that it was dangerous for a lady to be alone like she was, and against his better judgment, he closed the distance between them.

As he approached her from behind, he lightly grabbed her arm to get her attention. Quick as a viper, she whipped around and took his feet out from under him with a sweep of her leg before pointing a dagger at his neck and another at his heart.

"You think it's acceptable to touch a lady without invitation?" Her eyes were silvery and fierce, like a mountain cat from hell.

He let out a puff of astonishment and closed his eyes, trying not to laugh. His eyes flew back open when her dagger dug deeper into his throat. He was certain blood had been drawn and fought the urge to swallow.

"You think it's funny to attack a lady?" she snarled.

He put his hands up in surrender, failing to hide his amusement. "I was only going to offer to escort you home. I saw you alone and thought you'd need protecting." His gaze flicked to her daggers. "I can see I was mistaken."

Something akin to guilt flickered in her eyes. She stood and flipped her blades before hiding them somewhere in her skirts. He stared at her dress and wondered what else she had hidden in there.

She planted her feet and looked down at him. "I'm sorry. I thought..." She blew out a breath. "Nothing. I shouldn't have been so quick to draw my weapons." She reached out an arm to help him up.

He took her small hand in his and felt the calluses there. This woman clearly had been familiar with weapons for some time.

Still holding her hand, he said, "I'm Thad Greenwich. I'm traveling through from Eridu." He paused. "That rhymed. I guess I'm also a poet," he chuckled, laughing at his own joke.

She laughed and shook her head lightly. "Winnie Hayward." She pulled her hand free and pointed behind her toward the road. "My family owns Hayward's Place on the outskirts of town. It's an inn if you require a room. They're small, but you get three meals a day and tall tales every evening from one of the regulars." Her eyes darted over his shoulder toward the festival before giving him a polite smile. "My apologies again, Mr. Greenwich, but I must go."

He turned to watch her leave and yelled, "Call me, Thad!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Luther swung his long sword in an arch toward Winnie's left side. She spun away with a laugh and darted behind him, pressing her dagger to his throat. "Yield, you old goat."

He grabbed her wrist and flipped her over his shoulder onto her back with his sword pointed at her chest. "That ego of yours will get you killed, girl," he warned, sheathing his sword with a smile.

"I almost had you that time." She turned and threw her dagger at the wooden target hanging from a large evergreen and smirked when it found its mark.

He shook his head with a laugh. His sandy blonde hair had been streaked with grey for as long as she had known him, but his charcoal eyes still bounced with life. Only a fool would mistake him for anything but the formidable force that he was. He was lethal in battle and a strategist through and through. She was fairly sure he could kill a man with his smallest finger if he wanted to.

She threw her arms around his middle and gave him a tight squeeze. "I have to help Mother get ready for the dinner rush." She released him to gather her weapons. "When will you be back?"

"Not for a while. Chazriel will work with you until I return. Stay out of trouble." He patted the top of her hair, mounted his horse, and trotted away.

In Luther fashion, he said no goodbyes.

She pouted at the thought of not seeing him for several months. He was always gone on secret missions, and she hated it.

Chaz used to tell her he was rounding up ladies like cattle for the king to choose his next wife, and she believed it for far longer than she should have. She snorted at the memory of Luther's face when she finally

worked up the courage to ask him if it was true. He spewed his water all over her and asked where she had heard such nonsense.

Now she knew the truth: there was no need to round up women for the king because they throw themselves at him daily. What if his majesty looked like a troll, and they sucked it up for the money? She cringed at the thought.

Winnie blew through the tavern doors just in time to avoid her mother's wrath. "I'm here, Mother! What do you need me to do?"

Suki looked at her daughter and harrumphed. "Good gods, have you been out in the woods again? There's a leaf in your hair." She turned back to the stove and grumbled under her breath, "Take this plate to Francis. He's at the table in the corner today." She shoved a plate into Winnie's hands and turned back to the stove.

Winnie pushed through the swinging doors and grabbed a pitcher of ale from the bar. "Hello to my favorite man in all the land," she sang, winking playfully before setting his food down.

He lifted his mug to take a drink when surprise flitted across his face so quickly she almost missed it. He recovered and took a long gulp.

She turned to find the source of his odd behavior, and her breath stalled. Standing in the front doorway of the tavern was Thad Greenwich and another man. They both looked to be a couple of years older than she was, and she wondered what brought them to Anorak.

She took the opportunity to drink Thad in before he noticed her. She had left the festival to collect her thoughts and sort out why Edwin was acting affectionately toward her when Thad grabbed her from behind. She may have overreacted a bit, but he should not go around grabbing ladies like that.

Once she realized he was not a threat, she was struck almost speechless by his beauty. It was strange to think a man beautiful, but there's no other word for it.

He towered over her like a behemoth, with strong, corded arms she could make out through his shirt that pulled taut across his chest. His dark hair fell in short waves over his forehead, and he had a defined nose, square jaw, and plump lips that she wanted to taste. His most striking feature, though, was his eyes. They were the palest blue she had ever seen and stood out in stark contrast to his hair.

She moved her attention to his friend. He was a strong-looking man of average height with light brown skin, short black hair, and golden topaz eyes that seemed to hold a lot of mischief. He was grinning like a goon as they made their way to the bar.

"Well, well, well. I see you took my advice," she taunted from across the room. Thad and his companion turned, and she tilted her head and wrinkled her nose. "Might I show you to your rooms so you can shower first? You can pay when you come back down."

Thad was in front of her in all of two strides, wearing a devilish smirk on his face. "Hello again, Winnie Hayward." He motioned behind him. "This is my friend, Henry Ashdown."

Henry flourished into a theatrical bow before placing a gentle kiss on the back of her hand. "My lady. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

She scrunched her face again and pulled her hand from his grasp. "I see your friend is just as charming as you." She rounded the table she was cleaning and looked at them over her shoulder. "Follow me, gentlemen."

She opened each of their doors with a wave of her hand. "Here you are. Meals are included and served at sunrise, midday, and sundown. Linens are changed once a week unless requested otherwise. Emmy at the bar will take your payment. If you require an extended stay, payment is due weekly."

Thad stared at her with the strangest look, and she touched her hair nervously. "If you need any assistance, please find Emmy or me in the tavern." With that, she shuffled past them and disappeared down the stairs.

When she emerged from the stairwell, Francis was waving for everyone to situate their chairs around him. Happy for the distraction, she made her way over to the fire and pulled a chair into the circle.

He cleared his throat and stood. "Everyone knows the tale of how the gods created the kings, but does anyone know of their equals? Their *compeers*?" He looked slowly around at the guests, who shook their heads.

Winnie was intrigued. It was a rare occurrence, indeed, for her to hear a new story from the old man.

From behind her, she heard, "It's the king's mate. His equal in every way."

Everyone turned their focus to Thad. He looked around and gave a boyish shrug. She had not even heard the two men come downstairs.

Francis gave an approving nod. "That's right. It is why the kings must marry every year, for they can only be married for life to their *compeer*. They are the only ones who can rule beside the kings as equals and provide the gods-blessed heirs. She is the king's True Queen."

A young boy in the circle gave him a curious look. "Why do they need heirs? Don't they live forever?"

Francis bobbed his head. "That's right, lad. They are immortal, but they are not of this world. They are from the land of the gods, and to the heavens, they shall return. Once they have a child, they secede their throne when the heir reaches the age of five hundred and has been fully trained. After the coronation, the full powers of the gods transfer to the heir before the king and queen ascend into the heavens."

Winnie leaned forward. "What if their *compeer* dies? Is a king doomed to live out his days forever without returning to his true home?"

His face softened. "No, lass. The gods would never be so cruel. If a king does not meet his *compeer* during her lifetime, her soul is reborn every century until they find one another."

She nodded in understanding but still had questions. "But why would any king want to share his power and give up his throne? If they are anything like the nobles in the capital, their egos are as big as their palaces." A few of the listeners chuckled.

Thad's silky voice floated quietly over the group. "It's his true love. They say there is no other bond like that of the king and his *compeer*. Supposedly they can't live without the other once the connection is made. It's a love like you could never imagine." He crossed his arms. "And it's a crock of shit."

A laugh burst from her chest, and he smiled down at her, but Henry's face pinched in a scowl. She shook her head, giving Francis her full attention as he wove another story about the land before Rodina.

Feeling their commanding presence at her back, she stood and moved across the circle, motioning for the two men to have a seat. Once seated, she secretly watched Thad from her peripheral vision. He listened intently to the story with an amused expression on his handsome face, and she wondered what *his* story was.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"How do you like the new arrows, little dove?" Clarence looked up expectantly from the dagger he was forging.

With a smile, she sheathed the sword she had been admiring and placed it back against the wall. "I love them. The weight is more than I'm used to, but I've already adjusted."

She sighed and turned. "I guess I better head to the market before mother sends the bloodhounds after me."

He chuckled with a nod. "Suki is something else. Get on then. I'll see you later."

She wandered out of the smithy and into the busy market to pick up the tavern's orders. She smiled at her usual vendor as she approached his stand.

"Hello, Winnie. What'd Suki send you after today?" Harlan, a red-headed man around Chaz's age, asked as he stood behind the produce stand and smiled politely.

She laughed. "You know my mother; she wants the usual." She reached into her satchel and handed the sack of coins to him before walking around to grab the bags of potatoes and flour.

She wiped her hands and looked around the market. It was hard to believe that only two weeks ago, the village had looked like its own version of a Gala instead of the bustling street before her.

Sweating and thirsty, she left her wagon to find the bakery for water and a pastry.

Annie's Bakery had the best strudels in town and her mouth watered at the sign hanging above the door. Stepping onto the cobblestone, she looked both ways for riders and carriages before crossing over.

Before going in, she stopped next to a group of ladies waiting on their carriage and dug through her satchel for her coin purse. She was about to walk inside when she heard whispering and snickers.

"I heard Edwin Melhart only took her to the Ver Festival because her brother asked him to," one girl said, followed by more giggles.

"She seems nice, but her dresses are so plain. And that hair!" Winnie heard a gagging sound that steeled her spine. "It's unnerving," the girl continued.

"Her eyes, too," offered another girl with a cackle.

Winnie abandoned the bakery and ran to her wagon without waiting for the rest of their cruel words. She had heard it all her life, how strange her light eyes and hair were. There had never been another person with her coloring other than her father, effectively making her a spectacle.

She threw her leg over her mare, kicked her flanks, and tore out of the village as fast as she could without falling off.

When she pulled the wagon around to the back of the tavern, Suki stepped out with her hands on her hips. "What took you so long, child?" She dismounted and turned to her mother with teary eyes.

Suki rushed to her and gently grabbed both sides of her face. "What happened?"

Winnie shook her head sadly. "Nothing, Mother. Just the girls in the village again." She blew out a breath. "It's nothing new."

Suki strung together every curse word she had ever heard. "Why don't you go lie down for a while and wash up when you're ready to come out."

Winnie nodded and trudged out of the kitchen toward the hallway leading to their rooms.

"Someone squeeze a lemon in your eye?" a voice called, and she jerked her gaze to see Henry sitting at the bar.

She quickly wiped her eyes with her apron. "It's nothing. Just the season sickness is all. Runny nose, watery eyes, all of it."

He studied her and pursed his lips. "Alright, I'll buy your lie," he said, patting the stool next to him. "Come have a drink with me."

She hesitated, but reluctantly climbed onto the stool beside him and pointed to his ale. "How many have you had today?"

He closed one eye and peered into his empty mug. "Enough to make Francis look appealing," he grinned.

She was struck by how boyishly handsome he was. He had been overshadowed by Thad yesterday, but now that she took him in, he was really something.

She chuckled despite herself. "If you think he looks good now, you should see him in his plaid skirt he wears sometimes. Says it was passed down from his ancestors in the Old World." They both cracked up, and she grabbed a pitcher of ale from behind the bar. "So, what brings you to Anorak? Not many people travel here for pleasure. Usually just passing through."

He flicked his eyes to her before taking a drink. "Just needed to get away from the city for a while." He licked his lips and drained the rest of his mug in one go.

Her eyebrows disappeared into her hairline. "It's too bad you guys missed Winter. The mountains are beautiful when they are covered in snow. It's a sight to see."

He seemed to contemplate her words. "You know, I would look terrific in a fur loincloth. Maybe one year I will." She burst out laughing, and he puffed out his chest with a wink. "You want to play a game?"

"What sort of game?" she asked. "If it involves removing my clothes, count me out."

He threw his head back with a booming laugh. "I like you. It's a drinking game guaranteed to clear your *season sickness*," he drawled.

"Alright, Ashdown, show me what you've got."

An hour later, they were both stumbling off their stools from laughing so hard.

"Wait! Wait! I bet you your dinner potato that I can make this shot," Winnie challenged before picking up a coin.

"I'll take that bet. Be sure to put extra butter on *my* potato," Henry teased and rubbed his stomach.

She concentrated on the mug of ale on the bar before she bounced the coin down on the wood surface. She held her breath as it arched into the mug and hit the ale with a splash. She jumped up and down with her hands in the air, before throwing her arms around his neck, causing them both to tumble to the ground.

Lying on the hardwood floor, they were both in hysterics when Emmy's head leaned over them. "What are you two doing?"

Henry and Winnie exchanged a glance before they exploded with another round of laughter.

Thad's face, dancing with amusement, popped into their line of sight next to Emmy's. "You two smell like an alehouse." He quirked his lips to the side, hiding his smile.

The two drunkards climbed to their feet and draped their arms around the other's shoulders. "I was teaching her how to play Coin Cup," Henry hiccupped.

Thad bit his lip. "No wonder you two can barely stand. Henry, don't corrupt these girls, or you'll have us thrown out."

"Maybe I corrupted him," Winnie fired back with a hiccup of her own, causing him to pop an eyebrow.

"Coin Cup? Really, Henry," Emmy scolded. "Winnie, you better get washed up before the dinner rush, or Suki will drown you in the river."

Henry turned to Winnie with a devilish smile. "While you're down there, fetch me a catfish." They both burst into a fit of giggles again.

"Alright, you two, come with me," Thad grumbled and turned to Emmy. "When does she need to be down for dinner?"

She looked Winnie up and down with a heavy sigh. "She needs to be here now, but I'll set everything up. I can hold Suki off for maybe an hour or two." She looked at him with a worried expression. "Will she be ok by then?"

He looked from Winnie to Henry and dragged his hand down his face. "Yes, I'll sober her up," he mumbled, bending down to haul Winnie over his shoulder.

She pounded playfully on his back as he carried her up the stairs. "Hey! I can walk, you big buffoon." She looked up and flashed Henry a smile before looking around. "Uh, excuse me, Thad, my room is in the back, not up here."

"Relax, you little hellcat; I have to get Henry to his room first."

"I resent that," Henry said, lifting a finger in the air.

Thad opened the door to Henry's room and ushered him in while Winnie hung over his shoulder like a rag doll.

He gave her a quick pop on her thigh to get her attention and said, "Where to from here?"

She tried to look around his torso to his face, but it was futile. "If you'd put me down, I could get there myself." She was met with silence and let out a defeated sigh. "The hallway to our rooms is next to the bottom of the stairs."

He made his way downstairs, and she tried to signal for help from Emmy, but she mistook it as a wave. "Which room is yours?" he asked, squeezing her leg again.

"The first door on the right," she huffed and tried to point but couldn't see around his massive body.

He opened the door and gently deposited her on the bed before kneeling in front of her to remove her boots. "We need to get some water in you, and then you need to take a cold bath. Where are your bathing chambers?"

Her body flushed hotly at the thought of him watching her while she bathed. He was staring intently, and her eyes dropped to his lips before tracing their way back to his eyes.

Standing quickly, he cleared his throat. "The bath, Winnie. Where is it." She stood and opened the door across the room, which led to the bathing chamber connecting her room to Emmy's.

He nodded and opened her armoire. "Grab what clothes you'll need, and I'll start your water. Glancing over her shoulder, she admired his backside as he walked away.

She set her clothes on the stool, tested the water, and pulled her hand back with a hiss. "It's freezing! Are you mad?" She looked at him in disbelief.

He fought a laugh and pointed to the tub. "It has to be cold to sober you up. Consequences for your actions."

She huffed and crossed her arms. "It's freezing. Did you find a stragglng snowball and dump it in?"

His hand covered his mouth to hold in a laugh. "Just get in before I throw you in."

She planted her feet in defiance. "You wouldn't dare."

Before she knew what was happening, he tossed her into the freezing water. She shrieked like a hyena, sputtering in the ice bath. "I am going to kill you, Thad Greenwich!"

He was laughing so hard tears were brimming at the corners of his eyes. "I'm sure you will, but it was worth hearing you screech like an alley

cat."

She stood and grabbed him around the waist when he turned around and yanked him into the oversized tub. "Now we're BOTH cold," she said playfully.

His legs dangled over the edge of the tub like a dead spider, and his face was frozen in shock. She took one look at him and laughed hysterically. "You look like a drowned rat!"

He started laughing too, and they sat there until they were gasping for breath.

He stood, water dripping from his clothes, and helped her out of the tub. She took stock of her soaked garments and the water that covered the floor and groaned. "You got me all wet!"

Something like a growl rumbled through his chest, and her eyes shot to his smoldering gaze.

Her cheeks flushed as she took a step back and pointed to a cabinet near the sink. "There are towels in there. You should dry off and go change clothes." She looked at him again with a slight grin. "I'm sober now. Thank you for helping."

He stared at her for a moment longer before he gave a brief nod and left with a trail of water in his wake.

CHAPTER NINE

The king rapped his fingers anxiously on the arm of his throne; he hoped the other kings had not yet caught onto the missing duchesses. He sent his men to gather as many of the women as they could find to complete the process.

Taking them one at a time was too risky. He had to round up a duchess or two from his own kingdom as well to avoid suspicion. Such a shame; he was quite fond of a few of them, particularly in the bedroom. Perhaps they could be coerced to exchange their life for his pleasures.

He stood and walked to the window that overlooked his courtyard. With a deep breath, he touched his hand to the glass and watched a tiny bit of frost spread around his hand. He marveled at his own brilliance in figuring out that the duchesses had residual power leftover from their kings. Trying the bonding ceremony was simply a lucky guess on his part.

He hoped to locate a *compeer* from another kingdom soon. *Compeers* are considered the perfect vessel, and he would like to see if they already harbored power from the gods, making them larger conduits. He bristled with frustration at the lack of progress there and swiped the frost from the glass.

He wondered how many duchesses he would need to kill the other three kings if he could not find a *compeer*. He hoped it was not many. It takes the *power* of three kings to kill another, not three kings themselves. A fortunate loophole in the gods' failsafe.

He stepped away from the window before anyone could see him testing his newfound powers and sauntered to his rooms.

One day he would rule all of Rodina and answer to no one.

CHAPTER TEN

Thad ducked under a low-hanging branch, bow drawn, and looked around. He heard a twig snap, twisted to his left, and spotted an impressive stag grazing between the trees. He had refused to hunt until he learned to hit a bullseye with every shot, allowing him to kill the beasts instantly. He could never bring himself to cause an animal to suffer.

He steadied his breathing, released his arrow, and watched the beast drop. Lowering his bow, he began to make his way through the brush.

"Does your neck hurt at all?" Henry called from behind him. Thad shot him a quizzical look. "You know, carrying around that big head of yours," his guard deadpanned.

"I think you meant to ask if my hips hurt," Thad quipped over his shoulder.

A pinecone whacked him in the back of the head, and he had to duck to miss the next one Henry launched his way.

Grabbing the stag by the legs, the men tied them to a large branch and hoisted it onto their shoulders.

"Tell me again why you dragged me into these woods filled with mountain cats to shoot a deer we don't need," Henry griped.

"It's to thank the Haywards for their hospitality. They could use the meat." Thad adjusted the branch on his shoulder. "If you pulled your head out of your ass and stopped getting the barmaids drunk, you would have thought of it yourself."

"Ah, so this is about Winnie," Henry chuckled. "I knew you wanted her, though whether to fuck or marry, I'm not sure."

Thad glared over his shoulder. "I do not want to marry her. I don't want to marry at all; I'm forced to," he grumbled, stomping up the incline toward the tavern.

"But you do want to bed her," Henry said with a sly smile. "I get it. That long hair of hers makes me want to wrap it around my fists and bend he-"

Thad dropped the stag and had Henry pressed against a tree by his neck before he could finish his sentence. His chest heaved, and his eyes blazed.

Coming to his senses, he dropped his friend and stepped back, rubbing a hand down his face. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I did that," he said, sucking in a breath to calm his breathing. "I think I'm tired."

Henry scoffed, rubbing his neck. "I know exactly why you did it. The question is, when are you going to realize it, too." Without another word, he bent and picked up his end of their load.

Thad stared at him with his hands on his hips before hauling his end onto his shoulder and trekking toward the tavern.

"Where do you think her hair came from anyway?" Henry inquired. "Her eyes, too. I've never seen anything like it."

Thad lifted his free shoulder. "Maybe other kingdoms have citizens with her coloring that we haven't seen yet." He glanced over his shoulder, irritated. "Besides, it's not *that* different. It's just a lighter shade of blonde. Though I've never seen eyes that silvery."

"They're kind of like yours, just grey, and you're not a freak. At least not because of your looks."

"Stop talking about my sex life. It's not becoming," Thad shot back.

Henry barked out a laugh and pushed Thad's knee with his foot, causing him to stumble. "You arrogant ass."



Winnie stared open-mouthed at the size of the stag Henry and Thad dropped at the back entrance of the kitchen. "What is this for?"

Thad had cut open the stomach, removed the organs, and was currently yanking out the intestines. "We like to hunt for sport and can't use the meat while we're here. Suki can put it to good use," he said, dropping

the stomach in the bucket beside him. She gagged, and he bit back a laugh. "I didn't think hellcats had weak stomachs."

She narrowed her eyes. "I don't mind blood, but watching you throw around intestines filled with animal shit is a bit much."

A laugh rumbled from his chest. "Here, come down here, and I'll show you how it's done."

She paused before kneeling on the opposite side of the beast.

"First, you'll cut from here to here," he motioned between the throat and the end of the underbelly. "Next, you take out the ribs and organs at the top. That's what I removed first." She made a face, trying not to gag again. "After that, you have to cut around this hole to free the intestines before you remove the stomach and the *animal shit*, as you called it."

She looked up and thumped his forehead. "Don't get snarky, or I'll field dress *you*."

His smile widened. "You've got a sharp little tongue, don't you?" His eyes dropped to her mouth before he returned his attention to the task at hand.

"My tongue is none of your concern," she shot back.

He looked up at her with heat in his eyes. "We'll see about that."

Heat pooled low in her belly, and her cheeks warmed. His eyes flitted to her blush, and he bit his bottom lip, presumably to keep from laughing again.

He cleared his throat and continued with his lesson, "Now you have to separate the skin from the meat-"

"No," she cut him off, standing abruptly. "That's all of the butchering I can stomach today. Thank you for the meat. Mother will be ecstatic." She gave a small smile before turning and bolting toward the kitchen.

Emmy sashayed through the swinging doors and planted her hands on her hips. "I've been waiting for you all morning. Where have you been?"

She hesitated but recovered quickly. "I went on a walk through the woods for fresh air." That was her standard excuse for training, and no one ever questioned it.

Emmy wrinkled her nose. "You and your walks. You're going to be eaten by a bear eventually," she warned. "I'll miss you when you're gone."

Winnie snorted at her friend. "A bit dramatic today, aren't we?"

Emmy waved her off with a flick of her wrist. "That's not important. What I want to know is what happened with sexy Thad last night," she grinned and shimmied her shoulders suggestively.

"Your mind is fueled on sex alone, isn't it?" she groaned. "Besides, nothing happened other than him throwing me into a freezing bath." She shuddered at the memory. "I didn't even know our pipes could produce water that cold."

Emmy's eyes were as wide as saucers. "He *what*?" she screeched. "Why would he do that?"

She rolled her eyes. "To sober me up. It worked, too, so I couldn't be *that* upset with him... but I pulled him in with me."

Emmy looked like she was going to faint. "*He was in the bath with you when you were naked?* You need to lead with that information next time."

Winnie bristled at the insinuation. "No! Gods! He threw me in fully clothed. But if I was getting soaked, so was he."

Her friend fell into a fit of giggles. "Only you, Winnie! Only you would have the sexiest man alive in your room and throw him into a tub of ice water."

She was doubled over, and Winnie scowled. "It's not *that* funny."

Emmy wiped tears from her eyes and straightened. "Yes, it really is."

Winnie looked around before lowering her voice to a whisper. "But sometimes he looks at me with an intense look. It's unsettling. What do you think it means?"

Emmy's face lit up. "It means he wants to see you naked."

Her jaw unhinged. "Why would you say that?" she whisper-yelled.

"Oh, Winnie," she cooed. "Does he ever stare at your lips when he gets that look?"

She thought back to earlier with the deer. "Yes. Why?"

Emmy tilted her head with a knowing look. "He wants to kiss you. Probably more."

She stood straight as a board. "Impossible. Men like him don't want to kiss girls like me. Maybe he wants me to stop talking, and he's contemplating sewing my mouth shut."

Emmy pinched the bridge of her nose and released an exasperating sigh. "I have more experience. Believe me on this. Next time he does it,

touch him."

"*What!*" she shrieked. "I can't go around touching people. Are you insane?"

"Calm down. I meant to touch his arm or chest or something. Not grab his cock."

"And how am I supposed to do that without looking like I've lost my mind?"

Emmy tinkered out a laugh and placed her hand lightly on Winnie's upper arm before gently sliding it down to her elbow. "Like that."

Winnie chewed her lip nervously. "That seems easy enough. What is the purpose, though?"

Emmy crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head. "If he gives you another smoldering look, adjusts his trousers, or touches you back, then you'll know he wants you."

"Alright, I'll give it a try," she said as a thrill ran through her at the prospect of kissing a man.

Now, if only she could catch him alone again.



Winnie discreetly watched Thad and Henry tromp upstairs to wash for dinner. They were both sweaty, and a chill went down her spine at the vision of Thad's shirt unbuttoned with sweat trickling down his tan chest.

"What are you thinking about, lass?" Francis asked, lifting a bushy brow. "Maybe a tall lad with blue eyes?"

"Francis!" she scolded, lightly swatting him with her rag. "Keep your voice down."

He gave her a toothy grin. "He seems like a fine gentleman. There's no shame in admitting you fancy him."

A moment later, Thad and Henry stomped down the stairs like a herd of cattle and slid into the seats closest to Francis. They had taken to sitting at the bar top instead of at a table like the rest of the guests.

She poured both men's ales and slid them down the bar with a smile. She disappeared into the kitchen, kissed her mother on the cheek, and began delivering meals to the guests seated around the tavern. Emmy charmed the patrons with her dazzling smile and passed out drinks.

Tonight would be a good night; she could feel it.

"Heard you gagged like an infant today," Henry grinned behind his mug.

She glared at Thad, who was covering his mouth. "Maybe I could cut out your innards to practice hardening my stomach," she shot back.

Henry's shoulders shook with laughter. "If you want to see the contents of my stomach, you only need to beat me at Coin Cup again." She wrinkled her nose as he took a drink with a wink. "Would you show me around Anorak tomorrow? I need a good pastry, and Emmy said you know the best bakery in town."

She beamed. "Yes! Annie's is the best in the village. We'll go tomorrow morning if that works for you?" He gave a single nod, and Thad shot daggers in his direction. "Thad, would you like to join us?"

He lowered his mug. "I told Suki I'd help her salt the rest of the stag meat tomorrow morning."

Henry bumped his shoulder. "Don't worry. I'll bring you back plenty of teeth-rotting rolls."

Thad made a lewd gesture before his gaze caught on a woman who walked down the stairs. Winnie saw him take notice and felt her stomach twist. The woman was traveling through from Conso, a town just north of Anorak. She and her sister would be here for the night before heading to the mountains. She was beautiful with long red hair and pale, freckled skin.

Winnie's mood instantly soured.

The redhead spotted Thad and gave a sultry smile. She strutted over and placed her hand on the back of his and Henry's stools. "Hello, gentleman. I saw you two leaving your rooms earlier but didn't get to introduce myself," she purred. "I'm Jessalyn."

The two men turned to face her. "I'm Thad, and this is Henry," Thad said, motioning between them. "Where are you traveling from, Jessalyn?"

She pushed her hair over her shoulder with a flirtatious smile. "My sister and I are traveling from Conso to the mountains. Our family has a cabin a day's ride from here," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Would you two like to join us at our table?"

He smirked at Henry and stood. "We'd love to." He turned back to Winnie with a teasing grin. "Don't puke on anything while we're gone."

She watched gloomily as they made their way to a table in the back.

Francis rapped on the bar to get her attention. "Don't look so down, lass. You've still got me for company."

She laughed and walked around to hug the old man. "You're too good to me." She placed a kiss on his cheek and noticed Thad watching her from across the room. When she caught his gaze, he turned back to his companions without a backward glance.

Later that night, she wiped down the tables after the crowd had dispersed from Francis' nightly circle, humming to herself. Her thoughts wandered to Jessalyn and her sister, with their dainty laughs and rosy cheeks. Their red hair was beautiful, and she wondered what she would look like with hair like that. Maybe it would keep her eyes from looking so off-putting.

Her mind flashed back to the girls outside of the bakery, and embarrassment twisted her stomach again. She wasn't sure why the gods had cursed her, but there was no other explanation. Perhaps her father's family had angered them before she was born.

Lost in thought, she didn't hear anyone walk into the room and jumped when a deep voice said, "What are you humming?"

She flipped around to find Thad watching her and placed her hand over her pounding heart. "Gods, you scared me. What are you doing down here so late?"

He made his way across the room, pulled out a chair at the table she was cleaning, and sat down. "I wasn't ready to sleep yet," he said quietly as he traced the wood grain of the tabletop with his finger.

She laughed bitterly. "Jessalyn didn't work you enough?"

He rested his elbows on the table and watched her. "No, she didn't." She clenched her teeth and moved to clean the next table. "Why, are you jealous?"

Her hand paused mid-wipe. "Why would I be?" She stood and dropped her rag on the table with a hand on her hip. "Do you find yourself so irresistible that you assume every woman wants to bed you?"

He leaned back with a half-grin. "They usually do. But not you, I guess."

She lifted a shoulder before grabbing the rag and retreating to the bar top. "I guess."

She wiped at the counter she had already cleaned to hide her nerves. He was going to see right through her if she couldn't get herself under control.

He moved with her across the room and said, "Maybe I can change that." His voice touched her skin like a caress that made her skin pebble.

When she turned, he was a hair's breadth away. Emmy's words sounded in the back of her mind, and she lightly rested her hand on his bicep. "Why?" she asked, trying to hide the shake in her voice.

His hand drifted toward her face before he pulled it back and took a step away. "You're right. Can't win them all," he mumbled with a forced smile, turned on his heel, and stalked back to his room.

Shock and embarrassment ricocheted through her body. *Not even Emmy's secret tips worked for her.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The village was busy with people rushing along the stone sidewalks from shop to shop, while the cobblestone roads were busy with horses and carriages passing through.

"Is it always this busy?" Henry asked, looking around. "I didn't expect a small village like Anorak to have this many people."

"Not always. Now and then, we will have a busy day. It's as if everyone decides to shop and travel on the same day," Winnie shrugged. "You must really like sweets to give up your entire morning for them."

He groaned and rubbed his stomach. "I can't live without them. I think my organs are starting to fail from sugar deficiency."

She stopped him with a grim look. "Can I have your horse when you die?"

He roared with laughter and clapped his hands. "You've got it. Treat Sissy well." He turned and rubbed his hands together. "Where's this bakery you've been going on about?"

She pointed to Annie's a few shops down. "It's right there. Think you'll make it?"

He nodded, trotted to the bakery, and held the door open for her with a flourish. The sweet smell of bread and vanilla greeted their senses when they walked in, and she dragged in a deep breath.

"That's the smell of happiness," he crowed. He spotted a tray of cinnamon rolls and pointed. "I bet I could eat five of those right now."

She raised an eyebrow. "Only five?"

He narrowed his eyes back at her. "What do you mean 'only five'?" He looked her up and down. "You couldn't eat that many."

"I could so," she boasted, crossing her arms. "You think because I'm smaller than you I can't hold my own with rolls?"

He grinned like a cat in a canary cage. "Let's see who can eat more, then."

She blanched. "What do you mean?"

He pointed to the tray. "I'm going to buy every roll they have so you and I can see who can eat the most."

Licking her lips, she stuck out her hand for a shake. "You're on, Mr. Ashdown."

True to his word, he bought every cinnamon roll Annie's had and carried them to a table around the corner. "When I say go, we eat as many as we can, as fast as we can, until they're gone." He sat the giant sack between them. "Ready?"

She braced her hands on the table. "Ready."

"Go!" he barked.

They both reached into the sack, grabbed a roll, and shoved them in their mouths as fast as they could. He looked like a squirrel saving up for Winter, and she laughed around the roll in her mouth.

Five minutes later, when she reached for another roll, he reached across the table to knock it out of her hand. He grabbed another roll for himself and crammed it into his mouth. She snatched the sack and held it behind her out of his reach. Chewing as fast as she could, she swallowed the wad of dough in her mouth.

He jumped across the table to steal the sack back and wrapped a big arm around her, pinning her arms to her sides. He grabbed a roll with his other hand and shoved it into his mouth as she tickled his side, trying to wiggle free. She reached into the sack for another, only to find it empty.

Henry looked into the bag and smiled. "I win!"

"You do not!" she said indignantly. "How many did you eat?"

His eyes widened before he said with a full mouth, "I forgot to count." She burst out laughing. "How many did *you* eat? Whatever it was, I ate one more than that," he said, swallowing his bite.

She fanned the tears from her eyes, laughing loudly. "I forgot to count too. We're morons."

He licked his fingers and wiggled them at her. "You definitely lost. Come on, we need to find somewhere to wash our hands."

She swiped an icing-coated finger down his cheek and scurried to the washroom.

Once their hands were clean, they grazed toward the smithy to see Clarence. "You'll love him," she gushed. "I've known him since I was a girl. He's the best blacksmith in the Winter Kingdom."

He eyed her suspiciously. "How do you know so much about blacksmiths?"

She twisted her hands, grappling for an excuse. "I've always admired my brother's weapons. I think they're pretty, is all."

He nodded, seemingly content with her answer as they walked through the door of Clarence's shop.

"I was wondering where you'd gone, little dove. I haven't seen you in almost a week," Clarence said with his arms outstretched. He noticed Henry standing behind her and stalled, glancing back to Winnie. "Who's your friend?"

Henry stepped forward and offered his hand. "Henry Ashdown. My companion and I are staying at Hayward's Place, and Winnie has been showing me around."

The men held each other's gaze while they shook hands. Something seemed to pass between them that she did not quite understand.

"I just wanted to show him my favorite place in the village. Besides, you know I always stop in to say hello," she laughed uncomfortably.

Clarence nodded and embraced her before stepping back to his forge. "Well, it's always good to see you. I've got a lot of work today, and I'm afraid I can't visit for long."

She pushed a loose hair behind her ear and shrugged. "That's ok. We should be getting back anyway."

Henry had been unusually quiet since they entered the smithy. Once outside, she stopped and stared at him. "Do you know Clarence?"

He stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Can't say I do. I was looking at his work on the walls while you two visited. You were right. He does solid work."

She relaxed. "He really does."

They turned to continue home, but loud whispers and snickers stopped her cold in her tracks. This time it was a group of men.

"Seems the ghost has snagged herself a man," one jeered. "Bet he just wants to say he bedded the freak. I wonder if *all* of her hair is that color."

Before the group could laugh at the crude joke, Henry knocked the first man out with one hit and slammed the other against the stone wall, choking him as he grasped at the hand around his throat.

Henry's face was inches from the man's when he snarled, "If you ever fucking talk about her like that again, I will rip your throat out. Do you understand?" His eyes were almost black with fury, and the man nodded, falling to the ground when Henry released him.

Winnie's hands covered her mouth in shock, and Henry wrapped an arm around her shoulders to lead her away. Her voice was quivering as she tipped her face to his. "You didn't have to do that." She glanced back over her shoulder at the men still on the ground. "It's ok; I hear it all the time."

He snapped his gaze to hers. "That happens often?" She nodded solemnly. "It will never happen again when I'm with you. You have my word."

She threw her arms around his middle and mumbled against his chest, "Thank you. No one has ever stood up for me before."

He returned her embrace and murmured, "I will *always* protect you, Winnie."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sweat coated Thad's bare chest, and his heartbeat matched his feet's rhythm against the road. He had needed to blow off steam, and running always worked for him in the past, though today, it was proving to be futile.

He came to a stop outside of Hayward's Place and eyed the front entrance like it was coated in poison. He had managed to avoid Winnie after their encounter in the dining hall a week prior, and he didn't want to change that now. He wasn't sure why he decided to wander downstairs looking for her that night in the first place.

The beautiful redhead gave off every signal that she wanted him in her bed, but the thought hadn't been appealing at the time. It was unusual for Thad to turn down a beautiful woman, and it was messing with his head. His feet seemed to lead him to Winnie that night, and when he heard her humming while cleaning the tables, his heartbeat went into overdrive.

He almost kissed her before he came to his senses and went back to his room. He was sure if his lips found hers, he would never be able to pull them back. The night of the festival, he knew he needed to keep his distance, but no matter what he tried, he couldn't stay away.

He could tell his coldness hurt her, and it gutted him every time he saw her face. He was still polite in passing but avoided conversations when at all possible.

He knew she would be coming in from her walk at any moment for the lunch rush and didn't know if he could handle seeing her today.

He tried to run off the itching feeling, the one that demanded he be near her, but it hadn't worked. As if on their own accord, his feet carried him toward the door and inside the tavern.

Telling himself he would bathe and leave immediately, he vowed to make a beeline straight to the staircase. He didn't want to see her for longer than necessary, but one look from Winnie when he stepped through the door stopped him where he stood.

Her eyes widened and trailed down his glistening chest before making their way back to his face. The pink that colored her cheeks matched her lips perfectly, and he had to physically restrain himself from taking her right there.

"Hi, Thad," she said, her voice small. He hated the timid way she said his name as if she were nervous or afraid.

He supposed he had made her that way, and his gut churned at the truth. "Hello," he replied with a half-smile.

He was rooted to his spot by the door, his eyes trained on her beautiful face. She put down the last mug she was drying and walked around the bar toward him. She nervously touched a strand of pale hair, and he knew he couldn't be near her without pulling her into his arms.

She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say a word, he turned on his heel and stalked toward his room.

He stood in the hall and banged his fist against his door. *Why was he so attracted to this woman?* He couldn't figure out what it was about her that turned him into a feral beast who wanted to claim her and let the world know she was his.

He had to keep his distance. Otherwise, he'd make a fool of himself, and he had no plans to repeat the mistakes of his past.

Later that day, when Thad stepped into the dining hall for dinner, he spotted Henry and Winnie in the back courtyard. Henry had his arms wrapped around her from behind in some sort of embrace. Thad's blood boiled, and before he knew what he was doing, he had thrown the glass doors open with a growl. "What exactly are you two doing?"

She jumped, stepped away from Henry, and stuck her chin in the air with defiance. "That is none of your concern." She crossed her arms, her face clouded with anger. "Is there something I can help you with, or did you come out here to sour the mood?"

His eyes were trained on Henry, who was smirking at him across the yard. "Something wrong, brother?" his friend drawled, goading him. He knew what was wrong and would soon lose his head for it.

Thad couldn't calm himself, and his control was starting to slip. Henry must have recognized the signs because he dropped the cocky facade. "Relax, I was only cracking her back. She complained it was hurting after her walk."

His shoulders relaxed as the frosty anger seeped from his limbs, and regret hit him like a horse-drawn carriage. *What was he doing?*

He turned an apologetic smile to Winnie. "My apologies. It looked like he was about to break your back," he said with a shrug.

That wasn't true, of course. He thought they were being intimate and had planned to blast Henry into an early grave.

Her scowl seemed to deepen with his admittance. "Why would you care if he was hurting me or not? You barely speak to me, let alone give a damn about what I'm doing."

Henry gave a small wave and backed toward the tavern doors. "I need to wash up before dinner." He glanced at Thad before turning his attention back to Winnie. "Let me know if your back bothers you again."

He disappeared inside, and she took a step closer to Thad. "Well?"

He looked over her head into the woods, trying to think of an answer. "I wouldn't want someone with me to be responsible for hurting the help."

That was the exact wrong thing to say because she dropped her arms and balled her hands into tight fists. "*The help?* Is that all I am to you?" She laughed in disbelief. "You are an asshole. One minute you're hot, the next you're cold. I cannot keep up with your incessant mood swings."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. The point is, I am responsible for Henry," he barked with more aggression than was necessary.

"Why would you be responsible for him? He's a grown man, and you're friends, not father and son, or king and subject," she pointed out.

He needed to be careful with his words, but she always threw him off-kilter. "Can we drop it? I apologized; it's done."

"And I still want to know why you hate me all of a sudden," she snapped.

"I don't hate you," he said quietly.

Her shoulders slumped in defeat, and he wanted to rip his heart out and put it in her hands.

She looked at him with sad eyes. "I understand." Without another word, she walked around him into the tavern before he could stop her.

She couldn't possibly know what he was thinking. He stared at the doors and wondered what she thought she understood because, by the look on her face, it was nowhere near the truth.

He knew it was for the best, but why did he feel like a piece of his heart just walked away?



Winnie was such an idiot. She knew better than to ask Thad why he avoided her, but her anger overrode her rationality. She assumed he was repulsed by her advances that night in the dining hall but had hoped she was wrong. Clearly, she was not.

She took her spot behind the bar, and Henry studied her harried expression. "What did he say to you?"

She gave a small shrug. "Nothing I didn't already know."

She was about to start grabbing plates for the patrons when a man stepped through the front entrance. He was dressed in clothes fit for Winter and looked as if he had been traveling for some time.

He had a rugged handsomeness about him and appeared to be a few years older than Chaz. He had light blonde hair almost as pale as Winnie's, but not quite as ghastly. His muted green eyes seemed to hold many secrets.

She rounded the bar and walked toward him. "Hello, do you need a room or perhaps a warm meal?"

When the man's eyes landed on her, his brows shot up in surprise. She cringed inwardly and touched the ends of her pasty hair. She was used to people from elsewhere being shocked by her appearance, but it still made her uncomfortable.

His face transformed into a grand smile, and he held out his hand. "Rustin," he said in a deep voice.

She shook his hand and smiled despite herself. "Winnie." Pulling back, she clasped her hands in front of her skirts. "What can I help you with

today?"

Without taking his eyes from hers, he asked, "Have you always lived here in Anorak?"

She tilted her head in surprise. "Yes, I was born here and have lived here all of my life. Why do you ask?"

He shook his head, seemingly pulling himself out of a trance. "You look like you could be related to people I know. My mistake." He saw Emmy carry out plates to other guests and patted his stomach. "I could definitely eat. It's been a long day."

Winnie motioned for him to follow her. "Of course. You can sit anywhere you'd like."

"Where will you be?" he asked.

She stopped mid-stride and turned. "Me? Or do you mean Emmy," she said, pointing to her friend.

"I meant you," he confirmed.

She grasped for words, but her hammering heart was hindering her ability to speak. "After we pass out food and drink, I stay behind the bar."

He smiled, made his way to the bar top, and slid onto a stool.

She blinked several times, trying to process what was happening. She had never had male attention before and wasn't sure what to do. She cringed at the memory of when she thought Thad was interested and mentally shook herself. She was likely misinterpreting his actions the way she misinterpreted Thad's.

Two hours passed, and Rustin had quickly become one of her favorite guests to ever come through the inn. He was passing through after returning from a trip into the mountains, he'd told her.

Thad and Henry sat at the opposite end of the bar, and with Rustin there, she avoided them for most of the evening.

"I wish I could take you home with me, Winnie. You'd love it there," Rustin said before taking a drink of ale.

She sighed. "I could never leave my family, but perhaps one day I will visit."

He smiled from ear to ear. "Or perhaps I will have to stay in Anorak more often."

Thad slammed his mug on the bar top, and she swore the temperature in the room dropped a few degrees.

She glared at him across the bar and pointed to his mug. "Can you be careful, please? I'd rather not have to sweep up glass tonight."

He stared at her with unwavering intensity before turning his attention to Rustin. "Do you often prey on young barmaids when you pass through a village?" he snarled.

She froze and looked at him in bewilderment. Why would he say such a thing? Did he think her so unappealing that the thought of anyone showing interest was outlandish?

Rustin leaned back in his chair and gave her a smug smile. "No, not usually. Is she spoken for?"

Her stomach was in her throat, and her hands began to tingle. She looked to Henry for help, but he was ignoring the exchange altogether. *Traitor*, she thought to herself.

Thad stood and made his way to Rustin, his every step filled with malice. "Whether she is spoken for or not is none of your concern."

Rustin turned to her with a curious look. "Are you spoken for? If so, my deepest apologies."

"N-no, I am not," she stammered.

Thad fisted the back of the chair he stood behind and turned to her. "I don't want him taking advantage of you. Perhaps you should stay by Henry and me for the rest of the evening."

Rustin snorted. "How have I tried to take advantage of her? We've had good conversation and a pleasant evening. Until you inserted yourself, that is."

Thad slammed his fist on the bar, splintering it down the middle, and stalked to the front door. Throwing it open, he disappeared into the night.

She stood slack-jawed and looked between the bar, Rustin, the door, and Henry. "What just happened?"

Rustin stood with an amused smile. "I think he made it clear that you *are* spoken for. It was nice meeting you." He disappeared upstairs to his room without a parting glance.

Henry stood and assessed the damage to the bar. "We'll have this replaced tomorrow morning after breakfast," he promised, turning to follow Thad outside.

Emmy and Francis had been silent during the entire spectacle, and Winnie turned to them, her mouth wordlessly opening and closing.

Emmy walked over, leaned her elbows on the bar, and gave a small laugh. "Men are always so dramatic."

"Cheers to that, lass," Francis agreed and drained the rest of the ale.

She did not understand what happened, but she refused to let Thad dictate her life. She stomped around the bar and made her way outside to find Henry trying to calm him down.

"Henry, leave," she ordered.

He backed away from Thad and gave him a rueful look. "You're on your own, brother." He waltzed inside, whistling to himself, and she turned her murderous gaze to Thad.

"What the hell was that?" she demanded. He wouldn't look at her, and instead of answering, he clenched and unclenched his jaw repeatedly. "Look at me, damnit!"

Slowly, he swiveled his eyes to hers. "What do you want me to say? Do you want me to say that the thought of another man's hands on you makes me rabid, or that seeing him make you laugh ripped me in two? Because I won't."

She fought the sting in her chest and gave a humorless laugh. "I am not that stupid. I know where we stand, but what I do not know is why you feel the need to make me feel like shit at every turn."

He flinched. "That was not my intention."

"Then I guess you're really good at it if you can do it without trying," she spat.

He rubbed a hand down his face in frustration. "I can't do this with you."

He tried to veer around her, but she snatched his arm and yanked him back. "I am not done speaking to you. You do not get to discard me like trash."

He ducked his head to meet her gaze, his voice low and gravelly. "You are anything but trash, hellcat."

Her breath hitched at his strange admission, and she released him, allowing him to walk away from her once again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next day, Henry and Thad readied their horses for the trek to Eridu to prepare for the Summer Solstice in Zoris. They told Winnie, Emmy, and Suki they had business in the capital to take care of and would be gone at first light.

Winnie ran outside and threw herself into Henry's arms. "I'm not ready for you to leave." He rubbed her back soothingly before she stepped away. "Will you two be coming back?"

Thad looked between the two of them, and ice-cold anger pulsed through his veins. They had spent a good amount of time together over the past week, while he had tried to avoid her altogether. *How had they become so close?* He tightened the saddle on his horse to distract himself.

Henry rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not sure," he admitted and looked helplessly at Thad. "If we cannot return, I'll come to visit to kick your ass in another contest. We're one and one and need a tie-breaker."

She gave him a playful punch. "It's alright, I understand. You don't have to bring yourself back to our drab little town just to lose." He laughed half-heartedly and turned to load his saddlebags.

Thad turned his gaze back to Winnie, who gave him a tight smile.

"No grand goodbye for me?" he asked, clutching his chest dramatically. "You're breaking my heart, hellcat." He wasn't sure why he said that.

She shook her head and wrapped her arms around his middle. The moment their bodies pressed together, a shock ran through him that felt like iced lightning. She snapped her gaze to his, and he stared back, wide-eyed.

He had never felt a jolt like that before, and he didn't know what it meant. He had to admit the pull to her was getting impossible to ignore, and

as he stood there with her in his arms, the thought of leaving her was agonizing.

The Summer Solstice Gala is in two weeks, and you need to attend, he reminded himself.

He cupped her cheek and placed a featherlight kiss on her lips before he turned to mount his horse. Her fingers shot to her mouth when he turned and locked his gaze with hers.

"We'll be back in a fortnight," he promised. She merely nodded as they rode away, and he wondered what in the hell just happened.

"Are you going to tell me what happened back there, or are we going to pretend like you didn't kiss Winnie?" Henry cut his eyes to him with a smirk.

Thad's jaw ticked. "Are *you* going to tell me what's going on between you two?" he bit out. He could feel the jealousy fill his lungs like smoke, making it hard to breathe.

Henry held his hands up and chuckled. "You've got the wrong idea. I know you won't understand this, but I need to protect her. I don't know how else to explain it. She deserves to have more than one friend in her life that cares for her."

"There was a shock when our bodies touched," Thad said quietly. Henry's head whipped sideways. "It felt like being electrocuted by ice, but it wasn't painful. It was a feeling of being home, and I *had* to kiss her." He braced himself before continuing, "I'm drawn to her, and I don't know why. When I'm near her, no one else exists, and it scares me." He looked over with conflicted eyes. "She could rip my heart wide open, and I would happily bleed for her."

"What are you saying, Thad?"

"I think she could be my *compeer*," he rasped.

Henry stopped his horse abruptly. "Then why are we leaving her? She should be with us, *always*."

"I've already made this mistake before. I won't make it again," he snapped. "I have to be certain...*really* certain this time. Surely you understand?"

Henry worked his jaw and turned away. "It's your decision," he grunted, sending his horse into a trot.

They finished the six-hour ride in silence.



Thad and Henry strolled into the solstice brunch at the Summer Palace and sat at the long, golden table adorned with tropical fruits and candied ham.

"Not a pastry on the whole blasted table," Henry grumbled under his breath.

Thad walked to the head of the table and patted the Summer King on the back. "Larkin, good to see you."

Larkin smiled and motioned for them to sit.

"I thought I smelled a horse's ass," Silas greeted as he walked in, grinning from ear to ear, pointing at Thad. "Did you ride in this morning?"

He stood and shook Silas' hand with a laugh. "I believe what you're smelling is your upper lip, old man. And no, we stopped in Yalis for the night before arriving here last night."

Silas nodded and took a seat. "We did the same. Our routes meet in Yalis, I believe. Next year, we'll have to meet for a drink and finish the ride together." He turned to Larkin. "Where is Archer? That boring brute is never late."

Larkin's face darkened. "He sent word that he won't be attending this year," he fumed, reaching for his goblet. "I imagine he's still sulking over our last encounter."

Thad's brows rose in surprise. "When was the last time the four of us weren't together at a Gala?"

Silas chewed on a pineapple thoughtfully. "Not since that time about fifty years back when Larkin got too drunk to make the ride from Zoris to Kore in time."

They all laughed, and Larkin raised his cup. "I'll drink to that," he said with a grin. "It was worth it."



"Let me know if you see Luther," Thad said quietly to Henry. Henry gave a slight nod and melted into the crowd at the Gala.

Thad blew out a frustrated breath and swiped a goblet of wine from a passing tray.

"Hello, your majesty," a sultry voice said from behind him.

He turned to find Seren Longspeak smiling up at him. Her blonde hair was neatly tucked into a loose twist, and her dress revealed an enticing amount of cleavage.

He lifted his goblet and smiled politely. "Nice to see you again. Are you here with your father?"

She shook her head lightly. "My sister and I came together. Our family received an invitation, but neither of our parents wanted to make the long journey," she smiled sweetly. "Have you been enjoying the spring?"

Winnie's face flashed through his mind, and he smiled. "Yes, I have."

She must have mistaken his smile for her because she lightly touched his arm and purred, "Perhaps we could enjoy a little time together before you leave for the summer?" Her breath smelled of mint and wine.

He shifted uncomfortably. His mind would not stop replaying pictures of Winnie as she danced, laughed, and watched him skin a deer. He looked down at the woman in front of him and felt nothing, not even desire.

It was as if when he and Winnie met, they were fused together, and no one else would do. He glanced down at Seren's innocent face once more. Perhaps he could bed her and see if it cleared the Winnie-induced fog from his mind. He may be drawn to her because of the challenge she posed.

Making his decision, he pressed his lips to Seren's ear. "I have business to take care of, but meet me in my rooms just before sunrise." He placed a kiss on her cheek and walked away.

He swallowed down the bile that burned in his throat and set out to find Luther.

Henry made his way to Thad with Luther not far behind and motioned with his head toward an alcove on the palace's north side.

Thad shook the general's hand with a nod. "It's good to see you well."

"As you, your majesty."

"Do you have any news for us?" he asked grimly.

Luther set his mouth in a thin line. "Three duchesses from Spring, three from Summer, three from Winter, and one from Autumn have gone missing."

Thad's breath whooshed from his lungs. "What? How is that possible? How can so many disappear without a trace? Did you find out anything useful from the villagers?" He fired off questions in rapid succession. His brain could not comprehend what this meant.

Luther shook his head. "Only that their families disappeared with them. Most people think they've simply moved." He rubbed the stubble on his chin in thought. "I know that's not the case, but I don't know who's behind it."

Thad nodded solemnly and looked at Henry. "We need to relocate the remaining Winter duchesses and figure out why Autumn has exponentially fewer missing women than the other three kingdoms," he commanded and turned his attention back to Luther. "Have all of the remaining Winter duchesses and their families moved to the palace. I want a guard assigned to each, and if anyone goes missing from the palace, someone will be answering to me."

The ground around his feet iced over, and Henry jumped back. "Thad, we'll figure it out, but you need to calm down."

His anger was rising, and cold air puffed out with every breath. Someone was kidnapping women because they had been married to him, and when he found out who was responsible, he would *destroy* them.

Henry knocked on Thad's door a little before sunrise and stepped inside. "Seren Longspeak is here. She said you told her to come." His words were clipped, and guilt clawed at Thad's chest.

He nodded and motioned for Henry to send her in.

Seren walked in, looking like every man's fantasy. Her dressing gown was a light pink silk with lace trim that she held together with a

dainty hand. Her blonde hair was hanging loose around her shoulders, and her full lips smiled sensually.

The emotions swirling inside of him were warring with each other. His heart was screaming at him to send her away, while his brain was rationalizing that he needed to get Winnie out of his system.

His future bride opened her robe and let it slide to the floor, revealing her naked body. Her breasts were firm, her waist thin, and her hips round and soft. He groaned at the sight of her as she walked seductively toward him, swinging her hips.

She silently stood between his legs, and he looked up at her. "I'm yours, your majesty. Do with me what you will."

He pulled her close and took her nipple in his mouth, eliciting a moan from her full lips. Licking his way down her stomach, he ran his hands up her milky thighs. He flipped her around to lie on her back and surveyed her delicious body. He could see how wet she was for him, and yet, he felt nothing.

She leaned forward and unzipped his trousers, freeing his cock from its confinement. Her eyes widened at the sight of him before she wrapped her silky hands around his soft shaft. Taking his flaccid cock into her mouth, she moaned around his thick head while she licked and sucked. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back, trying to focus on the sensation. But still, nothing.

Frustrated, he hung his head and cursed himself, because all he wanted was Winnie. He knew no one else would do.

Sighing, he pulled back from her and yanked up his trousers. "I'm sorry, I think I had too much wine tonight. You should return to your rooms before your sister finds them empty and reports you missing."

She stuck out her bottom lip and walked to him, running her hands up his chest. Her voice was husky with desire when she said, "It's ok, Thaddeus. We'll have plenty of time to play later."

She smiled, pulled her dressing robe on, and left as quietly as she came.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Luther had been gone for almost four months, and Winnie missed him. It's rare that he stayed away this long, and she was starting to worry that something terrible happened. Perhaps she could send a letter to the palace asking after him.

It did not help that Henry and Thad had been gone almost four weeks, despite Thad saying they'd be back in two. She guessed they would not come back at all, and her very bones ached at the thought.

She still could not make sense of what happened when she hugged Thad goodbye. It was like having a cool caress blanket her body, and when he pulled back to leave, he seemed to take a piece of her with him. He had unknowingly been her first kiss, and though it was barely a kiss at all, it meant everything to her.

It made no sense because other than his meals where he barely paid her any mind, she never saw him. Henry, however, had become her sidekick, or perhaps she was his. She had never met someone who made her laugh the way he did, and true to his word, there were no whispers in the village when they were together.

"Why do you look so glum, little sister?" Chaz asked, hurling a small potato across the bar, hitting her in the arm.

She rubbed her arm where she was brutally assaulted via a root vegetable and glared. "I'm worried about Luther. He's never been gone this long before." *And I'm afraid I'll never see Thad or Henry again*, she silently added.

He stood from his stool and stretched. "Don't worry about Luther. He will be fine. It would take the entire land of Rodina collapsing in on itself to do the old buzzard in. Even then, he might still make it."

"That's true. He doesn't look old, but he acts like he's been around since the beginning of creation," she agreed.

"Who's old?" Edwin asked as he plopped down at the bar top.

"General deGrey," Chaz said, sticking his head in the kitchen. "Where's Emmy?"

"The general does act older than the dirt we stand on," Edwin chuckled.

"Did someone ask for me?" Emmy sang, floating in from the hall that led to their rooms.

Chaz smiled. "I did. I was wondering what you were doing right now. We have the afternoon off," he motioned between himself and Edwin, "and I thought you would like to go on a ride and look at the blooms. I'll have you back before dinner."

Winnie and Edwin looked at each other with knowing smiles, and Emmy's pretty face split in half with a wide grin. "Yes, of course! Let me grab my riding boots." She scurried back down the hall, and Winnie turned to Chaz.

"Don't say anything, or you'll meet the gods early," he promised as he pointed at the two of them. She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing and nodded.

"What are you doing this afternoon, Winnie?" Edwin asked.

Surprise buzzed through her limbs. "I don't have anything planned..."

"Why don't you let me take you to that bakery you love so much?"

Her shoulders slumped at the memory of Henry shoveling rolls into his mouth. She missed her friend, but she still gave Edwin a tight smile and nodded.

"That sounds fun. Let me tell my mother, and we can leave."

Edwin held the door open to Annie's Bakery, motioning for Winnie to walk through. The familiar smell of sugar filled the air, and she breathed deep with a happy sigh.

"What are you getting?" she asked, gazing at the sweets.

He leaned forward, surveying the trays of pastries. "I think I'll have a sticky bun." He straightened and looked at her. "What about you?"

She tapped her finger to her chin. "I think I'll have a sticky bun too. That sounds delicious."

On the walk home, they talked about everything under the sun. She told him about Francis and how he had been coming to the tavern and telling stories since she was a girl and how she wished to take over the business from her mother.

Edwin said he had wanted to be a warrior in the king's battalion since he was a boy and that he would do anything for his king. She admired his loyalty and wondered if he would be as fiercely devoted to his future wife.

When they arrived back at the tavern, it was almost time for the dinner rush to start, and he put his hand on her arm to stop her from going inside. Pushing a piece of hair behind her ear, he smiled, and she silently wondered why men always did that. If her hair was bothering her, she would move it herself. Her thoughts were decimated when his eyes dropped to her lips.

"You're lovely. I plan on telling you that every day that I see you." He lightly held her chin and gently pressed his lips to hers before murmuring, "Good night."

She stared after him in shock as he mounted his horse and disappeared into the sunset. His kiss hadn't sparked like Thad's, and she felt no butterflies or giddiness. She knew then that he wasn't for her, and perhaps no one but Thad would be.

If he ever came back.



Chaz watched Emmy's dark hair shine in the afternoon sun and itched to run his hands through it. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever laid eyes on, and today he was going to ask her to be his.

They always flirted back and forth, but neither of them took it farther than that. As he steered his horse toward the small valley near their village that sprouted wildflowers every spring, he flicked a smile over his shoulder.

"The flowers are almost as pretty as you," he drawled.

Her cheeks turned the slightest shade of pink, and she flipped her long hair over her shoulder. "Laying it on thick today, aren't you?"

His grin widened, and they hopped from their horses to let them graze in the field.

"Why did you bring me here?" she murmured.

He swallowed hard and turned to face her. "I wanted to spend time with you."

She studied him briefly before nodding and reaching for his hand. "Then you're going to help me pick bouquets for the inn."

He laughed and followed her into the thick of the flowers. She pointed to the ones she wanted him to gather, and he took out his dagger, wrapped a fist around a handful of petals, and began chopping at the stems.

She looked at him in horror. "What are you doing! You're not harvesting wheat, you brute!"

He looked at the stumpy stems on his flowers' ends and compared them to the much longer stems on Emmy's. "Oops."

She pulled him into a squat and put her hands around his. "You need to cut them at the base." She wrapped his fingers near the end of the stem, showing him. "Feel where it almost meets the ground?" she said too sweetly.

He knew she was being a smartass, but she was so close to him that all he could think about was ripping her clothes off with his teeth. He was so entranced that he hadn't seen her pull a stem out by its root until it was too late. She shoved the patch of earth hanging from the bottom directly into his mouth.

He sputtered and gagged on the dirt that coated his tongue. Looking at her with a wild smile, he lunged for her. She sashayed backward and dodged his advances with lithe grace.

He jumped to his feet and shot toward her. "Catch me if you can, Hayward," she called in a sing-song voice and darted through the valley.

She was faster than he was, and he didn't know how that was possible. She never did any sort of physical activity. How had she become so agile? She zigzagged and jumped as if she had trained with the best of the best her entire life.

He finally stopped and threw his hands up. "You win! I don't know how your little legs run that fast, but I give up," he gasped, laying amongst the sea of flowers, gulping in air.

Her head appeared over him with a devilish smile. "You're slow." She dropped down beside him and tweaked his nose, trying to pull back with a cheeky laugh, but he stopped her.

He sat up and licked his lips. "I want to kiss you."

She seemed enraptured, and her breathing quickened. "I... Chaz, you don't understand."

His eyes tightened in confusion. "What is there to understand? I want you, and not just to bed. I want *you*," he said. "I want you to be mine."

"Chaz," she pleaded.

Before she could say another word, he slid his lips over hers. They were still a little gritty from the dirt, but he didn't care. She paused before groaning into his mouth and returned his kiss with desperation.

They clutched wildly at each other as years of tension uncoiled between them. He ran his hands over the swell of her breasts and moaned around her tongue. She was perfect for him in every way, and all he wanted was his hands on her skin.

She pulled back with swollen lips and put a hand to his chest. "If we do this, you have to understand that this is all it can ever be. I can't be yours."

He felt like a bucket of ice water had doused him from head to toe. His rigid body wouldn't move except to blink at her. Finally, his motor skills returned, and he sat back on his heels. "What? Why?" His anger started to rise at her blatant rejection.

"It just can't. It's either casual fun or nothing."

He didn't understand, because what she was saying didn't match her expression. She looked like the words physically hurt her to say, yet she said them anyway.

"Is there someone else? Is that it?" he asked, afraid to know the answer.

She shook her head. "No. I just can't."

He stared at her in disbelief, the hurt and anger twisting inside him. He locked his jaw and stood. "Then I choose nothing." He stalked back to his mare and waited until Emmy was in her saddle.

They rode back to the tavern in silence.



The four men stepped into the cave and bowed to their king. "You may rise," the king commanded as he stepped down and surveyed his spies, each conditioned and forged into the perfect weapons from the time they were children. "Have any *compeers* been located?"

One spy stepped forward and bowed his head with his fist to his heart. "If I may speak, your grace?"

"Speak freely," the king said with a wave of his hand.

The man raised his head and placed his hands behind his back. "I believe I have located the *Winter compeer*. I still need confirmation to be sure, but a confirmed guardian has been seen with her."

The king nodded at the information. When he was training to be king, he had overheard a conversation between his parents and a Spring guardian. He spent all his free time finding out *what they were* and then *who they were* in each kingdom. They were almost impossible to find because they disappeared every one hundred years, but he had tracked down a few and kept an eye on them. "Does she know what she is?"

"No, your grace, I believe she does not." The spy hesitated. "There's something else."

The king motioned for him to continue.

"There was talk amongst the king's guard when I was at the palace in Eridu that King Thaddeus will be in Anorak soon."

The king stepped off the dais. "Why would I be concerned with Thaddeus' travels?"

"It's where the suspected *compeer* is, your grace."

The king's eyes turned to slits as his anger boiled to the surface. "Then you need to confirm her identity and bring her to me as soon as possible, or it will be your life I drain next."

"Understood, your grace." The spy bowed low and fell back in line.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Emmy always took the morning shift at the tavern so Winnie could take her morning *walks*. In return, she always took the closing shift so Emmy could leave early.

She was cleaning the tables and humming to herself and didn't hear when two gentlemen walked through the front entrance. One cleared his throat, startling her. She turned to see Thad and Henry standing across the room, looking like a dream come true.

Henry had a crooked smile on his face, and Thad stared at her with his signature intensity. Emotion hit her like a bag of stones, and she dropped her rag, running into Henry's arms. "I thought you'd decided not to come back," she whispered into his shoulder. With one more squeeze, she released him and stepped back.

"I'd never miss an opportunity to beat you at another game," he said.

Thad stepped forward and grabbed the back of her head, pulling her to his muscular chest. The second their bodies touched, she felt a calm wash over her and melted into his arms, breathing him in.

He released her and moved back a fraction of a step but kept his hand on her arm. He shifted those icy blue eyes to hers with the slightest grin. "Do you have any rooms for us, hellcat?"

Mentally shaking herself, she bustled around the tables with a nervous laugh. "Yes, of course, we kept your same rooms open in the event of your return," she chattered, motioning to the stairs. "The linens are fresh as well. Do either of you need any food or drink? I'm sure you're tired from your trip."

His lips twitched in amusement. "No, thank you," he said and nodded at Henry, who mumbled goodnights and climbed the stairs with a

salute.

Thad's breath drifted across her skin as he pressed his lips to her ear. "Can I take you somewhere tomorrow, just the two of us?" He pulled back to gauge her expression, and she tried desperately to catch her breath. "I'd like to get to know you better outside of the tavern."

"Yes, of course," she breathed.

He kissed her hand and retreated to the staircase. "We'll leave at sunrise," he said as she watched him go.



The next morning, Winnie shook her hands and tried to expel the nervousness from her body. Sleep evaded her as she ran Thad's words through her mind over and over.

She threw open her armoire, stared at her plain dresses, and moaned. The only decent dress she owned was the blue one from the night of the festival, and he had already seen her wear it.

With a sigh, she grabbed a dark grey dress that was newer and pulled it on over her underwear and breastband. She slipped on her riding boots, twisted the front of her hair back, and inspected her reflection in the mirror. She touched her pale strands hanging over her shoulder, a self-conscious habit she has had since childhood, and shut her armoire with a huff.

Grabbing her satchel, she rushed down the hall to the tavern so she could pace in a bigger area. It was not yet sunrise, but she was too fidgety to sit around in her room for another hour.

When she emerged from the side door, she let out a blood-curdling scream at the sight of a large shadow sitting at the bar top.

A smooth rumble coated her skin. "It's just me, hellcat."

Her body relaxed, and she placed a hand over her galloping heart. "You scared me half to death. What are you doing out here so early?"

Thad's mouth ticked up. "I could ask you the same thing."

Heat flooded her cheeks and she fidgeted nervously. "I couldn't sleep."

He nodded and stood, reaching for her hand. "Neither could I. Aren't we a pair? Come, I'll saddle the horse so we can leave."

"I can saddle mine; we'll be ready in half the time."

He looked back at her, his eyes intense. "I thought we could ride together."

She felt her heart speed up again and nodded. *What was she getting herself into?*

"Winnie, meet Captain." He motioned to his large silver stallion before he hoisted her into the saddle.

She leaned forward and rubbed a hand down Captain's neck. "He's beautiful," she gushed.

She slid herself to the back of the saddle, but Thad stopped her. "You will ride in front so I can make sure you don't fall off if Cap gets spooked."

Her blood turned to molten lava at the thought of her body pressed between his legs, and all she could do was nod.

As they rode, he kept one hand on the reins and another around her middle. His fingers began drawing lazy circles, almost as if he did not realize he was doing it, and she needed a distraction from the flutters in her stomach. "Where are we going?"

"To one of my favorite spots in this area. You may have been there before. It's a grassy cliff that overlooks a river not far from here."

She tilted her head and scoured her memories. "I don't believe I've seen a cliff like that. How did you find it? Have you been to Anorak before?"

She felt him stiffen behind her. "Once, years ago. Luckily, we were both up early," he said, changing the subject. "We'll get to watch the sunrise."

When they arrived, she turned to see him staring at her with a look she could not decipher. She touched the bottom of her hair, gave a nervous giggle, and turned to gaze over the cliff. It was still dark out, but you could see the rocks' outline across the river and hear the water trickling below.

She took a few tentative steps and looked around. "Even in darkness, it's beautiful."

"All the best things are," he murmured.

He dropped the bag he had taken from the saddle and pulled out a blanket to cover the ground. Taking a seat, he patted the spot next to him, with a handsome smile on his perfectly sculpted face.

Once she was situated beside him, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his side. The sun was starting to peak over the far cliff, and she had never seen anything so breathtaking.

She fit her head into the crook of his neck, and he rested his cheek on the top of her hair. They sat in peaceful silence, watching the sun roll over the river and bathe them in golden light.

She leaned back and tipped her face to his. "Thank you for bringing me here. It's beautiful."

His eyes searched hers, and he released her. The loss of his touch left her feeling empty.

He reached into the bag and pulled out a wineskin with an impish grin. "I brought libations from the pal- uh market. I hadn't planned on us being here at this hour, but it's never too early for wine." He pulled out two goblets and filled them to the brim before handing her one. "Cheers."

She laughed and took a sip. "This is really good. Where did you find a wine like this in Anorak?"

He coughed, spewing the liquid into his hand. "I...uh... meant the Eridu market."

She eyed him thoughtfully over her cup. "Tell me something about yourself. It feels as if you and Henry materialized with no backstory."

He slowly licked his lips. "Henry and I live in Eridu. We're warriors in the king's battalion during the Winter season, but if danger arises in the off-seasons, we will return to fight." He darted his gaze to the horizon.

She studied him and analyzed what he'd said. He spoke slowly as if choosing his words carefully. Perhaps, they were in a secret regiment for the king. "What about your family? Do they live in Eridu as well?"

His face slackened, and his words were solemn. "Henry is my only family. My parents have been gone for years."

She clasped her fingers around his hand and squeezed. "I'm sorry. My father has been gone a long time too. I can't imagine losing them both."

The muscles in his back shifted. "We all have sacrifices we have to make." Clearing his throat, he turned to her with a half-cocked smile. "Do you like to swim?"

Her face must have shown her uncertainty because he let out a low laugh.

She motioned to her dress. "I don't have my swimming clothes."

He shrugged. "Neither do I. They're the same as undergarments but with a different name. We could swim in those."

She blew out a nervous breath and mulled over his offer. "Yes," she said finally. "Let's do it."

He smiled wide and grabbed her hand, leading her down a narrow path to the river below. They deposited their clothes on the shore, and she tried to cover herself with her arms as she tiptoed toward the water.

He pressed a gentle hand to her arm and pushed it away from her body. "Don't hide, not from me."

His words were so sincere that she felt a new wave of confidence. Straightening her shoulders, she stepped into the cold river.

She shivered and walked deeper into the stream. This was a calm river with gently flowing waters, but some in the mountains had dangerous rapids that would pull your body under and carry you away.

Thad flipped to his back and stroked backward with his eyes closed. She marveled at the fluid way his form cut through the water and began to wonder what it would feel like to run her hands down his body.

Her cheeks flooded with embarrassment when she realized he was watching her stare at him, and a sly grin pulled at his mouth. "Don't be afraid. I won't let you drown." He held out a hand and beckoned for her to join him.

"I'm an excellent swimmer. Maybe *I* will have to save *you*," she sassed. With that, she sent a huge splash right into his face and burst out laughing at his shocked expression.

He lunged forward, causing her to scream and scramble toward the riverbank, but she was too slow. He snatched her from behind and launched her through the air, making her arms and legs flail like a turtle on its back. She shrieked like a banshee when she hit the water with a huge splash and sank to the bottom.

Surfacing, she blew water from her nose and narrowed her eyes before diving toward his monstrous form.

Laughing, he caught her around the waist and dunked her under. "Say mercy!"

She shook her head. "Never!" He submerged her again.

When he pulled her back up, she latched her hands around his neck so he could not dip her again. "I'll never give in," she said with a pant.

He released her legs, which was his first mistake. She gave a saccharine smile, and with all her strength, pushed her leg through the thick water, knocking his knees one way and pushing his chest the other.

He went under, and she swam away as fast as she could. When she whirled back around, he still hadn't surfaced. When it had been longer than should have been humanly possible, she started to panic.

"Thad!" She swam furiously to where he had been, her panic intensifying. "Thad!!"

He exploded out of the water directly in front of her and yanked her into a barrel roll. When they surfaced, they were sputtering and laughing, spewing water from their mouths.

She gave him a tiny splash with a playful glare. "How did you hold your breath that long? I thought you were dead."

He lifted a shoulder and rubbed a hand down his torso. "Big lungs."

She tracked the movement of his hand tracing the hard muscles on his stomach and gulped. He slowly moved toward her and wrapped his arms around her waist to pull their bodies together. She wrapped her legs around his middle and pressed her hips into his.

His gaze dropped to her lips before he looked at her with an unspoken question. She gave the slightest nod, and he pulled her mouth to his. She gasped, and he silenced it with his tongue as it slid between her lips.

Their mouths moved in sync like they had done this a thousand times before. She squeezed her thighs around his hips, and he groaned into her mouth. She leaned her head back when he began to trail kisses from her neck to her collarbone and back to her lips.

When they pulled apart, they both panted for breaths with heaving chests. Their lips were swollen, and his eyes darkened with desire.

He rested his forehead against hers and bit his bottom lip. "Well, that was fun."

She threw her head back and laughed, swatting at his chest. She had never been this happy, and she feared it would go away when he left for

good. Pulling her legs from his body, she made her way out of the water and sat on the shore.

He looked at her with an eyebrow raised in question, and she lifted her chin, squinting through the summer sunlight. "I'm going to let the sun dry me before putting on my dress," she said, laying back with a content sigh.

She felt him settle beside her, and the heat of his hand bled into her palm when he threaded his fingers through hers. The icy caress returned when they joined hands, causing them both to jump.

He turned his head toward her, his voice barely above a whisper, "You feel that, don't you?"

She swallowed and gave a tiny nod before closing her eyes and hoped this was more to him than just a way to pass the time.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gilda came gliding through the front entrance of the tavern with a grand flourish. "Special delivery!"

Emmy clapped excitedly and rounded the end of the bar to take her dress from the seamstress. "I can't wait to try it on!" she exclaimed and flipped around to Winnie, who made her way over. "We are going to look so good!"

Winnie could not deny that she was excited about tomorrow night's Aestas Festival in the village, especially since Thad and Henry would be there. Usually, in Anorak, the gods' festivals are held six weeks after the Gala, but Summer is the exception. She always thought it was because everyone in the mountains was ready for the warmth, so they celebrated a couple of weeks earlier than usual.

"Winnie, dear, I hope you don't mind, but I changed the fabric of your dress," Gilda said, lifting the bottom of the garment bag to show a slate grey skirt. "It will bring out your eyes. It's going to look fabulous with your coloring."

Winnie tried to hide her wince. The *last* thing she wanted was to draw more attention to her eye color. She had not dealt with vicious whispers as of late, but she would be humiliated if it happened in front of Thad. Still, Gilda's thoughtfulness touched her, and she gave an appreciative smile.

"Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you." She gave her a quick hug before she lifted the bag from the woman's arms.

Gilda gave her an affectionate smile. "You will never be without me, dear." She gently patted Winnie's arm and left.

Winnie was bubbling with nervous excitement and could not help but squeal when she uncovered her dress. It was sleeveless to accommodate

the heat of summer, with a V-neck trimmed in thin, silver rope. The same rope circled the waist where the bodice met the skirts and tied around the back. It was a beautiful dress, even with her standard slits and pockets hidden in the fabric.



Thad and Henry stood in the great room with Chazriel and Edwin, waiting on the girls. Thad had known Winnie had a brother in the Anorak regiment, but what he hadn't known was that he was a gods-damned giant.

"What brings you two to Anorak?" Chazriel asked. His mouth was in a firm line, and Thad had a feeling he did not like all the time they'd been spending with his sister.

Thad set his feet and crossed his arms. "We're warriors in the Eridu regiment," he said, motioning between himself and Henry. "The king gave us the seasons off until winter."

Edwin and Chazriel exchanged a look before they turned back to Thad and Henry with narrowed eyes. "How is that possible? No other regiments get time off."

Thad yawned with a bored expression. "You're also the only battalion in the area. Eridu has several. We rotate, one for every season."

None of what he said was true, but it was rare for non-nobles from this area to travel to Eridu and know the goings-on. He would need to send word to Luther to confirm his story if they asked upon his return.

Chazriel seemed pacified with that answer because he directed his attention to Henry. "I heard you stuck up for my sister in the village a while back," he said, sticking out his hand. "Thank you. I appreciate you looking out for her when I'm in the barracks."

Henry gripped his hand and nodded once before releasing him. "She will always be protected while I'm around. You have my word."

Thad had no idea what they were talking about and made a mental note to ask about it later.

Chazriel nodded, and Edwin silently glared at Thad, who glared right back. The man was a little taller than Henry with a lean, muscular build, and Thad was sure he could knock him out with one punch.

The sound of nervous laughter caused all four men to turn their eyes to the two women who entered the room. He felt all the blood leave his body at the sight of Winnie in the colors of winter: white, silver, and grey. In that moment, he was positive she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

He started toward her, but Edwin stepped between them and lightly kissed her cheek. "You look lovely, Winnie, as always."

Thad saw red. He could feel the blood as it rushed back into his body at an impossible speed and flooded every limb with blinding rage. Henry stepped closer to him and grabbed his forearm.

Low enough for only him to hear, he ground out, "Calm down before you turn the floors to ice."

Crashing back to reality, Thad glanced at his boots and saw the frost spidering out. Winnie's eyes met his, and he shot her a charming smile. He was still battling the jealousy that hammered in his chest and could not manage much more than that without knocking Edwin's teeth out.

Once outside, Edwin had her arm crooked in his. Thad did not like their familiarity and wondered if there was something more between them than friendship. His hearing was better than that of mortals, allowing him to eavesdrop on their conversation with clarity.

When Edwin mentioned the last festival, Thad realized he was the man she was dancing with the first time he had seen her. That realization did *not* help him keep himself under control, and he had to focus on his breathing to keep from freezing the entire village.

The Aestas Festival was as lively as the Ver Festival had been a few months back, and he laughed at the jovial crowd that danced around without a care in the world. Edwin finally dropped Winnie's arm to get refreshments, and Thad swooped in, whispering in her ear, "Walk with me?"

Her bright eyes turned to him with a shy smile. "I thought you'd never ask."

He took her hand in his and began to lead them away from the crowd when Edwin appeared out of nowhere.

The man smiled affectionately at her. "Will you dance with me?" Thad could hear the longing in his voice, and he *hated* it.

She gave Thad an apologetic look before she nodded and followed Edwin to the dance floor.

"I don't like that guy," Henry said around a mouth full of food.

Thad turned to his friend with a murderous expression and stalked to the closest ale vendor.

Edwin occupied Winnie's time for the duration of the festival. If she sat to rest, he was beside her. If she wanted food or drink, he accompanied her and bought whatever she wanted. She seemed to be enjoying herself, which was the only reason Thad did not turn him into a block of ice.

He had not seen Henry in a while and pushed his way through the crowd to find his friend. He spotted his companion in front of a dress shop speaking hurriedly to a woman with black hair and a moose of a man with a reddish beard.

Thad had never seen them before, but he could see Henry's face etched in worry from where he stood. He began making his way to the three, but the woman looked up, murmured something to the other two, and they dispersed.

Henry glanced at him over his shoulder, lifted his mug in cheers, and disappeared into the crowd. He trusted Henry more than he trusted himself and knew he would tell him if it was something important.

He turned his attention back to the dancers and realized Edwin was standing with Chazriel and Emmy *without* Winnie. He navigated his way around the vendors and villagers until he spotted a flash of pale blonde hair bobbing toward the edge of the crowd. He sent a thanks to the gods and hurried to catch her.

Learning from his previous festival experience, he called out from a safe distance, "Leaving so soon?"

She spun around with a wide grin. "I was hoping you'd find me," she teased and stepped closer. "I'm sorry we haven't been able to enjoy the festival together. I don't see Edwin and Chaz often."

He could not take his eyes off her, because she was so beautiful that words failed him. He stepped closer and ran a hand down her bare arm, watching the goose flesh form under his touch. His desire was suffocating,

and it took all his restraint not to take her back to the inn and show her how much he wanted her.

He cupped his hand around the back of her neck and brought his mouth to hers. He laughed at how fast his heart was beating and said, "You're beautiful."

She jerked and pulled back, storm clouds forming in her steely eyes. Her face contorted into one of anger mixed with hurt. She shoved his chest and started toward the tavern without a word.

His mind was racing. *What happened?* He grabbed her around the waist to stop her. "What was that? Tell me what you're thinking." He knew his voice was desperate, but he did not care.

She ripped from his hold and whirled on him, fury blanketing her every move. "Don't. Do not follow me. Just leave me alone."

She took a few steps backward, then turned and ran, as he stared after her in disbelief.



Winnie rushed into the kitchen and grabbed plates to deliver to the filled tables. She wiped the sweat from her face and cursed herself for not coming in early enough to bathe after training. She was fairly sure she smelled like a water buffalo.

Backing through the swinging doors, she spun around and froze. Thad and Henry sat at the bar top, deep in conversation with Emmy. Her stomach dropped when she saw the barmaid leaning toward Thad in her flirtatious sort of way, but what really twisted her gut was the way he was smiling back.

She should not care after he mocked her last night. She was not beautiful and never has been. Everyone was careful with their words around her. It was always 'nice' or 'lovely,' but never 'beautiful.'

She may have believed him after what happened at the river if he had not laughed as he said it. *Cursed by the gods, indeed.*

Pulling her back straight, she marched across the room, doing her best to avoid the bar.

"Winnie!" She cringed at her name being called. *Please do not call me over.* "Winnie!" Emmy called again. *Maybe she could pretend to be momentarily deaf and walk into the courtyard.*

She realized she took too long contemplating her escape when Emmy popped in front of her with a wary expression. "Did you not hear me calling you?"

She schooled her features into surprise. "Were you? You know me, always with my head in the clouds."

Emmy bobbed her head. "I was just wondering why you haven't so much as looked at Henry or Thad since you got here," she accused, popping a brow.

Winnie did not want anyone to know about her humiliating exchange with Thad, so she gave a small shrug. "Just busy with the rush."

She motioned around the room after setting the plates down. With a tight-lipped smile, she walked to the bar and braced her hands on the edge. "Hey, guys. Good to see you," she deadpanned and gave a pointed look to Emmy before turning toward the kitchen.

Chaz appeared out of thin air and dead-legged her from behind. She screeched and waved her arms like a lunatic when her leg buckled out from under her.

Forgetting that she was supposed to be hiding in the kitchen, she righted herself, jumped up, and locked Chaz's neck in the crook of her arm.

"Let me go, you little spider monkey!" he cried. He had never been able to get out of her neck hold, and it's the only move she had over him.

"Say, 'Please Winnie, you're the best Hayward sibling ever to live,'" she said in a sing-song voice.

She could tell he was about to give in, but someone else lifted her into the air. "I must defend my brother in arms from the likes of saucy barmaids such as yourself," Edwin said, fighting to keep his voice steady, but his amusement betrayed him as his chest rumbled with laughter.

She pawed at his hands until he released her. "Traitor," she squealed. Laughing, she turned to see Thad and Henry staring at her with unreadable expressions.

Suddenly self-conscious, she touched her hair before she turned to leave. Edwin gently caught her arm and pulled her to him. "Where are you

off to in a hurry? Sit and keep us company while we eat."

She glanced quickly at Thad, who was watching Edwin with pinprick pupils.

It would be strange if she did not stay like she usually did when they came in, and the last thing she wanted was more questions. Sighing, she nodded and took her place behind the bar.

She released a relieved breath when Francis sidled up in front of her. "Hey, Fran!" she said with too much enthusiasm. He knows her well and narrowed his eyes over the mug that Emmy already had waiting on him.

Edwin walked over to Francis, patted his back, and raised his mug to Winnie. "You look lovely today." Her cheeks burned like coals, and Thad's gaze burned into Edwin with his jaw clenched. She wanted to crawl into a snake hole under his scrutiny.

She pressed her lips into a line and tried not to cry. "You don't have to do that, Edwin."

His face twisted in confusion, and he set his mug down. "Do what?"

She touched her hair. "I've seen a mirror. I hear what they say about me in town," she hissed, grabbing a rag to busy her hands, humiliation and anger burning through her.

He leaned forward and tipped her chin while Francis watched silently. "Don't listen to the people in the village. Ever."

Faster than what she thought was possible, Thad was across the bar, turning her face toward his. "What's been said to you? What people in the village?" He looked ready to level the entire town of Anorak. She did not understand what was happening, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Henry's knuckles whiten around his mug.

She met Thad's gaze with blurry eyes. "Nothing that you haven't already made clear."

Edwin was out of his seat in the blink of an eye and grabbed Thad's shirt in his fist. "*What did you say to her?*" he roared.

He pushed Edwin back with enough force to knock him over before he turned back to her. "What do you think I've said to you? If my recollection is correct, I only said you were beautiful, and you stormed away."

Her chest heaved as his words stoked her anger. "I don't need you to make a mockery of me. Edwin only says I am 'lovely' because he is practically family. I know what I am. I'm the girl with the strange eyes and

ghastly hair," she snarled, motioning to her head with a humorless laugh. "It's like looking at a ghost, right? I've dealt with teasing since I was a girl, and I don't have to put up with it as an adult."

She looked around and felt the pity that radiated from her friends in waves. She pushed past Thad and stormed through the back doors, running as fast as she could.



Thad stared after Winnie as she fled the tavern, the shock of her words still coursing through him. *She thought he was mocking her last night.*

How do the people here think her to be anything but gorgeous? He felt a weight pressing down on him as the need to protect her crashed through him.

"I told her she was beautiful last night at the festival. I didn't know she would think I was teasing her," he uttered, turning back to everyone at the bar and hardening his gaze. His voice was lethal when he asked, "How could you all let her believe those things about herself?"

Chazriel stepped forward, his mouth grim. "She's my sister, and I can assure you, we've tried to tell her," he said, giving Thad a rueful look. "But people can be cruel."

Thad glanced at Henry, who ignored the entire exchange while he dug into someone else's dinner after he had finished his own.

He turned his attention back to Chazriel. "Is it safe for her to be in the forest by herself?"

"Yeah, she can hold her own," he chuckled and rubbed the stubble on his chin. "She goes there when she wants to be alone."

He nodded and rounded the bar. "This has been an... *eventful* evening. I think we'll turn in for the night." He grabbed the back of Henry's shirt and hauled him off his stool.

"What's our plan?" Henry threw himself down on Thad's bed and crossed his feet. "Because I know that look, and there's no way you're going

to bed."

"We aren't doing anything," Thad retorted. "I am going to find Winnie."

Henry sat up. "You have no idea where she went. Maybe you should give her space; her brother said she'd be fine."

Thad stalked across the room toward the door. "I know she can handle herself; she almost gutted me the first night we met."

Henry grabbed his stomach and barked out a laugh. "Never thought I'd see the day you let a girl beat you up," he bellowed, his grin widening. "But if any woman could do it, it'd be her."

Thad scowled. "She did *not* beat me up. She almost stabbed me. There is a difference. Besides, I am not worried about her physical wellbeing. You saw her face. She's hurting in here," he said, tapping his heart.

A mixture of anger and grief clawed at his chest as he slammed the door behind him.

He picked up her tracks right away and followed them through the dense trees until he heard grunting and the sound of a sword slicing through the air. He dashed through the brush at an unnatural speed and stumbled into a small circular clearing.

He found Winnie, but she wasn't under attack as he expected. She had not heard him approach and kept going through the same movements his warriors were taught in training.

With a loud grunt, she swung her sword down and sliced a target sack in half. He wanted to watch her like this forever; her pale hair floated like clouds, and her body tightened with each movement.

She walked to a metal box and replaced her sword with a bow and quiver. He took a step, snapping a twig, and she knocked an arrow, whipping around with the weapon trained on his chest.

When she realized it was him, she lowered her bow with a slow breath. "Did you follow me?" Her voice had lost its usual fire and a chasm opened in his chest.

He stood less than a foot from her, but it wasn't close enough. "No, I found you." He reached up and tucked a strand of baby blonde hair behind her ear. "I would never mock you. I meant every word last night."

She searched his eyes, nodding slowly. "OK. Thank you." She walked back to the metal box and deposited her weapons with a clunk.

"What is this place?" he asked, looking around.

Her eyes widened. "It's... it's my training arena." She looked around uncertainly. "Please don't say anything. Only my brother and Luther know about this place."

He had never heard of a woman training, but after watching her in action, it's something he and his generals should discuss. "Who is Luther?"

She heaved a heavy sigh and dropped her arms helplessly. "Luther deGrey. He is a general in the king's battalion. He's in Eridu a lot; you may have met him."

He stilled at the mention of his most trusted general, shocked.

"He found me scaling the walls of the training arena in Anorak," she said, flicking her gaze to his. "I was attacked when I was thirteen. If not for the town's blacksmith, Clarence, I would have been... I would have been assaulted, probably raped, and maybe even killed."

Blood rushed through his ears in a deafening roar. It was taking all his self-control not to freeze the entire forest and blast the village to pieces.

He managed to force his voice into an icy calm. "Who tried to hurt you? Tell me, *now*."

Her eyes flared. "They're dead. Clarence slit their throats." She rushed to add, "Please don't tell anyone. I do not want Luther or Clarence being punished, and I don't want to stop fighting. My mother would never allow it," she said, her eyes pleading.

He stepped close enough to feel her breath on his chest and ran a finger down her cheek. "I would never punish them. They deserve to be *honored*." She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. He lowered his head, mere inches from her mouth. "Your secret is safe with me."

Her eyes jerked to his, and he slammed his lips to hers. This kiss was not like the first one. This kiss was desperate and hungry because he *needed* her. Cool electricity hummed through him with every stroke of her delicious tongue.

He hoisted her up and carried her across the clearing, their mouths moving in tandem. He pressed her back against the trunk of a tree and leaned into her, his hips pressing into hers. Her skirts fell away on the sides, revealing two slits he had not known were there. He looked at her bare leg and back at the sheepish grin on her face.

She lifted a shoulder. "Easier to run."

Her words fanned the flames of his desire, and he slid a hand slowly up her silky thigh. He looked at her, the intensity of the moment electrifying the air.

A silent question passed between them, and she whispered, "Take me, Thad. I was only ever yours to take, anyway."

He claimed her mouth again, and his wandering hands skimmed under her underwear and found her wet and wanting. He ran a thumb over her center, and her breath caught as her head lolled to the side. He sat her feet on the ground and worked the scrap of cloth down her legs with one hand, his other still circling her clit.

She pushed his hand away and tore at his trousers. He hurriedly lifted her again, and she wrapped her legs around his waist once more. Moving the middle of her dress to the side, he aligned himself with her entrance and paused.

Her eyes locked with his, and she whispered against his lips, "Yes."

His restraint snapped, and he pushed into her in one stroke. All at once, the world stopped as invisible sparks surged around them. Her gasp echoed through the air, and her wide eyes met his.

He began to move slowly inside of her, melding them into one. He had never felt anything like it, and her moans were sending him over the edge. He drove into her harder and faster to chase their releases, and they climaxed together, both shouting with ecstasy.

Still inside of her, he rested his forehead on hers, wondering how he'd fought this for so long. "That was... incredible," he rasped.

When they pulled apart and dressed, he had never felt lighter as he watched her smooth her hair back.

"Is it always like that?" she asked, turning to him.

He froze mid-button and looked at her. "Was that your first time?" he asked in disbelief.

She touched her hair lightly, and her already flushed cheeks turned a deeper shade of red. "Yes."

Two things happened at once: a thrill ran through him at the thought of her being *completely* his, and he realized he took her virginity against a gods-damned tree.

He closed the distance between them and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. "It's never been like that before, but it will be from now on, because

you are *mine*."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Winnie woke up feeling deliciously sore and as light as a feather. She replayed the night before, wondering if it had been a dream. Thad said she was his, and he *claimed* her. She could still feel his scorching touch under her skirts, and a shiver ran down her spine. She had never felt that type of pleasure before and didn't know if it was because of him or if that's just how sex usually was.

She dressed in a hurry and ran into the tavern. Her shoulders drooped when she realized Thad was not there, and she sulked her way into the kitchen.

"Good morning, deary. Why do you look like someone closed down Annie's Bakery?" Suki asked, eyeing her up and down.

She shrugged. "Just tired."

Her mother started scooping food onto plates. "You better liven up; the inn's full this week."

She backed through the swinging doors and almost ran headfirst into Edwin. "Oop! Sorry, I didn't see you there."

He moved aside, holding the door for her. "No worries. How are you today? You seemed pretty upset last night."

She winced, remembering the scene at the bar. She had fled like a child after yelling at her friends. "I shouldn't have acted like that. It was childish. Forgive me?"

He took a plate from her and sat at the bar. "There was never anything to forgive you for." He shot her a handsome smile and dug into his food.

The afternoon was uneventful other than Emmy demanding to know if she needed to kick anyone's ass for making her cry. Winnie assured her

that all was well, but she didn't seem to believe her.

Chaz walked into the tavern in regular trousers and a white button shirt in place of his usual fighting leathers.

Winnie blanched at the sight. "Why are you dressed like that in the middle of the day?"

He chuckled. "I thought you and I could go into the village today to collect supplies for the crazy lady in the kitchen." Her face scrunched in question, and he shook his head. "Don't give me that look. Let's go."

Keeping pace with Chaz's horse that pulled the wagon, she leaned her head back, letting the sunlight coat her face. "OK, spill. Why are you skipping training to help me do something I am perfectly capable of doing on my own?"

Her brother squinted into the distance. "I just want to make sure you're OK. I've never seen you that upset, and..." His voice caught, and he swallowed before continuing, "And I should be there more to make sure you're taken care of. That's my job as your older brother."

She sniffed and wiped her nose, determined not to look like a blubbering idiot. "You're one of the only people who has always been there for me." She shrugged. "Sure, I have people in my life that care for me, but it's always been you and me since day one."

He fake-coughed. "Enough talk about feelings. Let's get these potatoes so we can snag a few goblets of wine before heading back."

He shot a mischievous grin before he kicked his horse into a gallop, not caring that the wagon was about to explode from the speed.



Thad tried to hide his smirk as Winnie bounced on her toes. "Thank you, thank you, thank you! Chaz never lets me go with him!" she said. "He took off part of his training yesterday, so I know he'll be there today. He may make me leave." A little of her excitement fizzled out.

Henry and Thad were going to check out the warriors in the training arena and had invited her to join them.

Thad had *hoped* this would make her happy, and judging by her reaction, it had been the right call. He warmed at her excitement. "Will Suki be looking for you at all?" He paused. "Now that I think about it, I rarely see her except when she's cooking."

She waved him off. "She cooks the food and then stays in her room most of the time. Occasionally, she goes into town for a new book." She heads for the door and says over her shoulder, "Don't feel sorry for her, though. Her room is as big as the other three put together and done up like her own little palace. Not a bad place to spend time."

When they arrived at the training facility, he surveyed the arena appreciatively. For a small village, it was impressive. Not as big as the headquarters in Eridu, but still formidable.

Inside of the wooden doors, there was a hallway that encircled the entire sparring ring. Doors dotted the corridor, and beyond them were rooms with weapons covering the walls. The weapons rooms had gates that rose by a chain system that led into the expansive arena.

Behind the arena was a monstrous courtyard surrounded by the same stone walls. It was rectangular in shape and large enough to fit the entire regiment. The courtyard is where they run drills, and the arena is where they fight.

Winnie pointed to the wall between the arena and courtyard. "That's where I'd sit to watch."

He smiled down at her. "Even then, they couldn't keep you contained."

They met with Luther's second in command, Brandol, a slight man with severe features. Thad had sent word using his royal seal to allow the two visiting warriors from Eridu to observe and join training if they so desired.

"We're here from the Eridu regiment. King Thaddeus said he would send word of our arrival," he said to the man.

Brandol nodded. "He did. It's a pleasure to have you, gentlemen." He eyed Winnie. "You've brought a woman?"

Thad's eyes narrowed. "King Thaddeus instructed you to indulge our every need, did he not?"

The man bristled. "Yes, but-"

Thad held up a hand to cut him off. "We need her to train with us today. No further questions."

"Of course. Right this way," Brandol mumbled, leading them into the courtyard. "Attention, men. This is Thad Greenwich and Henry Ashdown from the king's personal regiment." He paused, "and their female companion. You will do as they ask."

Some of the warriors regarded them with curiosity, while others paid them no mind. Chazriel emerged from the mass of men, looking furious.

"What is she doing here?" he demanded, pointing at Winnie.

"Don't talk about me as if I'm not here," she snapped. "I'm joining you today."

Thad smirked and crossed his arms. "You heard her. The king has given us approval to do as we please. If she wants to participate in training, she will do so."

Chazriel's face was scarlet, and the vein in his temple throbbed. "You cannot be serious, Winnie. What if someone tells Mother?"

She fisted her hands at her side. "Then she finds out. I am an adult, Chaz. I can fight if I want to."

He closed his eyes and pressed his lips together before throwing his hands in the air. "Fine." He motioned for them to follow and mumbled, "Just skip the horse training this afternoon."

"What's wrong with horse training?" Henry asked, looking between the two siblings.

Her face reddened. "I'm not the best at sparring on horseback. I don't have trouble with the fighting part, but I always get hurt if I'm knocked off." She shrugged. "It's not like I'll ever actually go into battle."

Chazriel smirked at her over his shoulder. "If you insist on doing this, then show them what a Hayward can do."

She ran through the drills as if she had trained with the warriors since birth. Pride swelled in Thad's chest as the men around her watch in astonishment.

"Damn, she's good," Henry said. "I wonder if she can fight or if Luther only lets her run drills."

He had not told Henry about the night in the woods and wondered how he knew she was training with Luther.

Before he could ask, Winnie stomped over. "I heard that, Ashdown. I'll have you know I could spar with anyone here." She motioned her dagger wildly behind her.

Henry's eyebrows raised. "Impressive."

Chazriel stalked to the three of them, along with Edwin. Edwin ignored Thad and Henry and turned to Winnie. "You look good out there. I didn't know you were secretly running drills with your brother."

Her eyes darted to Chazriel, and Thad realized her brother had to explain away her skill without throwing Luther into the fire.

"It's not just drills. He's taught me everything," she bragged.

A young warrior, who did not look to be a day over twenty, scoffed beside them. "You might look pretty waving that sword, but you wouldn't stand a chance against one of our men."

"I could best you," she growled.

Thad started in alarm. Training with Luther and Chazriel was one thing but going against a trained warrior was another. He would have to kill them if they hurt her, and that might blow his cover.

He placed a hand on her arm and bent to whisper in her ear, but Chazriel spoke first.

"Meet us in the arena. When she wins, you owe her an apology."

The boy laughed and nudged the warrior next to him. "I'll enjoy watching you eat crow, Hayward." He turned to Winnie and added, "You too, cotton-top."

Henry lunged and grabbed the boy by his shirt. "If you want to challenge her, then challenge her. But if I ever hear you call her anything other than her name again, I will put a dagger through your tongue." He released the boy and turned toward Winnie. "Let's go get you ready."

Thad rounded on the trio. "Are you three insane? She can't fight trained warriors."

Winnie looked like she'd been slapped, and Chazriel smirked before saying, "Just wait and see, pretty boy. You're in for a treat." Thad could only look at him in disbelief.

Edwin stepped forward. "I have to agree with Thad. This seems like a bad idea. Lachlan isn't going to go easy on her, not after Henry embarrassed him in front of the others."

"Good," she snarled and pushed past them.

Chazriel shrugged as Henry bit back a smile and followed her into the arena.

As Lachlan and Winnie readied, Thad sized the boy up. He was young, sturdy, and about Henry's height but much broader. He wondered how bad it would look to freeze his own warrior to death.

Others had begun to trickle in from the courtyard to watch the spectacle, and he noticed many of them passing coins between each other, presumably placing bets. He had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from telling them to get out of his sight.

"Lachlan, is it? Would you prefer daggers or swords?" Winnie asked smugly. Her confidence was something Thad was not used to seeing from her, and he liked it *very* much.

Lachlan bellowed out a laugh and turned to his friends. "I'm sure a sword is a little too heavy for you, *Winnie*," he spat and glared at Henry. "But I will let you choose."

She gave him a tight-lipped smile. "Swords it is," she quipped, walking to Chazriel, taking a weapon from him.

Edwin stood by Thad with his arms crossed. "For the record, I think this is a terrible idea." Concern wrinkled his forehead as his eyes tracked her movements.

Thad did not like how he was looking at her, but it was nice to know he wasn't the only sane person here. He turned his attention back to the ring when Chazriel announced the rules.

A killing blow position ends the match. Thad's blood began to hum as he watched Lachlan crouch into a predatory stance.

Chazriel dropped his arm, and Lachlan charged Winnie. She flourished her sword and twirled faster than Thad thought was possible, blocking him on the downstroke before pushing him back and retreating a few steps. Her eyes were narrowed in disciplined focus, and her breathing was steady.

Lachlan charged again, anticipated her speed, and faked to the left, swinging his sword down to the right. She ducked and rolled beneath his arm before popping up behind him and bringing her sword down toward his side. He twisted and blocked her without a second to spare, and they chopped the blades relentlessly, the clanging of the metal echoing through the silent arena.

Thad was amazed at Winnie's skill, and now he understood why Chazriel had no qualms with her sparring. She was going to win this match, of that he was sure. Watching her fight was like watching a river cut through a mountain: smooth and unyielding.

Lachlan and Winnie backed away from each other, chests heaving. The boy looked murderous when she gave him a feral smile. Something about his demeanor set Thad on edge; it seemed this was no longer a simple spar to him.

He charged her with a roar and tried to ram her with his shoulder. She turned out of the way, but he managed to clip her side, sending her tumbling to the ground. He swung and stabbed his sword down toward her stomach, but she rolled away and climbed to her feet, her face determined.

Thad went on high alert. If she had not moved out of the way, Lachlan would not have been able to stop his sword in time. He would have killed her, and that is not how sparring works. As soon as she was on her feet, Lachlan flipped his sword around, grabbed the blade, and slammed a murder stroke directly into her temple with the pommel of his sword.

The four men were moving now, but before they could get to the ring, she had kicked Lachlan's feet from under him and held the point of her sword to his throat.

She pushed the point hard enough to draw blood. "Checkmate." She lifted her blade and smeared the blood across his cheek and pointed to her head with her free hand. "Now we match," she said and held out a hand.

He swatted her away, clambered to his feet, cursing, and stomped out of the arena. Murmurs of appreciation echoed through the men on the sidelines, and a few congratulated her on the win.

Thad had never been so aroused and murderous at the same time. He couldn't decide if he wanted to chase Lachlan down and impale him with his bare hand or whisk Winnie away to rip her clothes off with his teeth.

Edwin scoffed in disbelief. "Wow, Winnie. I had no idea. That was sexy as hell."

Her cheeks warmed, and Thad's blood boiled.

Chazriel stepped in and pushed Edwin's shoulder. "Don't ever call my sister sexy again, or I'll spoon-feed you your balls."

Thad knew he liked Chazriel.

Winnie met his gaze and smiled triumphantly. She lifted onto her toes and whispered against his ear, "Don't ever underestimate my skill

again, Mr. Greenwich." He grabbed her arm to lead her away. "Where are we going?" she laughed.

His voice was husky as he growled, "Home."



Winnie was still riding the high of her win at the arena yesterday and the way Thad ripped her clothes off when they got back to his room.

Emmy stuck her head through the door, interrupting her thoughts. "Someone is asking for you, Winnie."

She caught Emmy's wicked grin and knew it was Thad. When she rushed through the swinging doors, she found him leaning on the end of the bar. His hair was mussed, and his shirt was snug against his muscles, making her mouth water.

He pushed off the bar and approached her in one long stride. "Hello, hellcat," he murmured.

She felt a blush creep into her cheeks and fought the urge to fan herself. "Hello."

Grabbing her hand, he pulled her to the back courtyard and picked her up to kiss her. She pushed her fingers through his hair and took everything he gave her before he pulled back with a smile.

"I missed you today," he whispered for only them to hear.

She shrugged. "I'd hoped to see you at lunch, but you didn't show."

His piercing gaze never left hers. "I had some business to sort out with Henry, but I'm here now." He ran a hand down her back and over the swell of her hips. "Come with me to the clearing. There's something I want to show you."

She hoped it was whatever was under his clothes, but she kept her mouth shut and nodded.

They stepped into the familiar circle, and she jarred to a stop when she saw his horse standing at the tree line. "What is this?"

He pulled her to the massive stallion and rubbed his flank. "It's my horse, Captain. You remember him, don't you?"

She set her jaw and put a hand on her hip. "I know that, you ass. What is he doing *here*?"

He grinned. "Have Luther or Chaz ever taught you how to fall from a horse safely?"

She blinked at him, wondering if she had misheard. "Why would I ever want to fall from a horse?"

"No one *wants* to fall from a horse, but if someone tries to fight you on one, I want to know you can safely fall without getting hurt."

She chewed her bottom lip and tentatively approached the beast. "OK, I'll bite. But if this is some trick for him to buck me off, I'll cut your throat."

His smile was devilishly handsome as he said, "Just get on." She stepped into the stirrup and threw her leg over the saddle, and he stepped back. "Now fall off," he commanded.

She stared at him like he had grown a second head. "Aren't you supposed to teach me how first?"

He rolled his lips to hold in his laugh. "I need to see if you have any inkling of how; otherwise, I won't know how to instruct you."

She sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. "Alright, give me space."

He gave her a wide berth, and she silently counted to three before leaning sideways out of the saddle. Her body stayed rigid the entire way down until she smacked the ground. He ran to her and checked her for injuries, his eyes alight with amusement. Her arm throbbed, but it was nothing serious.

Trying not to laugh, he said, "You fell like a statue."

Her eyes turned to slits, and she gritted her teeth. "You told me to fall. I fell."

He lost the war and doubled over laughing. "I meant fall and try to catch yourself. Not fall like a rock." He had tears seeping from his eyes, and she punched him lightly in the gut.

He bit his bottom lip to hide the smile that tried to break free. "Let's try this again. This time, try to actually catch yourself."

With one more glare, she mounted the horse and counted to three. She leaned to the right and tried to twist her back to break her fall. When

she hit the ground, all the air was knocked from her lungs.

His head poked into her line of sight. "That was better, but still terrible." He grabbed her under the arms and hauled her up, inspecting her for injuries again.

She pawed at his hands and brushed the dirt from her dress. "I'm fine. Stop pecking like a hen. Move." She stomped to the horse and mounted again.

Before she could throw herself into the dirt, he put a hand on her thigh to stop her. "This time, instead of twisting on your back, fall headfirst and tuck your head under to roll when you hit the ground."

She nodded, took a breath, and dove from the saddle. She must have flipped her legs too hard because they flew over her head with blinding speed.

She flipped through the air and landed on her back with a loud thud, knocking the wind from her lungs once more. She rolled over with a groan, positive she had punctured a lung.

He hauled her up and covered his mouth. His shoulders shook with silent laughter, and she kicked his shin, making him laugh harder.

"I'm going to cut your tongue out," she threatened.

Before she could mount again, he stopped her. "Clearly, we need to practice rolling on the ground first. You do know how to roll, don't you?"

She flung unintelligible insults at him, moved a few steps away, leaned forward, and rolled with her shoulder.

He walked to her and squatted on the ground. "You need to put your hands down to break your fall and push yourself into a roll." He stood and moved to the side. "Like this." When his hands hit the ground, his elbows bent before he tucked his neck and rolled smoothly into a ball.

She studied his form on his second demonstration and climbed to her feet. "I think I've got it." She mounted for what she hoped was the last time and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and dove from the saddle.

She let her arms absorb the fall and rolled to the ground in perfect form. Her eyes went wide, and her jaw fell open. "I did it!" She jumped to her feet and flung herself into his arms. "I actually did it!"

He pulled them apart and smoothed her hair back. "I knew you would."

She pulled his head to hers and showed him just how appreciative she was.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Thad stood in line at Annie's Bakery and scanned the pastries in the display case. He had to send a message to his council to check on things and wanted to grab a treat for Winnie and Henry before he returned to the tavern. The bakery must be a favorite in Anorak because the long line was out the door.

He leaned against the cool stone of the building and surveyed the busy street to people-watch. Behind him, he heard two women whispering. Usually, he would not care about petty gossip, but something they said caught his attention.

"She must have paid him to protect her like a guard. There's no other explanation of why a handsome man would beat Gregory and Tomsen bloody for that freak," one of the women said with disgust.

The other cackled like a hag. "She looks like a wraith. What man would want a woman who looks so ghastly?"

"Truly! And did you hear that she fought like a brute at the training arena yesterday?" the other woman asked, scandalized.

The other gasped. "No! How humiliating! What poor soldier had to spar with her? I am sure her brother forced him to take it easy on her, not that she deserves that mercy. It would be a favor to put her out of her misery."

Their voices faded out, and Thad's vision began to spot. He had to remind himself that he could not gut-punch a woman for gossip, but gods, did he want to. His chest burned, and he tried to calm himself enough to formulate a plan.

He would not allow them to speak of Winnie in that manner, but he needed to play it right. If he simply berated them, they would spread more

heinous rumors. No, it needed to frighten them into never speaking her name again.

Casually he spun toward the two and gave a lazy smile. "Hello, ladies. Beautiful day, isn't it?"

Both women's eyes went wide as they took him in. He knew he was considered handsome thanks to the gods' divinity that pumped through his veins, and he winked.

The taller of the two giggled and tossed her hair over her shoulder. "It really is. I've never seen you before. Are you passing through?" She batted her lashes obnoxiously, and he had to stop himself from rolling his eyes.

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Yes and no. I'm from Eridu but will be here until Winter." He took a step closer. "Are either of you ladies spoken for?" He flashed another grin.

They traded a glance and shook their heads. The hair flipper placed her hand on his elbow with a syrupy smile. "Why? Are you interested?"

He bit his lower lip and stepped closer, placing a hand on her cheek. Looking her directly in the eye, he pushed a thin layer of frost over the delicate skin of her face and neck. Not enough to hurt, just enough to show his power.

Both girls squeaked and jumped in alarm with wide eyes. "I am King Thaddeus of Winter. I'm sure you've heard of me?"

Both women nodded, and the taller one smiled coyly, making him smirk. "Good. Then you will understand how important what I am about to say is and the consequences you will face if you disobey me."

They traded a nervous glance, and his voice turned virulent. "If you ever speak ill of Winnie Hayward again, I will see to it that no man in all of Rodina will give you the time of day." The color drained from their faces as he looked between them. "You think her to be a freak, but I know her to be beautiful and fierce. One word about her and both of your lives will be destroyed. Do I make myself clear?"

The second woman, who had been quiet up until now, stammered, "Y-yes, your majesty."

He smiled coldly. "Good. I suggest you do not allow any of your companions to speak of her either." He tossed his head behind him. "Go."

The girls scurried away, and he stared after them, disgusted. *He would be damned if anyone insulted the woman he loved.* He froze at his

thoughts.

She was his, but was that love?



The king smiled pleasantly and approached the Longspeak's home in Eridu, and their maid let him in with a stunned expression. He had met the family at the Spring Gala and was pleasantly surprised to learn that their youngest daughter had been chosen as the next Winter Queen Regent.

If the gods existed, he would consider himself blessed. The gods abandoned them long ago and left them to their own devices. No king had heard from them since the beginning of Rodina, and he doubted they existed at all. He was certain the past kings and queens never ascended; they simply died when their heirs stole their power.

To marry a *compeer* was not a ticket to the heavens; it was a death wish. *Fools*.

Anton Longspeak greeted him in the foyer with an eager expression. "Your grace," he said, bowing low. "To what do we owe this honor?"

The king smiled and motioned to the formal sitting area. "If we may? I have news for your daughter, Seren."

Anton bowed again. "Of course, your grace. I'll fetch her now."

The man re-entered the room, followed by a beautiful blonde-haired woman. The king trailed his eyes down her body with appreciation. Perhaps after she did his bidding, he could take her for his bride and see what she was hiding under that skirt.

He smiled. "Seren, you look as beautiful as ever," he said and kissed her hand with a slight bow. "Please have a seat. I have a message I was asked to deliver for King Thaddeus."

At the mention of the Winter King, her eyes grew wide. She moved to the settee and sat with her hands folded politely. The noble children were taught well.

"Thaddeus has requested your company. As you know, he travels during his off-seasons."

"Yes, your grace. He told me as much. I was under the impression that I would not see him until the Winter Solstice," she said excitedly.

He grinned slyly. "It seems you've made quite the impression. He asked that I send you to him so you two may become more acquainted. You see, the conduit brides are kept a close secret for safety reasons, which is why he asked me to relay his intentions."

She could not contain her joy. "Yes, of course. I can leave at once, no matter how far."

He suppressed his laughter. She was filled with such eagerness and stupidity. "He's in Anorak, a small village six hours south from here by carriage. If you leave before sunrise, you should make it by the lunch hour." She nodded eagerly. "He's staying in a small tavern and inn called Hayward's Place on the southside of the village. He should be there when you arrive."

He stood with a slight bow. "I must be on my way now. Kingdom business waits for no one."

Seren and Anton stood quickly with bows, curtsies, and thanks. The king gave a small wave before he stepped into his carriage with a satisfied smile.

He knew the Winter King's naive *compeer* would be devastated when she discovered he was already betrothed to another.

His men would have no problem extracting her tomorrow tonight.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"When are you going to tell her, Thad?" Henry demanded, standing across Thad's room, looking like a grumpy goblin.

Thad sat on the edge of the bed and put his head in his hands. "I don't know." He dropped his arms and met Henry's gaze. "I'm still not completely sure."

Henry looked ready to cut his head off and feed it to the wolves. "How can you not be sure? You said yourself you are drawn to her. That there's *literally* a spark when you touch."

Thad's restraint snapped. "And I also thought Lana was the love of my life and look how that turned out."

"Did you feel the same things with Lana? Or were you just a boy in love?" he spat back.

He rubbed his hand down his face. "What's the difference?"

Henry let out an incredulous laugh. "Do you think you don't love Winnie?" He shook his head. "Did you love Lana more than you care for Winnie? Help me understand. Because if she is your *compeer*, you need to be married as soon as possible to protect her."

"I don't know," Thad said weakly.

Henry pushed from the doorway. "Yes, you do."

The night was winding down as the guests wandered upstairs to their rooms. Thad sat at the bar and stared into his empty mug, waiting for Winnie to finish closing. Henry and Emmy went into the village to drink at a pub, allowing him to have more alone time with Winnie.

She pecked his cheek as she passed by and said, "What do you want to do tonight?"

His eyes darkened with desire as he thought of everything he wanted to do to her but swallowed his words. "I thought we could go up to my room and talk." He pulled at a string on his trousers before he returned his eyes to hers. "I want to *really* know you."

She moved around the bar, wrapped her arms around his neck, and murmured, "I want to know you too." She parted his lips with her tongue in a sensual kiss before she pulled back and led him up the stairs.

They laid in his bed, fully clothed, and looked at the ceiling, hand in hand. He asked her questions about her life growing up (wonderful), what she liked to do (fight and sing), what her favorite color was (blue), and any other questions he could think of. They laughed and teased as the night wore on, and his chest had swollen with emotion.

He turned on his side, arm tucked under his head, and memorized her profile.

She cut her eyes to him with a laugh. "Why are you staring at me like you want to wear my skin?"

He released a low chuckle. "Well, it *is* very pretty skin." He ran a finger over her smooth leg that shone between the slit of her skirts. "Who wouldn't want it?"

Her entire body shook with laughter, and she turned on her side to face him. "What did you mean when you said I was yours?" she asked, her tone light.

His gaze bounced between her silvery eyes, eyes the color of a winter storm. The thought sent a bolt of electricity through him, and his body jerked.

Why had he never made that connection before? He leaned back to take her in. Her eyes, her hair, her fair skin...she was the embodiment of winter, an ice queen personified. *Compeers* in the past had not been colored to match their kingdoms, but she was. *She was.*

He had been so *blind*. How could he ever think her to be anything other than his True Queen? He had never felt this way about Lana, and he knew that now. The boyish love he felt for her was shallow compared to the sea of emotion coursing through him at this very moment. How he had ever confused the two, he will never know.

Heat rose from his chest to his throat as he took a shuddering breath. She was still waiting for an answer, so he leaned forward and pulled her lips

to his. "It means that I love you, Winnie Hayward, and I always will."

Her breath stilled. She pulled back and searched his eyes before she confessed, "I love you too, Thad. I'll love you until my dying breath." She laid her head on his shoulder and sighed. "Even then, I'll love you from the stars."

"Even from the stars," he murmured.

His need for her was all-consuming, and he began to kiss her with abandon. She was his, and he was hers. He sat up and ripped his shirt and trousers off. Seeing his intentions, she removed her dress and stood in front of him in her underthings.

Embers sparked through his body as he pulled her between his legs and kissed the delicate skin on her stomach. Slowly, he slid his fingers under her chest band and pulled it over her head, freeing her breasts. He took one in his mouth, making her gasp and clutch at his hair.

His name escaped her lips in a whisper as he kissed his way down her body, relishing in the taste of her skin. He slid the thin fabric of her underwear down her hips, allowing her to step free. He drank in her nakedness and thanked the gods for sending her to him.

Planting a hand on her back to steady her, he hooked one of her legs over his shoulder and brought his mouth to her center. He licked the length of her, and she moaned, grabbing at his shoulders to steady herself, her nails digging into his flesh. He lapped up her arousal with the thirst of a dying man, savoring the scent of her. Slowly, he added a finger, then two, and hooked them as he pumped. He felt her legs begin to tremble, and her grip tightened as he sucked her clit relentlessly.

He drove her to release, and her body sagged against his. Standing, he laid her on the bed and climbed over her. Aligning himself with her entrance, he searched her face for permission.

Her eyes shone as she nodded, and he slowly sheathed himself inside of her with a groan. He didn't want her fast and hard; he wanted to relish in the feel of her. He wanted to make love to his future wife.

As they moved together, he lowered himself to her ear and said, "I love you. Even if you shatter my heart like glass, I'll love you still."



Winne pressed her body closer into the warmth of Thad's chest while he traced lazy circles on her stomach. She did not understand what was happening, but he had said *she was his* and spent the last two weeks wooing her. Last night, he worked tirelessly, *several* times, proving it and said he loved her. She had never felt more beautiful or whole in her entire life.

He propped himself up on his elbow and leaned forward, pressing a kiss to her shoulder. "How'd you sleep?"

She twisted her body to look at his strong, stubbled jaw and blue eyes that sent heat straight to her core. "Best sleep I've had in years."

A low laugh rumbled through his chest. "Me too. You're my own personal sleeping drought." He kissed her again before he patted her thigh and sat up. "As much as I'd like to stay in bed all day, your mother will burn this place down if you're not in the kitchen by lunch." He stood and began pulling on his trousers.

That reminder jolted her into action. She had not thought about her mother seeing her come from his room. "I'll never be able to sneak downstairs," she said, muttering a string of inappropriate words that would make a warrior blush. She grabbed her dress from the floor and examined it for stains. "Think she'll realize this is the same dress from yesterday?"

He smirked. "I love it when you swear, hellcat. You know your mother better than I do; do *you* think she'll notice?" He yanked his shirt over his head and bent to grab her underwear from the floor, stuffing them into his pocket.

She sighed. "Yes, she will. I'll tell her I slept in the woods." She looked furtively at him. "That lashing would be better than the one I'd get if she knew where I really was."

He wrapped his arms around her naked body. "You're an adult. You can do as you please."

She twisted from his grasp with a laugh and pulled on her clothes. "She would be more upset that I slept with a *guest*. She probably prays to the gods every night that I'll finally take up with a man."

She kissed him goodbye and rushed to her room.

Winnie scurried from the hall toward the bar after changing clothes, and Emmy gave her a knowing look. "You weren't in your room last night."

"Keep your voice down," Winnie whispered. "I managed to change without Mother seeing, and if she finds out, she'll have my teeth."

"OK, fine, but you're telling me every detail when she leaves," Emmy whisper-yelled after her as she hurried to the kitchen.

Thad and Henry were laughing with Emmy while Winnie leaned over the bar in front of Francis.

He eyed her and smiled around his mug. "Someone's in a good mood today."

She rolled her eyes and a blush crept up her neck. "Mind your nose, Fran." She lowered her voice. "But if you must know, Thad and I are *together*. We've kept it quiet, but I don't know if I can anymore." She almost clapped with giddiness but refrained.

The old man perked up and gave her the biggest smile she had ever seen grace his face. He reached a hand across the bar with tears in his eyes. "It's about time, lass. I knew you'd find each other."

She smiled and patted the old man's hand. "I never thought I'd find anyone. Especially not someone as wonderful as Thad Greenwich."

Surprise marred Francis' expression. "Thad *Greenwich*?" He glanced toward Thad before he turned back to her with a solemn nod.

What other Thad would she be referring to? Confused, she straightened and made her way down the bar. Henry looked at her with a sly smile, and she swatted at his arm with her rag.

A beautiful noblewoman stepped through the door, and Emmy greeted her with a smile. "Hello, miss. Are you looking for a room?"

The woman shook her head and seemed to search each table, looking for someone. Her eyes lit up when she spotted Thad and Henry at the bar top.

Winnie looked between the two and wondered if they knew each other, a queasy feeling settling in her gut. Thad saw her expression and turned toward the woman, bolted out of his seat, and turned to Henry in alarm.

Henry, having seen the woman, gave Winnie a look of regret, and her stomach dropped.

Thad started toward her. "Winnie, please under-"

"Thaddeus! I'm so glad I found you. I've missed you!" The woman said, cutting him off as she threw her arms around his neck with familiarity.

Winnie felt like a horse had kicked her in the chest. "Thaddeus?" She asked and looked to Henry. "Who's Thaddeus? What is she talking about?"

The woman released Thad and looked at her with a kind smile. "King Thaddeus." She motioned to Thad. "My betrothed."

Winnie felt her heart drop out of her body and her face leach of color. Tears welled in her eyes as Thad met her gaze with desperation. Surely the woman was mistaken.

Henry rounded the bar and reached for her, but she backed away. "Don't!" she screamed, her eyes still locked with Thad's. "King Thaddeus? Betrothed?" Her ears rang, and hot tears threatened to spring free. "Is this true?" She looked from Thad to Henry and back again.

Both men stared at her in silence.

She covered her mouth to stop the sob that was trying to escape her chest. "You're the king and *engaged*? You...you lied?" She shook her head in disbelief, and the pain of betrayal ripped her apart. "About everything. You lied." The hurt rolled off her in waves, and she thought she would drown in it.

She thought he loved her.

Francis was staring daggers at Thad. "I thought he told you last night. I thought that's what you meant when he said you were his." He slammed his mug down with such force that she jumped.

He knew who Thad was?

Emmy stood ramrod straight with her eyes trained on Francis, the two exchanging unspoken words.

Thad looked at the old man quickly before he turned his gaze back to Winnie. "Please calm down. I can explain everything..."

"What in the hell is going on? Why is my sister in hysterics?" Chaz's eyes were murderous when he charged into the room.

Winnie looked at her brother. "Did you know too?" Her lip trembled. "Did you?"

He looked around, bewildered. "Know what?"

Seren stepped forward. "My apologies, but I'm very confused." She smiled politely and tilted her head. "Did you all not know that he was your king?" She looked around incredulously. "And why are you all speaking to him with such disrespect?" She gently placed a hand on Thad's back as if offering support. "You should bow to your king."

Chaz whirled on Thad. "You're *who*?" he asked before turning to Henry. "And who are you, the King of Spring?" he said with heavy sarcasm.

Henry's voice was quiet. "I'm the head of Thad's personal guard."

Winnie choked out another sob. "Henry, how could you lie to me?"

Seren tinkered out a laugh. "Truly, do you all never leave your village?" she bristled. "Him, the Spring King? How silly. That would be King Silas. In fact, he is the one who sent me." She tipped her face to Thad with a smile. "He said Thaddeus requested my company so we could get better acquainted before our wedding."

Thad finally snapped his gaze to hers. "Silas sent you?" His gaze was lethal as he turned to Henry.

Had Thad requested her company here? Winnie backed away. "Please excuse me, *your majesty*."

"Winnie, don't-" Thad started toward her.

Chaz grabbed him by the shoulder and growled, "You are my king, but if you touch my sister after what you've done, I will rip you limb from limb."

She turned and ran through the back doors and into the woods. She ran until her lungs burned and her skin was slick with sweat. She stopped to breathe, and a sob ripped from her chest.

"Winnie?" She turned with her dagger drawn. Edwin sat atop his horse with his hands in the air. "Easy. It's just me." He dismounted and walked to her. "Why are you crying? Are you hurt?" He began to inspect her body.

She wiped her face with the back of her hand and shook her head. "Can you take me away from here? I can't be here right now," she hiccupped.

He nodded. "Of course. Let's go." He lifted her into the saddle and climbed on behind her, kicking the horse into a trot.



Thad couldn't breathe. "WINNIE!" he bellowed into the forest, turning to Henry with desperation in his eyes. "We have to find her. I have to make her understand," he croaked out.

Chaz shoved him, hard. "The hell you do. Go back to your *fiancé*, your majesty, and leave my family alone."

"Winnie is my fucking *compeer* and my future wife. I *will* find her." Ice formed around Thad's feet, and his breath came out in visible puffs.

Chaz turned to him, anger and confusion blanketing his face. "What the fuck is a *compeer*? She won't be your whore," he spat. "I won't allow it."

Thad slammed him against a tree, and ice cracked across the ground, splitting the trunk.

Before he could say anything, Francis' voice rose from behind them. "She's his mate, Chazriel. His True Queen. She is to rule by his side until they ascend into the heavens."

Thad's chest was heaving as he released Chaz and turned to Francis. "How did you know who I was, and why didn't you say anything? How do you know so much about our history? Who are you really?"

The old man glanced at Henry, who gave him the slightest nod. He released a breath and looked at Thad. "I am one of her guardians."

"Guardian?" Thad and Chaz asked in unison.

Francis stepped forward, his back no longer hunched, his strides no longer slow. "Yes, guardian, and I am not the only one. There is a group of guardians in every kingdom, brought from the Old World and duty-bound by the gods. Our only purpose is to protect the *compeers* and if needed, the kingdoms." He looked apologetic and softened his tone. "We are not allowed to interfere and tell either of you what she is until you accept it yourselves. You must find each other on your own, but we step in if anyone were to try to harm her. We're her protectors."

"We?" Chaz asked.

Thad could not stop staring at Francis in disbelief.

Henry stepped forward. "Yes, *we*."

Thad started and turned to his best friend, stunned. "Henry?"

He nodded. "And others."

"Like me," came Emmy's voice from behind them. She flashed them a devious smile. "It's easy to go undetected when people believe you to be vapid and weak." Francis shot her a look that said, '*not now*,' and she shrugged.

Thad fisted his hair, and Chaz looked like he was going to faint. Thad turned to Henry. "Are there others?"

Henry nodded.

Chaz finally choked out, "What the *fuck*?"

Thad let out a frustrated breath. "We have to find her. I do not want her out there alone. Silas must know what she is and somehow knew who my conduit bride-to-be was. *No one*, outside of a very select few in my kingdom, has that information." A thought occurred to him, and he turned frantically to Henry. "The duchesses. *Fuck!* The duchesses, Henry!"

Henry jolted with panic and turned to Francis and Emmy. "Find the others. Winnie is in danger. *Now*."

Francis and Emmy took off without question, and Thad was shocked at how quickly the old man moved.

He turned to Chaz. "Where is my battalion right now?"

Chaz ran a hand across his jaw. "They should be gathering back at the arena, your majesty."

He nodded. "Tell them they are to scour every inch of this forest and find my bride. Nothing else is more important. *Go*."

Chaz ran toward the tavern, and Thad turned back to Henry. "You should have told me what you were. Not because I am your king, but because we are family."

Henry looked stricken with remorse. "I couldn't. The gods bind us. We cannot tell you who we are until you figured out who she was on your own." He rested his hand on Thad's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I had no choice."

It hurt that Henry had kept something from him, but he understood why. "We need to find Luther."

Henry nodded, then paused. "About Luther..."

Thad pinched the bridge of his nose. "You have got to be kidding me."

Henry shrugged. "You never wondered why your best general wanted to stay in the tiny village of Anorak?"

Thad shook his head. "Come on. We need to figure out what to do about Silas."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Winnie didn't recognize her surroundings the further they rode from the village. She twisted to look at Edwin, who smiled down at her. "I think we can go back now. I can't hide forever."

Something flashed across his face, and his mouth flattened in a grim line. "We're not going back, Winnie."

Her eyes flared. "What do you mean? I must go back. I only needed to get away for a bit."

She watched his face transform into someone she did not recognize. "We're not going back. The king has bigger plans for you."

She scrunched her face in confusion. "Thad? I mean, Thaddeus? What plans? I need to go back; I didn't tell my mother I was leaving."

He tightened his arm around her waist and laughed stiffly. "Thaddeus is not my king. King Silas of Spring is."

Her heart tried to leap out of her chest as fear seized her lungs. She did not understand what he was saying, but she knew she needed to get away as soon as possible. She took stock of the path around her and the saddle under her. She was not strapped down, but Edwin had her in his iron grip. She would have to wait for him to relax his arm before she could jump. She thanked the gods that Thad prepared her for this very situation. *What were the odds?*

It was some time, but eventually, he lifted his arm to scratch his face. The moment she was out of his grasp, she threw herself to the left and used her arms to absorb the fall, rolling across the ground.

He cursed and pulled his horse to a stop, jumping down after her. She shot through the woods, weaving between trees, not daring to look back.

He crashed through the forest like a lumberjack and closed in on her. She looked around frantically for a tree she could climb, but the evergreens were too tall. Stars dotted her vision when he slammed into her from behind and tackled her to the ground.

"Stop fighting me, Winnie, *please*." Pain laced his voice, but she fought harder.

Before he could register her movements, she had her dagger buried in his shoulder. He howled, grabbing at the hilt. He yanked the dagger from his arm and threw it out of reach with a growl.

She tried to kick out from under him, but he reared back and punched her in the face. She thought she heard him whisper, *'I'm sorry,'* before everything faded to black.



As Thad walked up the Winter Palace's grand steps with the others, Henry stopped in his tracks and clutched his chest, groaning in pain. Thad gripped his arm and looked for any sight of blood, finding none. "Are you hurt?"

Henry shook his head and looked to him with a tear rolling down his face. "Winnie," he rasped.

Fear seized Thad's chest, and he grabbed Henry's shirt. "What about her?"

The guardian choked and fought for air. "Something's wrong. We must find her."

Thad cursed and bolted through the palace. "*Get me someone from the Spring court, now!*" He burst through the throne room doors and reared back, hitting the glass sculpture by the entrance. The statue exploded into a thousand pieces, and ice cracked across the floor in every direction. Every step he took fissured the ground as his fury climbed to new levels.

Luther stepped out of the hall and surveyed the destroyed room before turning his calculating eyes to Thad. "Your majesty, you will destroy this entire palace. You need to control your emotions."

He spun on his general. "You were supposed to protect her, and now she's gods know where and could be hurt. I will destroy a mountain to bring her back," he promised, his voice deadly. The temperature in the throne room dropped to near freezing with every fall of his chest.

Luther looked at Henry. "Silas is at the Spring Palace. Rumor through his battalion is that Winter's bride is with him."

Thad steadied his breathing. "Then we're leaving at once."

"Your majesty, he has gathered his battalion to surround the palace. It seems even the citizens of Uruk have taken up arms in anticipation of your retaliation. We have spies in his ranks, and they've agreed to help us sneak into the palace to retrieve her."

"Why would the people of Uruk stand with him when he's kidnapped an innocent woman? Do they not realize he's taken their duchesses as well?" He threw his hands up in exasperation.

Luther sighed, "They adore him, Thaddeus. He's been their ruler for centuries."

He cursed. "Gather every regiment. We march on Spring tonight." He turned on his heel and left the room, ice freezing everything around him.



Francis, Gilda, Emmy, and Clarence strapped weapons to their fighting leathers when a middle-aged man with jet black hair and a tall redheaded woman stepped through the door of the smithy.

"Are you the Winter guardians?" the man asked.

They exchanged a glance, and Clarence stepped forward with his arms crossed. "Who are you?"

The man tipped his head. "I am Gabriel, and this is Landa. We are guardians of Autumn."

The Winter guardians gaped in different stages of awe. Most guardians had not met since brought from the Old World to help keep their identities secret.

Gabriel continued, "There are three more waiting outside. We know where your *compeer* is."

The four Winter guardians straightened, and Clarence advanced on the two intruders. "How would you know that?" he demanded.

The man's voice was steady but low, "Because they also took our king."

Silence filled the small room. Francis stepped forward and reached out a hand. "I am Francis. Gilda, and Emmy," he said, motioning to the women behind him. "And this is Clarence," he said, resting a hand on the blacksmith's shoulder. "Let's ready the horses and get to it."

Gabriel nodded and stepped onto the cobblestone outside. The four Winter guardians followed and nodded to the three others who stood with their arms crossed. A young man with sandy blonde hair named Rogan, a young woman with boyish short hair named Willow, and an older gentleman named Laud.

"He wants your king to believe he's holding her at the palace. He means to distract him as he slips away to complete his ritual," Laud said.

"Where is he keeping them?" Emmy asked as she mounted her horse. "We were about to follow *the pull*, but it's much faster if we know where we're going."

"In a network of caverns in the Halsha Mountains on the edge of the Spring and Winter border," Rogan replied.

Gilda smoothed a hand over her hair. "I know the area. It's rough terrain, but I can get us there. It will not be a quick trek." She turned back to Laud. "What ritual is he trying to perform?"

The Autumn guardians exchanged a harried look. Rogan threw his leg over his saddle and pinned Gilda with a hard stare. "We don't know all the details, but somehow he has learned to siphon residual power from the duchesses."

Emmy gasped. "Then why does he need our *compeer*? She hasn't wed the king yet, and why would he need your king?"

Landa steered her horse next to Emmy's. "That is what we don't know."



Edwin warred with himself as he left Winnie on the floor of her holding cell. He had to do it for the greater good of Spring, and he knew that, but it was still difficult. He has wanted her for the last five years, and once his king was close to his goal, he decided to make her his.

He would have an honorable position once King Silas was the sole ruler of Rodina. He would be able to offer her the life she deserved.

That was impossible now that he knew she was the Winter King's *compeer*. His duty was to his king over everyone else, but it still pained him.

King Silas saved his life when he was a boy. He found Edwin and the other elite guards when they were living on the streets as young children.

They had all been without parents, food, or shelter, and he took them in. He had them trained by the best of his generals, dressed them in the finest clothes, and let them stay in his palace. He was a father to them, and for that, they would die for him.

When he asked them to spy on the other kingdoms, they agreed without hesitation. Edwin's lip curled in disgust, remembering how easy it was to join the Winter battalion's ranks. He moved to a Winter village when he was seventeen and enlisted without problem when he was eighteen. They had been foolish to let anyone in, and now they would pay for their mistake.

King Silas spent the last few centuries learning about guardians by following a Spring guardian he found speaking with his parents years ago. He learned of one Winter guardian's identity from an old Winter villager who always told a story of a young man he'd met years ago that never aged. It had been easy for the king to track him down after that.

When Edwin heard a rumor that the only known guardian of Winter and now, the king's personal guard, had been seen in Anorak with Winnie, his heart plummeted to his feet.

There was only one reason Henry would leave the king's side, and that was to protect the Winter *compeer*.

It had been easy to watch King Silas drain the life of the other duchesses. They were money-hungry sluts who married the kings for elevated status. They easily opened their legs for a meal ticket and a title. They disgusted him, but not Winnie, never her. She was pure and would never sell herself like a common whore.

It made sense for her to be a *compeer*. She was kind and beautiful in an ethereal kind of way that most people did not appreciate. He'd heard the whispers in the village and kept a list of anyone who insulted her. When King Silas ruled all, he had planned to ask permission to execute them for their indiscretions.

He rubbed his eyes. That did not matter anymore. She was Winter's True Queen, and for that, she must die.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Winnie's head pounded when she awoke on a cold stone floor, plunged in darkness. As she pushed herself up, she winced at the pain shooting through her face and neck. She gingerly touched her cheek and felt the crust of dried blood and dropped her hand quickly.

She started running back through her memory and remembered her fight with Edwin. *He'd hit her.* He said he was working for the Spring King and that there were plans for her.

She lifted her head to gauge the situation she was in and if there was a way to escape. She could barely see through the darkness because there was only one small window at the top of the door to let in a slither of faint torchlight.

Once her eyes adjusted to the dark, she realized the cell was made entirely of stone. But not like the stone buildings in Anorak, it was as if Silas carved the very room out of a huge rock.

Her head swam, and her vision blurred. Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried to wish away the pain and nausea. She opened her eyes slowly and tried to reassess the room with a clear head.

She ran through what she knew: it's rock, so she must be in a cave of some sort; the only caves in Rodina that she knew of were in the mountains. *But which mountain range, is the question.*

She released a steady breath to stop her hands from shaking and began to feel her way around the room.

Continuing her room survey, she discovered there was only one tall metal door fitted into the rock with a long skinny window at the very top. There were no other windows or light sources anywhere, and she wondered if she would ever see the light of day again.

She gasped when she approached a figure chained to the wall in the far corner. He sat on the floor with his arms stretched above him in heavy shackles that looked painful.

She quietly leaned closer to get a better look in the low light. The man was beautiful and around her age, with dark, auburn hair and tan skin.

She attempted to gently shake him awake without scaring him. His left eye was swollen, and she guessed he'd had a similar experience to hers. His eyes fluttered open, and he sucked in a startled breath, yanking on his chains and trying to say something. She clamped a hand over his mouth and brought a finger to her lips.

"Shh," she whispered.

His eyes darted around the room, and he gave a quick nod of understanding. When she was sure he wasn't going to freak out, she released his mouth, slowly.

She leaned close to his ear and whispered, "My name is Winnie, and I just woke up too. I was kidnapped and brought here. I do not think we should let them know we are awake yet; we have to whisper. Are you hurt?"

He shook his head and looked around, his face set in a scowl. "Can you help me adjust? This is terribly uncomfortable." She nodded and grabbed him under his arms to pull him up, surprised that his lean, muscular body was so heavy.

He released a sigh of relief and turned back to her. "I'm Archie. Silas had one of his henchmen knock me out while I was sleeping." He inspected his shackles and moved his fingers in a weird motion before he mumbled under his breath.

"Edwin, the man who brought me here, said the Spring King has plans for me." Her face twisted. "Edwin has been close to our family in the Winter kingdom for years...I don't understand it."

Archie studied her with keen, copper eyes. "You're a duchess?"

Her brows almost shot off her face. "No. I've never been married. I'm not even a noble. I work at my family's tavern, and I don't know why he wants me." She situated herself against the wall beside her cellmate and leaned her head back.

He seemed to contemplate her response before he sucked in a breath and snapped his head toward her. "Are you Thaddeus' *compeer*?" He looked around like his brain was putting pieces together. "I'd heard a rumor

the Winter *compeer* had been found. That's the only reason I think he'd have you here."

She chewed the inside of her cheek. "No. I don't think so. I knew King Thaddeus as Thad. I had no idea he was the Winter King, and we..." Her cheeks warmed, and she gulped. "We were together, and he said he loved me. But a woman showed up at the tavern and said he was the king, and they were to be married," she said, sadness tightening her chest. "I was upset and left. That's when Edwin took me."

He listened to her intently, and his voice lost its edge. "He never told you," he murmured and looked away. "Or perhaps he didn't realize." He sighed before turning back to her. "Silas has been siphoning the residual power left in the duchesses of each kingdom. I don't know how; I just know he is. We did not know who was taking the duchesses or what was being done with them at first. I had spies stationed in every kingdom."

"That is how I heard about the Winter *compeer*. Our spies in the Spring Kingdom made a breakthrough, but they could only find out so much because Silas keeps his inner circle very tight. If I could figure out how he is doing it, I could figure out what he wants with us." He leaned his head back against the stone in frustration. "Why would he need me?"

She chewed her lip. "What do you mean 'residual power'?"

He sighed. "When a king marries a conduit bride, there's a blood-bonding ceremony. It allows the king's overflow of power to be...stored, for lack of a better word, in his conduit bride. When the marriage is terminated, a reverse blood-bonding is done, pulling the king's power back into him and out of her. Some have speculated that some of the king's power is left in the brides."

"But why would they think that? Can they use the power?" she asked, wondering silently how he had spies in other kingdoms. Perhaps he was a high ranking general.

He shook his head. "No, only those blessed by the gods can wield power, but the duchesses live long, healthy lives. After breaking the bond with the king, they never get sick, live to be old by mortal standards, and their beauty stays with them. They wrinkle and age, but not as fast as others. It suggests that possibly there's power left."

She blew a piece of hair from her face while mulling over how the power was pushed back and forth. "It has to be siphoned through some sort

of blood bond, right? That's how he's taking the residual power?" She looked at her cellmate with a raised brow.

He nodded. "That's what I think, but I don't understand how. Once a woman weds a king, she can never wed another king. To do so is to be cursed by the gods."

"How are they cursed? And what happens to the king?"

He shrugged. "No one knows, because it's never happened..." his voice trailed off. "But if it did, the king wouldn't be affected. Kings cannot die that way. If his power is pushed into her, and the blood bond can't take, it would be pushed back..."

She sat up. "Taking the residual power with it..."

The realization rendered them speechless. She could see the wheels turning in his head as he put the puzzle pieces together. He must have figured it out because he released a string of expletives that she did not know existed.

He pressed his lips together and pinned her with a hard stare. "Listen to me, Winnie. You are likely Thaddeus' *compeer*. I'd bet my life on it."

She shook her head. "Isn't that his immortal mate or something? I am not immortal. I've almost died plenty of times."

"The *compeer* becomes immortal once she weds the king. She also is a more powerful conduit than all of the regular mortal brides combined." He closed his eyes and blew out a breath before looking at her again, his voice hoarse, "I think he's going to force you to marry me, break the bond, and then force you to marry him so he can take whatever power is left."

Her hand flew to her mouth. "He...he can't...I..." Her head snapped back in confusion. "Wait. If he wants me to marry you..." she trailed off, eyes going wide. She leaned toward him and whisper-yelled, "Archie, are you a king?"

He nodded solemnly. "My full name is King Archer of Autumn."

Her jaw fell. "You could have led with that."

He ignored her and continued, "I *knew* something was happening with the duchesses. One of ours went missing, as well as one from every other kingdom. We had the remainder of ours hidden away immediately, and after that, three more went missing from each of the other kingdoms." He lightly banged his head against the wall behind him and spoke more to

himself than her, "But why would he be trying to collect so much power? What's the point?"

She perked up with an idea. "Wait, what's your power? Wind, right? Can you use it to open the door?"

He shook his head. "My affinity is for air. There's no flowing air in this room." He motioned to the air with one of his shackled hands. "It's airtight, so there's no moving air for me to manipulate. It seems like we're underground; my guess is there's no airflow until you get closer to the surface." He banged his head on the wall again. "I'm useless."

She slumped back. "Shit. Air bending sounds cool, though. What are the other king's powers?"

He looked at her, and she shrugged. "We aren't getting out of here anytime soon. We might as well get to know one another. Maybe we'll get an idea of what that bastard is up to as we talk."

His mouth tipped up. "Thaddeus can wield ice, but his power is not like mine. His comes from within, allowing him to create ice from nothing. Silas controls the earth. Like me, he can manipulate the earth and plants around him, but he can't create them from nothing." Archie scowled. "Then there's Larkin, and like Thaddeus, he can create heat from within himself. He can burn someone from the inside out with one touch or summon flames to burn an entire building to the ground."

Her mouth hung open in awe. "That's the one thing Francis never told us," she mumbled. When she caught Archie's questioning look, she said, "Francis was a regular at my family's tavern. He would tell us stories about the Old World and the kings." She gave him a sad smile. "And I'll probably never see him again."

She crawled to the door and pressed her ear against the cool metal to distract herself from her spiraling thoughts. Hearing only silence, she grunted and made her way back to their corner.

"Nothing," she grumbled, then sat up straight with an idea. "Have you tried to manipulate someone's breath?"

He started in horror. "That would kill a person. I can push air into their lungs and take it out, but I would *never*. I do not use my powers to cause harm like Silas."

She pursed her lips. "If it comes down to it, use my breath to kill the guards. I'd rather die than give him whatever he thinks I have. Maybe you can escape that way."

His expression was unreadable as he stared at her. "I won't let that happen. I don't know how, but I won't."

She perked up again. "What about your own breath? You're immortal, meaning you can't be killed by something as dumb as not breathing, right?"

He tried to scratch his head, forgetting about the chains, and shot them an annoyed look. "We *can* be killed," he admonished. "It takes the powers of three other kings to kill another, but it can be done..." he said, stopping midsentence, his eyes flaring. "That's what he's doing. That son of a bitch is collecting our powers to kill us." Another string of curses.

"Archie, focus." She snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Can you use your own breath or not? Try it on your shackles."

He studied her thoughtfully before he finally nodded and tilted his head back. He inhaled deeply and blew out a long breath, twisting his fingers. His head snapped toward her with the ghost of a smile on his face. "I think I can do it. You might be a genius." He leaned his head back again and sucked in another long breath before blowing it out and moving both of his hands. A few seconds later, there was a loud click, and his hands fell to his sides.

She silently cheered and shook his shoulders. "You did it!"

He gulped in a breath, rubbed his wrists, stood on shaky legs, and walked to the door to examine the edges. He clenched his fists and retreated to their corner.

"A lot of good that did us. The door is completely solid," he seethed, raking a hand through his hair. "The locks must be on the outside."

She patted his leg with a small smile. "It *did* do us good because your arms are free. Hanging like that must have hurt."

He watched her for the longest time with a crooked smile. "Thaddeus is a lucky man."

She laughed humorlessly. "Well, he's to be married to someone else, so he's not *that* lucky." She gave him a cheeky grin to disguise the hurt she felt, her stomach souring at the thought. She still could not believe he had been betrothed to another woman the entire time.

A new wave of pain washed over her and crushed her heart into little pieces. Her tears began to wet the floor beneath her, and she choked out a quiet sob.

As she drowned in her own sorrow, Archie grabbed her hand and gave a reassuring squeeze. "When we get out of here, I'll kick his ass for you."



The air was heavy as three regiments from the Winter battalion marched toward Uruk. No one had questioned their king when he stood on a dais and told them to ready themselves for battle, nor did they flinch when he said they would kill Spring citizens if they refused to yield. They knew Spring had stolen their True Queen, and they would cut the world open to get her back.

Leading the battalion on a great silver warhorse was King Thaddeus himself. To his right was the head of his personal guard and a guardian of Winter, Henry Ashdown. King Thaddeus' wrath knew no bounds, and a chill surrounded them despite the warm season. The only sounds ringing through the frosty air, were the steady fall of hooves and the clanking of armor as they moved as one.

They did not need royal banners, for all of Rodina knew Winter was descending upon Spring, and a storm was coming with them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The icy wind slapped against the great trees that framed the wide cobblestone road leading to the Spring Palace. The Winter battalion crested the top of the last rolling hill that separated the palace grounds from the bustling city of Uruk.

Thad turned his deadly stare to Henry, his voice like ice, "Retrieving Winnie is the first priority. Bringing Silas to me is the second." Henry nodded and adjusted himself in the saddle.

Luther approached them, breathing heavily. "I came as soon as possible." He turned on his horse to look at the palace where three companies of warriors were stationed in front of the great stone steps, and citizens of Spring stood on the outskirts, watching. "I have other news." Thad turned slowly to his general, and the man continued, "King Archer has gone missing. It appears he disappeared in the middle of the night."

Henry cursed, and Thad closed his eyes before turning them back to the general. "How does someone kidnap a gods-damned *king*?"

"There was a bottle on the floor with a type of seaweed-based liquid. When the soldier who found the bottle sniffed it, he fainted almost instantly." His face was etched in worry. "For them to get to him in his chambers means they've infiltrated his ranks."

Henry turned to Luther. "You think we have spies too." It was not a question.

Luther nodded grimly. "We should suspect everyone until proven otherwise."

Thad turned his gaze back to the palace and raised an arm, signaling his warriors to advance. "First, we find my queen."

Thad stood at the edge of the grassy entrance to the massive courtyard and held up his fist, bringing his men to a halt. He raised his voice and called out, "Tell King Silas to return whom we've come for, or I will retrieve her myself."

The grand doors opened slowly, and Silas sauntered to the top of the stairs, hands clasped in front of him. He wore his ceremonial crown for a show of power. It was a bronze circlet that looked like vines of ivy wound together, and Thad silently vowed to cut it from his head.

Silas's smile was pleasant, as if they were having lunch or discussing fond memories. "Thaddeus. Why all of the dramatics?" He looked around and spread his arms wide. "I've had to drag my men from their homes on word that you mean to attack. What seems to be the issue, brother?"

Sleet began to fall with Thad's mounting rage. He leaned forward on his horse and snarled across the distance between them, "Do not play coy with me. You have taken my future bride, and I will rip your kingdom apart to get her back." His face was set in calm ferocity, and his hair whipped around his temples in the frigid wind.

Silas laughed with a friendly smile. "You think I've taken your bride against her will? Surely not." He motioned behind him, and Seren Longspeak stepped forward wearing a sugary sweet smile. "Is this not your next conduit bride?" He turned to Seren. "My lady, do you wish to leave? If so, you are welcome to it," he said, flourishing a hand toward the steps.

She turned a scornful gaze on Thad before looking back at Silas with false sincerity. "I am happy at the Spring Palace, your grace." She turned to speak to the crowd of civilians that had gathered. Whether they gathered to watch or to fight, Thad did not know. "I was not coerced. My family has known King Silas for some time, and I am here as a friend."

The sleet rained down harder like shards of glass, and Thad yelled with the force of a thousand winds, "*I will not play these games, Silas. Where. Is. My. Compeer.*" His voice seemed to echo through the entire city, causing many townspeople to cower in fear.

The Spring King laughed and held out his hand to one of his guards. The guard placed a silver dagger in his palm, and he held it up.

"Are you referring to the owner of this dagger?" Thad lunged forward, but Henry grabbed his arm to hold him back. "The woman who owned this dagger attacked one of my men. She stabbed him! Can you

believe that? A ferocious woman, she was," he sighed, handing the dagger back to the guard. "My men killed her on the spot. They were threatened, and they defended themselves."

Thad felt the blood in his heart turn to solid ice, and his control snapped. He bellowed a war cry, and the veins on his neck distended with coursing fury. Snow the color of blood dumped from the sky in a murderous squall and coated the trees and ground in a powdery bloodbath. The citizens of Spring screamed and ran for cover as Winter charged across the crimson flood with their swords held high.

Silas glanced at the sky, his jolly facade slipping, and allowed his fear to take over. He hurried his gaze back to the Winter battalion that was closing in and yelled to his men to intercept them before they reached the palace. The sound of metal-on-metal rang through the air when the two armies collided in an explosion of bodies.

Ice daggers flew in every direction as Thad swung his sword, desecrating anyone in his path. He jumped from his horse, rammed his way through the sea of soldiers, and cut a path toward the Spring King.

Silas, his face set in rage, stepped back and threw his hands skyward, causing the earth in front of Thad to rise into a great wall. Without slowing his stride, a bridge of ice formed with every step he took, carrying him over the mound.

When he cleared the top of the makeshift plateau, he jumped through the air and landed on the veranda, splintering the stone in every direction. Standing, he watched the guards around him retreat, and Silas was nowhere to be found.

Howling with hatred, he jumped to the ground and began cutting down as many men as he could reach, and the bloody blizzard that bore down on the battle intensified with every swing of his sword.

He yelled over the clamoring of swords for his men to retreat and duck. Their generals had trained them for this, and they understood the meaning of his command, running up the hill from whence they came to throw themselves down the other side.

Thad faced the Spring warriors and threw his arms wide with a deafening roar. A sheet of jagged ice cut across the courtyard, slicing every man in its path.

Bloody and heaving, he stood in the middle of the carnage and looked slowly at the few enemies left standing.

"Hear me now, warriors of Spring. Your king has stolen what is mine, and if you value your life, you will assist my men in any way they ask."



"She's not here, Thad," Henry croaked, running a hand through his hair. "Our men have searched every inch of the palace. We forced everyone out and left no stone unturned."

Thad looked at Luther, who nodded in confirmation. "Is she really dead?" he choked out. "Wouldn't you two be able to tell?"

Pain was engraved on Henry's face as he looked helplessly at his king. "I don't know," he admitted, his voice barely a whisper. "I thought the burning pain that engulfed my soul was because she was in danger, but...it could have meant..." He could not finish the sentence, so he began another, "We have never lost a *compeer* to anything but natural death. I am not sure what it would feel like for her to go before her time."

Thad turned to his general, whose eyes were brimming with tears. At the look on Luther's face, his lip wavered, but his voice turned to steel, "Leave. Now."

Luther shook his head. "We cannot leave you. You're in more danger now than you we-"

Thad turned on his men and exploded. "*I said leave!*"

Both men walked briskly from the front lawn toward the army over the hill. Almost as an afterthought, Thad called after them, "Has the palace been completely evacuated?"

Luther swiveled around, confusion on his face. "Yes, your majesty."

The Winter King descended the steps and rounded on the palace, throwing his arms out with a strangled sob. The ice whipped through the air and slammed against the Spring Palace on all sides. Pieces of the beautiful, garden-clad walls blasted in every direction, shaking the world as it crumbled to the ground.



Henry and Luther sat atop their mounts and watched as Thad instructed his generals to return with their men to the capital and prepare for war.

His voice was pained when he turned back to his closest confidants, "I have to tell her family. Chazriel will never forgive me for forcing him to stay behind."

"You told him to stay to protect her in case she returned to the tavern. There is nothing he could have done here, and he will understand that," Henry said, shaking his head.

Thad threw his leg over his saddle and turned to Luther. "I need you to ride to Summer and warn Larkin. Tell him to prepare his warriors. We need to find Archer, and then the three of us are going to kill Silas, even if I have to yank the gods from the heavens to do it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Winnie laid on the cold, stone floor with her feet propped on the wall next to Archie. Her stomach ground against itself, begging for something to eat, and she groaned. It was impossible to gauge time without any windows, and she wasn't sure how long they'd been trapped. Her best guess was eight or nine days. The guards had only thrown them a loaf of bread and a bucket of water twice, and she was starving.

"Archie, if you had to eat your own arm to survive, would you?"

He looked at her like she had lost her mind. "Why would you ask something like that? You know I can't die from hunger," he said with a smirk.

"I'm so hungry, I might have to eat *you*," she said, snapping her teeth at his leg.

"Francis never told stories about evil kings who lock other people in drippy caves. Maybe I would have been better prepared," she said wistfully.

"Tell me about your friends," he said quietly. "I don't want to think about our demise. I want to hear something good."

She nodded and swallowed the lump that formed in her throat. "Well, first there's Emmy. She is beautiful and charming and would do anything for anyone. She is one of the liveliest people I have ever met. Then there's Clarence. He's the best blacksmith in all of Rodina and like an uncle to me." She flitted her eyes to Archie's before she focused on the string in her dress that she was fidgeting with. "He saved me from two men when I was a child. They would have done terrible things if not for him.

"There's Luther. He's general of the Anorak regiment and the one who taught me to fight." He watched her with rapt attention, and she touched her dirty hair self-consciously. "My brother, Chazriel, is my best

friend," she said, pausing to keep her voice from breaking. "And then there's Francis.

"He showed up at the tavern not long after my father died. He has come in every day since, and he loves to tell us stories about the Old World, kings and queens, or whatever else he conjures up. I have not gone a day without seeing him since I met him. Then there's Gilda, my dressmaker. Not because I like pretty dresses, obviously," she chuckled and waved a hand over her torn smock, "but because she never judged me for my requests, and she flits around like a happy fairy.

"And, of course, my mother. Her name is Suki, and she's tanned my hide more times than I can count, but she loves my brother and me as fiercely as she loved my father."

The tears she had been holding back spilled over the corners of her eyes and fell to the stone floor. She turned to her cellmate with a sad smile. "Those are my people, and I miss them so much it hurts."

He reached out and rubbed the top of her hand. "I understand. I've watched every person I have ever cared for die. When you're immortal but your friends are not, it takes a toll."

She sat up and turned so she was arm to arm with him. "I'm sorry. I'm crying over a few friends when you've lost so many." She laid her head on his shoulder, and her tears continued to fall for them both.

"You didn't mention Thaddeus," he murmured.

She sniffed. "I thought he loved me, and I thought Henry was my friend." Her voice began to crack again. "But they both lied. I guess I was wrong."

The metal door ripped open, and two burly guards stepped inside. Archie and Winnie shot to their feet with their backs against the wall, ready for a fight.

The first guard stepped forward and pointed at Winnie. "You're coming with me."

He advanced toward her and snatched her arm, dragging her into the hall.

Archie lunged forward and grabbed at her. "No!"

The other guard reared back and punched him in the nose. "Don't get your skirts in a twist, Autumn King; you're coming too."

Together, they were dragged down a long, dark corridor that smelled of wet dirt and death. They emerged into a spacious cavern with ceilings as

tall as a building, lined with torches and open entrances to hallways encircling the room.

They both squinted at the bright light in the cavern, and after a week in the dark, it nearly blinded them. Once Winnie's eyes adjusted, she took stock of the room and saw a black throne at the back that looked menacing and cold.

She was taken to the middle of the room and shoved to her hands and knees, hitting the ground with a grunt. Archie fought against the two guards that pinned his arms, his eyes on the man behind her.

The bigger guard pushed him to a kneeling position, his meaty hand gripping his neck. Even with his abnormal strength, Archie was no match for these two giants without access to his power.

A taller man with grey, slicked-back hair walked in from a corridor with his hands behind his back. "I see you've been enjoying yourselves during your stay," he remarked, turning his condescending sneer to Archie. "I must say, *your majesty*, you've seen better days." He crossed the room and knelt in front of the Autumn King. "For someone who's supposed to be a strategic mastermind, you've found yourself in a rather inconvenient situation."

Archie's jaw clenched, but he kept his eyes trained on Winnie. She tapped her skirts where her second dagger was hidden, and his eyes flared. She had shown him the dagger in their cell, but they had agreed not to use it. What good was one dagger against dozens of armed guards?

The man stood and turned to her with a smile. "Hello, Winnie. My name is Martine." She glared at him in response, and his smile widened. "I'd heard you were a feisty little thing. Tell me, at what point did you realize your friend had betrayed you?"

She spat at his feet. "Fuck you."

He backhanded her, sending a flash of pain across her cheek. "I'll enjoy watching the life drain from your eyes," he sneered. "On their feet," he called to the guards, never taking his eyes from hers. "You two are getting married today. Isn't that nice?"

She rolled behind her guard before he could grab her arm and held the dagger to her throat. "Let the king go, or I will coat this floor with my blood. We'll see how much your Spring King likes that."

His face turned the shade of a beet. "Why wasn't she checked for weapons?" he roared before he steadied his voice and took a step toward her

as she took a step back. "If you do not put the dagger down, I will have them slit his throat," he seethed, pointing at Archie.

Her lip curled. "He can't be killed by someone as pathetic as you. Even I know that."

Martine snapped his fingers, and the guard who pinned Archie down yanked his head back and pressed a dagger to his throat. Martine turned back to her. "No, but I can separate his head from his body and keep it in a box for the rest of his pathetic existence."

Her eyes shot to Archie. She did not know how their immortality worked if they were dismembered, and hesitated.

Martine walked toward her and cackled. His breath brushed her cheek, sending a shiver down her spine before giving her an idea. She snapped her gaze back to Archie's and yelled, "Their breath! Archie, their breath!"

Understanding flickered in her friend's eyes, and he began moving and twisting his fingers, concentrating on the guards around him. They grabbed at their chests and throats as he sucked the air from their lungs, and one by one, they dropped within seconds.

Martine looked from Archie to the guards and grabbed Winnie by the hair. He dragged her toward one of the corridors with a growl, and her dagger clattered to the floor when she collided with the hard ground.

Archie turned his heated gaze on Martine and reached out a winding hand. The snake of a man dropped Winnie's hair and clutched at his throat. She gave him a swift kick and, with satisfaction, watched him take his last breath.

She sprinted across the room, launched herself into Archie's arms, and breathed him in, relieved they were both still alive.

He rubbed a soothing hand down her back and murmured in her ear, "You're ok. We made it. We can leave now."

She nodded against his chest and mumbled, "I told you your air bending was cool."

He chuckled and squeezed her tighter. "Let's get out of here."

They quietly navigated their way through the dark corridors, searching for a way out. Winnie did not know how long they had walked or how many times they had backtracked when they heard voices echoing in the dark. They crept down the darkened hall toward the middle cavern to

see who was coming, and more importantly, which opening they were coming from.

When they crouched at the mouth of the cavern to spy on the intruders, she gasped. In the middle of the room stood Francis, Clarence, Gilda, Emmy, and three other people she did not recognize.

"Archie," she breathed. "Do you see them, or am I dreaming?"

"What do you mean? You look like you've seen a ghost. Do you know them?" he whispered from behind her.

"You see them?" she asked again, turning to look at him.

He nodded, and she stood, stepping into the spacious room. All seven people snapped their heads toward her. A strangled sob clawed its way out of her throat, and she sprinted across the massive room.

She threw herself into Francis' arms and whimpered, "You found me." Her shoulders heaved as relief racked through her body.

Francis laughed through tears of his own. "You know I'd never miss the opportunity to learn a new story, lass."

"You must be Francis," Archie said from behind them with a smile.

"That I am, lad. And you must be the Autumn King." He shook Archie's hand with a tip of his head.

Winnie turned to the unlikely group of rescuers in amazement. "How are you all here? I don't understand." She blanched when her eyes landed on Gilda and Emmy. "Are you carrying *swords*?"

Emmy smirked. "You're not the only girl who knows how to kick ass." Gilda snickered when Winnie's jaw dropped open. *What was happening?*

A handsome man who looked to be a few years older than Winnie stepped forward. "We need to go before someone comes back." He scanned the bodies of the guards that littered the floor and quirked a brow. "Though I'm guessing if they did, we'd be ok."

"I don't mean to be rude, but who are you?" Winnie asked tersely.

His mouth tipped up and revealed a dimple. "I'm Rogan, a guard in the Autumn battalion. When King Archer went missing, myself and a few others were sent to find him." He pointed to a woman with brilliant red hair and the older man beside her. "This is Landa, my companion, and Laud, a fellow guard." Landa gave a tiny wave, and Laud just stared.

Archie stepped forward and shook his hand. "I thank you for your service." He gave a small bow before he turned to Winnie. "I agree with

Rogan. We need to go, or at least get to open air, where my power is stronger."

She looked at her friends, frantic. "It was Edwin. I didn't know. I asked him to take me away from the tavern, but then he wouldn't let me go. He brought me here, and I-

Francis patted her hand reassuringly. "We'll make sure he pays, lass. I promise."

She released a calming breath and gave a firm nod. "Then let's go."

When the sunlight hit her face, she tipped her head back and sighed. "I never thought I'd see the sun again."

Archie stretched beside her. "Me either," he admitted and turned to Rogan. "How far of a ride are we from Kore?"

Rogan and Francis exchanged a look. "Actually, your majesty, we need you to go with Winnie and her guardians to an unknown village in the far mountains of the Winter Kingdom."

Archie's face was blank. "I cannot leave my kingdom unprotected."

Winnie was still stuck on the fact that Rogan called her friends *guardians*. She had no idea what that meant.

Laud stepped forward. "It won't be, your majesty. Your generals have been informed of the threat and have put up protections against Spring until they receive further instruction." Archie crossed his arms, unconvinced, and Laud continued, "The three of us will be going back with the information we have collected. We need you in a location where the Spring King cannot find you. The mountain village is unknown to anyone, including the Winter King himself. Thaddeus will be informed of this location, as well as Larkin. Our only chance to kill Silas is for the three of you to stay alive."

Archie moved his eyes between Laud and Rogan before he turned to Francis. "Then lead the way."



Thad and Henry rode to Anorak in pained silence. As they approached the familiar tavern that had become their home, Thad's anguish froze the trees and ground around them.

When they walked into the great room, they found Chazriel, Suki, and two strangers speaking in hushed voices. The unknown man had black hair and wore a hard expression, while the woman was tiny with a boyish haircut.

Suki snapped her gaze to Thad and Henry, noticed the look on their faces, and gasped. "Good gods! Are you hurt?" She hurried to the men and began to inspect them for injuries.

Thad grabbed her hand and gently lowered it with somber eyes. She looked between the two and stepped back. "What's happened?"

He didn't want to tell her that it was his fault Winnie was gone, or that he took too long to get to Silas. It'd been a week since she'd gone missing, and he failed her. Now he had to break her mother's heart.

He clenched his jaw, hating what he had to say. "Suki, we tried to get her back, but we were too late." He paused to swallow the torment in his throat.

Her brow furrowed before her eyes widened in understanding. "You think Winnie is dead?"

He gave the slightest nod.

"Winnie's not dead," the dark-haired man said as he stepped forward.

Thad met him halfway, eyes narrowed. "What do you mean? Silas had her dagger and said his men killed her. Henry was doubled over in pain."

The short-haired woman shook her head. "He lied. She was being held in a series of caverns in the Halsha Mountains, along with King Archer. She has probably been hurt, but she's not dead."

He could not move a muscle as relief crashed through him. Next to him, Henry choked out a breath and asked, "How did you find her? Who are you?"

The black-haired man tipped his head. "I'm Gabriel, and this is Willow. We are guardians of Autumn."

"I need to see her," Thad ground out as he tried to keep his outward demeanor calm.

"She's not here, your majesty," Willow said. "She's safe with the Winter guardians on their way to the village of Takita."

He marched toward the door. "What kingdom is this village located in?" He turned to Henry. "We need to leave at once."

Gabriel cleared his throat awkwardly. "I'm sorry, your majesty, but you aren't going to like this."

Thad glowered at the Autumn guardian. "What is that supposed to mean?"

The guardian smirked back, "It's a hidden village in Winter."

His eyes widened a fraction. "Excuse me?"

Henry stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder. "It's been hidden away. The villagers have lived in secret since coming from the Old World. No king has ever known they exist."

Thad's expression revealed nothing, but his voice was dangerous. "Is this a joke?" he asked, looking around. "If they're so secret, how do all of you know about them?"

Chazriel and Suki watched the exchange with rapt silence. Thad looked at them and asked, "Did you two know about this village?"

Chaz shook his head. "Not until they showed up and told us. We were preparing to leave as well."

Henry sighed. "The Winter guardians know about it because there was once a *compeer* there many years ago. Because the king did not know the village existed, they never met. I'm guessing the others told them about it."

Chazriel grunted and crossed his arms. "What happens if a *compeer* and a king don't marry? What if Winnie doesn't want to be his wife?"

Willow looked solemnly at Chazriel before answering. "If a *compeer* and a king do not wed by the time she is thirty-five years of age, she will die peacefully in her sleep the night before her thirty-sixth birthday. Her soul will be reborn sixty-five years later."

Suki gasped and Chazriel zeroed in on the Winter King. "You better grovel and beg her forgiveness. I will not lose my sister because you couldn't keep your fucking dick in your pants." Anger danced in his eyes, and his nostrils flared.

Thad clenched his fists. "I never slept with anyone after Winnie and I were together. I was betrothed to Seren before I ever set foot in this tavern,

and you will not berate me for my life before I met your sister."

Chazriel's massive form was inches from Thad's face. "You also *conveniently* forgot to mention that you were the gods-damned King of Winter."

Henry put a hand to Chazriel's chest and pushed him back. "This is not the time. We need to get to Winnie. The sooner they marry, the safer she will be. Once they wed, she will become immortal. We are wasting time."

Thad had not realized Suki left the room until she reemerged from the hall with a satchel and a longsword. "Then we leave now," she announced.

Chazriel paled when he saw his mother returning from her room, strapped to the teeth with weapons. "Mother, where did you get a sword?"

She rolled her eyes. "You and your sister think you're so stealthy. I know you have been training with the general. I've always known." She slid her sword into a scabbard and fastened it to her body. "Saved me the time of having to train you two myself."

With those parting words, she walked out of the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Do you think they'll have a roast in Takita?" Winnie mused. Clarence gathered berries for her and Archie to eat, along with dried meat, but she was still hungry. They had been riding for three days, and her stomach growled like an angry mutt.

Archie's chest vibrated with laughter against her back. "Where would they keep pigs in the snowy mountains? I bet they have flavored ice for you, though."

She jabbed her elbow into his ribs. "Very funny. If they don't have a roast, I'll put you on a spit." She sniffed at the air. "On second thought, you smell like you're already rotten, so maybe not."

"You're one to talk. My eyes are watering from your hair alone," he said, his breath puffing against her neck.

She snickered and rubbed her hands on her arms for warmth. The higher they climbed, the cooler it became, despite the Summer season. Archie wrapped his borrowed cloak around them both to hold in their body heat, but it wasn't enough.

She was thankful to have him as an ally, because every other friend had lied to her. Edwin betrayed her, her closest confidants were some sort of warrior guardians, and Thad was the king, set to marry someone else, which Henry knew. She was glad to have one person who hadn't deceived her.

"Do you ever make the wind blow your hair back when you enter a room?" She rotated her head to see his face. "You know, to make yourself look badass?"

He threw his head back and barked out a laugh. "No, but I'll be sure to try that next time I meet with my council."

"We're almost there. Just past that spur," Clarence said, pointing. "We have to go through the pass one at a time because the path is narrow, so

stay close."

Winnie squinted and searched for the spur, despite not knowing what a spur was. Even if she did, where he pointed looked like everything else they'd passed for the last few hours. Leaning back again, she whispered, "I don't see any path. Do you think they've gone crazy?"

Archie smirked. "I don't see anything either, but I'll never admit that to them."

Her shoulders shook, and she had to chew her lip to keep from laughing.

Clarence turned to them and said, "You two need to be in the middle."

She fought the urge to give him a formal salute. She had never seen her friends so fierce or authoritative before, and she wasn't sure if she liked it.

When they arrived at the spur (which she still could not see), they veered to the left and made their way across the snow. Archie used the wind to wipe their tracks away to prevent anyone from following them.

They approached what appeared to be a wall, but once they were closer, she realized it was an illusion made by two pieces of rock that concealed a narrow passageway.

The passage was long and uphill before it wound back and tilted in a steep decline. They stayed between the rocks and could see nothing but the path in front of them.

The narrow passage eventually opened into a valley surrounded by a great stone wall after a days' worth of travel. The barrier was taller than anything she had ever seen, and at the top, there were people standing with arrows trained on them.

One of the men descended the wall with a rope and jumped to the ground. As he walked toward them, she imagined he could slaughter them all without breaking a sweat. He was massive with a long beard, giant arms, and a surly face. He looked like a bear in human form, and she adjusted herself nervously in the saddle.

"What's your business?" he hollered, his deep voice vibrating across the snow. She wondered, briefly, if it would cause an avalanche.

Clarence jumped from his horse and approached the man with his hands raised to show he was not a threat. "We are guardians of Winter. We've come to speak with your council and seek refuge."

The bear studied the guardians before his gaze stopped on Winnie. The flare of his nostrils was the only indication that seeing her caused a reaction. She touched her hair nervously and hoped her odd coloring wouldn't hinder her entry.

Not breaking his penetrating stare from hers, he nodded. "Dismount your horses and leave them with one of our men. They will take them to the stables while I escort you to our council leader."

Once they were through the gate, Winnie gasped at the sight before her. An entire village, bigger than Anorak, sprawled across the snowy valley. She had never seen anything like it in her life.

As they walked through the middle of town, she looked at the buildings in awe. They were taller than the buildings back home and had platforms surrounded by railings that jutted from the windows, several stories up.

She halted and clutched Archie's arm, unable to move her feet. He caught sight of her face and looked around. "What is it?"

She pointed at a woman and man who were walking down the sidewalk between shops. "Their hair... it's like mine," she whispered in disbelief. "No one else has hair the color of mine. *No one*, Archie. I... I thought the gods cursed me."

Francis gave her a warm smile. "I told you there was no curse, lass. Your father was from Takita. He left when he came of age because he hated being cut off from the world." He tipped his head toward the two people on the sidewalk. "Your coloring is common here."

Was anything she knew about herself true?

Her stomach twisted with anger. "You all *lied* to me. Everything I have ever been told about my life since I was a girl has been a lie." She swiveled to Emmy. "All those nights of crying because I thought the gods hated me, and *you knew there were others.*"

Emmy looked remorseful but offered no excuses.

Winnie whirled on the others. "Edwin kidnapped me, and you all are secret spies who call yourselves 'guardians.' That is the Winter King and engaged to someone else, and now I find out my father was from some town no one knew existed!"

Gilda approached her carefully, like one would a wild animal. "Winnie, dear, we know this is hard to understand. In time we *will* tell you

who we are and why we had to deceive you."

Winnie turned to her and shook her head. "How can I believe anything you say when you've only told me lies?"

Clarence pressed his mouth into a thin line and said, "You can't, and we understand that. We hope that will change, but until then, you have to allow us to keep you safe."

"That was touching," said a tall woman who they hadn't heard approach. She was beautiful, with a stocky build and pale hair the color of Winnie's, braided into a thick rope. She wore men's clothes that seemed to fit her body perfectly, making her look dangerous.

Clarence stepped forward and bowed his head respectfully. "I am Clarence, and we are Winter guardians. We are requesting temporary refuge."

He pointed to each person and named them before he clasped his hands behind his back. Winnie thought he looked regal, a stark difference from his presence at the smithy.

When the woman's eyes landed on her, a small smile spread across her face. "I am Naomi, the head of the council," she said and turned her gaze to Clarence. "How is it you have a Takitian I have never met?"

Winnie bristled. "Do not speak about me as if I am not here. My father was Takitian, not me."

Naomi laughed. "A woman who stands her ground. I like you, but make no mistake, you *are* Takitian whether you were raised here or not." She grabbed a strand of Winnie's hair. "Only descendants of the first Takitians have the platinum blonde hair color. What was your father's name?"

She wondered what *platinum* meant as she shook herself and stood taller. "Patrick Hayward."

Naomi's body went rigid, her eyes squinting to study her closely. "Yes," she whispered. "You look like him."

Without warning, she pulled her into a hug, surprising Winnie, who stood with her arms awkwardly at her sides. When Naomi pulled back, her eyes were shining. "Your father was my brother, and we were devastated when we learned of his passing." She squeezed Winnie's shoulders lightly. "We promised him we'd never contact you and your brother. You coming here is surely a sign from the gods. Welcome home."

Everyone stood speechless and stared at the two women. Winnie's mouth opened and closed in shock. "It's nice to meet you," she replied lamely.

Archie blew out a laugh behind her, snapping her out of her stupor. She turned to glare at him, and he nudged her shoulder. "Could you be any more awkward?"

Naomi chuckled when Winnie punched him in the arm. The council leader's voice seemed to take on a commanding tone to address the guardians. "You brought my niece to me, and for that, you will have lodging and provisions for as long as you need them. Follow me."

Naomi led them to a tavern with an inn attached, similar to Hayward's Place in Anorak.

Winnie leaned over to Archie. "Why do they need an inn if no one knows they exist?"

Naomi seemed to have abnormally good hearing because she said, "It was built in the First Days after coming from the Old World," she explained, pointing to the walls. "See how old they are? Luckily for you, we keep the inn updated as a sort of remembrance. The rooms are now used when lovers quarrel, and one finds themselves in need of a room for a night or two," she snorted. "The tavern downstairs is open to the public and serves food whenever you'd like, not just at mealtimes."

As if on cue, her stomach growled, and Emmy giggled. Winnie wanted to scrub the grit from her skin before she stuffed her face with every piece of food she could get her hands on.

She inspected her disgusting clothes and groaned. "Naomi, I'm sorry to ask, but do you have clothes for Archie and me? We were imprisoned and came straight here."

Francis tried to hide his laughter at her cavalier mention of their imprisonment but failed.

Naomi whipped around with a grisly expression. "Whoever imprisoned my family will be dealt with. I expect full details reported to me when you are well enough to do so." Her eyes turned lethal, and Winnie's blood drained from her face. "I'll have clothes sent for both of you until you can have the tailor make you more."

"That was scary," Archie whispered in her ear.

"You haven't seen scary, Autumn King," Naomi retorted, without turning around.

When their clothes arrived, Winnie sprinted to the washroom and scrubbed her body until it was pink. She washed her hair three times and still didn't feel clean. Nothing could wash away the dank smell of their drippy cell or the feel of Martine's breath on her skin.

She could still feel her cool blade pressed against the beating pulse of her own neck, and the image of Archie being held down was crystal clear in the forefront of her mind. She was truly going to slit her own throat that day, something she never thought she'd be capable of doing. King Silas had driven her to desperate madness, and she would make him pay for his transgressions.

When she decided she was as clean as she was going to get, she slipped on the plain blue dress from Naomi and met the others in the hall to venture downstairs for food.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Henry led Winnie's family and Thad out of the narrow passage and brought them face-to-face with a huge stone structure with tall wooden doors. Thad scanned the top of the fortress, noted archers with their weapons pointed at the four of them, and cursed under his breath.

Where had Henry brought them?

A burly man, the size of a horse, repelled down the wall and stalked toward them. "What is your business?"

Henry jumped to the ground and approached the man with a small salute. "I am a guardian of Winter. I travel with the Winter King and two companions," he motioned to the group. "We are to meet the other guardians in Takita and speak with your council."

The man nodded. "Your friends arrived earlier today, and I've been instructed to take you to your lodging straight away. Leave the horses. They'll join the others in the stables."

Thad's world stopped. *Winnie was here.* He had not let himself believe she was alive, and it would not feel real until he could see her with his own eyes.

When they stepped through the gates, he was taken aback by the booming town that lay before him. He had expected a small village with makeshift houses, but this was a fully functioning city.

The man led them into town and pointed to a tavern. "The innkeeper will show you to your rooms. Your friends are already inside." He gave a final nod and retreated to the entrance.

Thad all but kicked the door in and swiveled his head with predatory precision as he looked for Winnie. The second he saw her near a far table, the dam that held back his emotions exploded. He reached her in three long strides and fell to his knees, wrapping his hands around her middle. He

pressed his forehead to her stomach and cried as he held her, relief flooding his senses.

He finally stood and grabbed her face softly. "I thought you were dead," he rasped.

She shook her head vigorously, leaning into his palm. "I'm not. I thought I would be, but I'm not."

He laughed and wiped his tears on his shoulder. *She was here, and she was whole.*

She stepped back and trailed her eyes over his body. "You're not hurt?"

He shook his head. "No, are you-"

"Good," she snapped and punched him in the throat as hard as she could.

While Thad gasped for breath and clutched his throat, Chazriel walked through the door in time to bark out a laugh. Henry covered his mouth, and Emmy smirked with her hands on her hips. The rest of their group looked on in astonishment.

As he righted himself, she pushed him and shouted, "You liar! You're betrothed to someone else!"

She charged him again, but Clarence grabbed her around the waist. She struggled to get free, and her shoulders shook with hurt and rage.

He took a step, but Henry grabbed his arm to stop him from getting too close. "Winnie, the only thing I lied about was my last name, I swear it. I was betrothed to Seren before I met you, but it was just contractual," he assured. "I was afraid to fall in love again, but in the end, it didn't matter. I fell anyway. I swear to you, the day Seren arrived, I was going to tell you who I was. I planned to have my council terminate my engagement."

"Why didn't you end your engagement the first time we slept together? Or the first time you said you were mine?" she demanded. "How am I supposed to trust you again?"

He lifted his arms helplessly. "I had to be sure," he confessed, taking a tentative step forward to grab her hand. "I was an idiot. I was fighting what I already knew was true. You are my *compeer*. My equal. My heart in every way. I am sorry I hurt you, and I understand if you need time. I plan to spend every day winning your trust back, but until then, we need to be married at once to ensure your safety."

She looked around, confused. "What is he talking about?"

Chazriel stepped forward and rubbed the back of his neck. “If you’re his *compeer* and you marry him, you’ll become immortal. If you do not, you’ll die before your thirty-sixth birthday.” His blue-green eyes implored her to listen. “Please, do this. If not for him, then for yourself.”

She yanked her hand from Thad’s grasp and stepped next to Archer.

Thad didn’t like their familiarity and rubbed a hand over his mouth. He stepped forward, his voice breaking, “Winnie, you can hate me. You can fight me if that’s what you want.” He looked to Archer before he turned his eyes back to hers. “You can even love someone else, but *please* marry me. I cannot watch you die.”

Her eyes blazed. “If I marry, I don’t want it to be to keep me from dying or because you need a power boost,” she seethed, looking to everyone in the room before taking another step back. “I want to marry someone who *knows* that they love me completely for *who* I am, not *what* I am. I want a beautiful arch with hundreds of flowers and my family and friends in their best outfits.

“I don’t want to be married in a gods-forsaken inn to someone who wasn’t sure if he loved me in the first place,” she snapped, her expression steel. “I want to know that I am his, and he is mine.” She paused, pinning him with her silvery eyes. “You were all I wanted, Thad, but not like this.”

She fled from the room, and everyone stared at him. He met their gazes and blew out a breath. “I can’t live without her,” he said, his voice uneven.

Archer’s body tensed. “You make this right, Thaddeus, or I’ll kill you myself.”



Winnie laid on her bed and screamed into her pillow. The weight of the last week and a half settled on her soul, and she was exhausted, enraged, and hurt. Her mother had followed her upstairs and laid behind her, gently rubbing her hair. She never dreamed her mother would have to soothe her broken heart once she met Thad, but once again, she had been wrong.

Sometime later, she sat up and clasped her mother's hand. "I think I'm alright now. You should get something to eat. I know it was a long journey."

Suki eyed her suspiciously. "I know you're hurting right now, and if you want to be alone, I'll go. But if you are asking me to leave because you feel guilty that I haven't eaten, I'm not budging from this bed."

Winnie shook her head. "I need time to process everything alone."

Her mother rose to her feet. "Ok, dear. I will be back to check on you in the morning, but find me if you need to talk. I *do* know a thing or two about relationships," she said as she patted her daughter's leg.

A sad laugh bubbled from Winnie's chest. "Perhaps I'll take you up on that tomorrow. I love you."

Suki placed a kiss on the top of her head. "I love you, too."

When her mother shut the door on the way out, panic seized her chest. She crossed the room and yanked it open with a shudder. After her time in the cave, she never wanted to be shut into a small room again.

Archie approached his room across from hers and watched her quietly. Without saying anything, he closed the distance between them and wrapped her in a strong embrace.

He pulled back and dug into his pocket, producing a napkin full of pastries. "I thought you might be hungry, and I remember you rambling on about the bakery in Anorak."

Without hesitation, she shoved a muffin in her mouth. Bits of food tumbled down her dress as she mumbled a garbled thank you.

He laughed, squeezing her shoulder. "I'll be across the hall if you need anything. Make sure to breathe between bites."

She nodded before she grabbed a shift from the armoire and trudged to the washroom.

When she emerged, she crawled into bed and tortured herself with a replay of her fight with Thad.

How could he be so blasé about an engagement? If it were nothing to him, could she trust that his marriage proposal to her would be any different? He said she was his compeer, but what if she's not? Then he would dispose of her just as easily as he disposed of the other women he had married. Everyone else, including her own brother, seemed to be certain that she was to marry him, but how would they know?

She felt like something was being kept from her, and she hated it. She was exhausted by all the deceit that had found its way into her life and wanted to scream at the gods until her throat was raw.

Archie's door eased open, and the sound made Winnie flinch and reach for a weapon.

He eyed her open door sympathetically. "Can't be closed in either, huh?"

"No," she confessed.

"Yeah. I guess Silas really did a number on us."

She could see the pride deflate from his chest, and her heart ached for her friend. "Come, sit down," she gestured to the chair in the corner of her room. "Tell me a story."

He made his way across the hall and fell into the chair with a sigh. "What do you want to hear?"

She rubbed her hands together and licked her lips. He would tell her stories he heard from his parents when he was a boy about the Old World, and she would tell him tall tales she heard from Francis at the tavern. It had helped pass the endless hours in their dark cell.

"Did your father ever tell you about the giant rabbit that laid eggs?" she giggled. This was one of her favorites.

His eyes rounded. "You're kidding." When she shook her head, he leaned forward on his elbows. "Now you have to tell me."

"In the Old World, they believed that once a year in the Spring, a man-sized rabbit would lay eggs in their houses." She had never been able to keep a straight face during this story. It was so outlandish that she thought Francis made it up. "It would leave them gifts sometimes too!"

Archie burst out laughing. "I think Francis was yanking your chain with that one."

"That's not all! They also believed that when children lost their teeth, if they left it under their pillow, a fairy would give them money for it," she exclaimed, smiling so big her cheeks hurt.

The people of the Old World were ridiculous, and she loved it.

His face turned serious. "If you ever knock out Thaddeus' teeth, be sure to collect them. We might be paid handsomely."

They both fell back in a fit of laughter, and she felt lighter than she had in days.

When one of the lamps started to die out, she darted across the room frantically. “Do you have any extra oil in your room?”

He looked at the other two lamps that burned brightly, and his eyes softened. “I’m guessing you don’t like the dark, either?” She gave a slight shrug and shook her head.

He walked across the hall and came back with two more lamps. “Do I brighten your world?”

She rolled her eyes and sat the lamps in the corners of the room, thankful that he understood. She laid on her bed and rolled to look at her former cellmate perched in the chair.

“Tell me a new story. Something interesting.”

He thought for a second before smirking. “I would say you’re not going to believe this, but you believe in an egg-laying rabbit and a tooth-buying fairy. My father once told me a story he heard as a small boy about a little magic device people carried everywhere.” He smiled fondly at the memory. “He always said he wished he could engineer one.”

Winnie propped herself up on her elbow. “What did it do?”

“I’m not sure of everything, but I do remember that it held thousands of portraits. You could switch between them with your finger.” He looked up, longing in his eyes. “Could you imagine? Being able to pull up the faces of anyone you loved, dead or alive?”

She knew he had suffered a lot of loss, and her heart constricted. Not just Archie, but all the kings. They were the only immortals in Rodina and were forced to watch everyone they had ever met die.

She could not bear the sadness on his face, so she picked up her pillow and heaved it across the room. He snatched it from the air with cat-like reflexes and a feral grin. The pillow whacked her in the face before she even knew he had thrown it.

Laughing, she laid back. “I think the tooth fairy was more believable than that.”



Thad's chest could not take in enough air. The expression on Winnie's face when she screamed across the tavern broke him into a million tiny shards. He hurt her, he knew that, but he never imagined she would question whether or not he loved her.

Henry said the guardians could not reveal to her what she was until she accepted it herself. He would have to make her believe it on his own.

Leaving her unprotected was not an option, of that he was sure. If she would not marry him, then he would spend every second of his life making sure she was safe.

He walked solemnly down the hallway toward her door. He would stand guard all night tonight, and tomorrow he would speak with Henry and Chazriel about taking shifts. Of course, he couldn't let her know what he was doing, or she'd probably try to run him through with her sword.

He laughed at the memory of her many threats and then again at the fact that she throat-punched him. *Feisty little hellcat.*

As he approached her door, he found it wide open. Quietly, he peered around the frame, and his heart plummeted to his feet.

She and the Autumn King slept soundly, their quiet breaths the only noise. She was curled on her side in the bed, and Archer had his head leaning against the wall in the corner chair.

Icy jealousy sliced through his chest at the sight. *He* should be the one she fell asleep with. She was Winter's True Queen and no one else's.

With one last look, he whispered into the darkness, "I love you, Winnie, even from the stars," and walked toward his room.



Winnie heard Thad approach but laid stock-still. She also heard his whispered words when he walked away, and the knot in her throat was difficult to breathe around.

"I know you're awake," Archie murmured from his chair. She heard him sigh and shift. "You have every right to be angry. I know Thaddeus betrayed you in the worst way, but I think I should explain to you the

relationship between a king and his *compeer* before you make your decision.”

She held her breath and silently waited for him to continue.

“I once asked my father how he knew my mother was his. He said he didn’t realize what she was until after he had already fallen in love with her,” he said quietly. “Once a king acknowledges his *compeer* and the love he feels for her, the bond will snap in place, and that love becomes immeasurable. No person or force can separate him from her.”

“I don’t want Thad to love me because a bond forces him to. How is that love?” she asked, her voice small.

He shook his head. “You’re not understanding. Yes, there will be a magnetic pull to one another, but not love. For instance, if he were already in love with someone else, he may feel a pull toward you, but his heart would not be yours. To get to the point of recognizing their *compeer*, the king must love them beforehand.

“Being his *compeer* means that you are his match in every way. It does not mean he will be forced to love you. But if he does and recognizes the bond, that love will know no bounds,” he explained. “Even if you decide not to marry him, he will never leave you. Even if he must watch from the shadows, he will follow you to the ends of the world and love you the entire way.”

She turned to face the ceiling as her heart thundered in her chest before turning back to her friend. “Will you tell me another story?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“What are you two doing?” Chaz’s voice startled Winnie and Archie awake. He stood in the doorway with his arms crossed and a brow raised.

Winnie sat up and stretched. “Sleeping. What does it look like?”

Archie stood from the chair and cracked his neck. “We were scheming up ways to take your teeth,” he said casually and crossed the hall to his room.

Chaz shook his head. “You two have a weird sense of humor.”

“At least we have a sense of humor,” she shot back, folding her arms. “What can I help you with, *brother*?” She knew she was being rude, but she was still pissed that everyone was keeping secrets from her, Chaz included.

“Get dressed. Naomi wants to speak with us,” he yawned, sitting on her bed. “*Only us.*”

“Did she tell you she’s our aunt?” she asked as she grabbed her dirty dress from the floor and walked to the washroom.

He straightened. “What are you talking about? She had a message delivered to the inn. I haven’t seen her yet.”

She opened the door with a smug grin. “You are in for a treat. She said she’s our father’s sister, *and* her hair is like mine.”

His mouth hung open. “Come on then. I have got to see this.”

The council chambers were located in a plain stone building at the heart of the city. Inside, there was a boy with dark brown hair and grey eyes sitting at a desk. “Do you two have an appointment?” he asked, barely looking up from his stack of papers.

Chaz and Winnie traded a look before she stepped forward with a polite smile. “We’re here to see Naomi. Our names are Winnie and Chazriel

Hayward.”

The boy jumped from his seat and scurried around the desk. “Yes! She told me you would be by. Follow me.”

He led them down a long hallway lined with doors before he stopped at the last one and knocked. Naomi opened the door and beamed at them before she turned to the boy. “Thank you, Daniel, that will be all.” Daniel gave a slight nod and disappeared the way he came.

“Come in, you two,” she motioned to two chairs in front of her massive desk.

“Naomi, this is my brother Chazriel. I don’t think you two have been introduced yet,” Winnie said, gesturing to Chaz.

The intimidating woman rounded the desk and wrapped him in a familiar embrace. “I am so glad the gods have led you to my door,” she began, “I have missed my brother dearly, and to have his children here feels surreal. I imagine this is quite the surprise for you two as well,” she mused, sitting back down.

She looked fierce with her masculine clothes and intense features, but her voice and words were kind when she spoke to her niece and nephew. Winnie found it fascinating.

Chaz cleared his throat, “It’s nice to meet you. You will have to forgive us; our father never mentioned Takita or his family. All we knew was he didn’t see them anymore.”

Their aunt nodded. “Patrick was never meant to stay here. He loved his family, but he has wanted to see the world since we were children. When he turned eighteen, he left and traveled to each kingdom to ‘see the sights’ before he met and married your mother,” she smiled. “He loved her very much.”

Chaz’s face twisted in confusion. “How do you know all of this if you never saw him?”

She laughed and leaned on her elbows. “People may not know about Takita, but Takita is familiar with your world. We have a few runners who go into the closer towns for supplies we need. We have grow houses for crops in this cold climate, but there are still some things we cannot manufacture ourselves. To keep from drawing attention to ourselves, we do not send runners often, but your father knew the runner’s schedules when he left. He would find them on their trips and give them a letter to send

back.” She pulled a handkerchief from her drawer and dabbed her eyes. “We missed him very much.”

Winnie leaned her elbows on her knees. “Why didn’t he ever bring us to visit?”

Naomi gave a tight-lipped smile. “We don’t allow people to come and go in Takita as they please. You can leave any time you want, but you cannot come back unless it is an extenuating circumstance. For this reason, most Takitians do not leave, which is why you have never seen your hair color outside of these walls,” she said, “Though there *are* a few scattered throughout Rodina. According to tales passed down from our ancestors, our hair color was not common in the Old World either. We were of something called Scandinavian descent. Regardless, too many people coming and going draws attention. We have protected this village for thousands of years, and we will not risk our safety because people want to explore.”

Winnie nodded in understanding. “We thank you for giving us refuge. We hope we didn’t put you in a precarious position.”

Her aunt leaned back, hands clasped across her belly. “The guardians know how to cover their tracks and what is at stake if they do not. There are records of their arrival centuries ago, and it was written into our bylaws to always allow them entrance whenever requested. You pose no threat here.”

Winnie froze. This was the third time someone had referred to guardians. “What if someone pretends to be a guardian? How did you know that’s who they really were?”

Naomi gave her a strange look and said, “There is only one set of guardians for each kingdom. They were brought from the Old World by the gods-”

“Naomi,” Chaz ground out. “She doesn’t need to be bothered with a history lesson.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed, and a silent conversation passed between the two. She turned to Winnie with a shrug. “It really is quite boring. I just wanted to bring you two in to say that if you’d like, you are welcome to stay in Takita forever.”

Winnie was still reeling from the new intel she was inadvertently given on the so-called ‘guardians,’ and she needed to be prepared for anything at this point.

“Can I have clothes like yours?” she asked and pointed to Naomi’s pants.

Naomi looked down at her fitted trousers and shirt with a smirk. “Of course. Just tell the seamstress what you’d like, and she’ll make whatever you need. It will take about a week for her to finish. I will have clothes sent to you until then.”

Winnie smiled politely. “Thank you, aunt. We look forward to our stay.”

Chaz shook Naomi’s hand before they left her office and blew out a breath. “That was something I wasn’t expecting.”

Winnie glared at him and stormed off. She was positive he knew about the guardians, and if he would not be honest, she wanted nothing to do with him.

When she walked into the tavern, Francis, Clarence, Suki, Gilda, and Emmy were eating lunch. She stomped to their table and slammed her hands down with Chaz trailing behind her.

“Who are you four, *really*?” she demanded and met the eyes of everyone at the table, save her mother. “How *pray tell*, did Francis go from a hunched over, slow-walking storyteller to a warrior?”

Clarence started to speak, but she held her hand up. “Do not feed me honey. Either tell me the truth or tell me nothing.”

He held her gaze and pressed his lips together. “Then we can tell you nothing, little dove.”

She worked her jaw in frustration and looked at the people who had been her closest confidants.

“Do you know what they are, and does it have anything to do with the sword you were carrying yesterday?” she asked her mother.

Suki looked at the other four and met Chaz’s gaze over Winnie’s shoulder. “I can’t tell you about the others, but I can tell you about me. Sit down, dear.” Suki motioned to the bench across from her. “I grew up in a strict family. We were coached in etiquette, fighting, and the ways of the gods. From the time I could pick up a sword, I was training.”

Winnie’s head snapped back in surprise as her mother continued, “I hated every second of it but understood the need to protect myself. I did not want to take your childhoods from you and had decided I would start

training you each when you were eighteen. However, you two took matters into your own hands.”

She smirked when Winnie and Chaz’s cheeks reddened. “I left my old life as soon as I was old enough, and a few years later, I met Patrick. We bought the inn and added the tavern. He loved meeting new people, and I loved to cook. It was perfect for us,” she sniffed. “And that’s all there is to know, really.”

Winnie swallowed down her own emotion and swiped a rogue hair out of her face. “Thank you for telling me. It would have been nice not to have to sneak around, though,” she mumbled.

Her mother chuckled and stood. “Where’s the fun in that? Excuse me. I am going to ask if I can help in the kitchen. I have to know what they put in their stew.” She pressed her lips to Winnie’s forehead. “You’ll find out everything in due time, dear. Just know that we all love you.”

Winnie stood and started toward the stairs but was stopped by the sound of Emmy’s voice. “We’re still your friends. That was never a lie.”

Winnie turned. “Why did you call yourselves guardians?” Emmy’s shoulders deflated.

She shook her head and continued to her room.



Hours later, Thad sat at the bar and stared at the amber liquid in his glass. It burned in the best way and helped dull the ache in his chest. Delyna, the pretty barmaid with shiny black hair and upturned eyes, said it could dull a broken heart, if only temporarily.

“What in the gods’ names are you drinking?” Archer asked with piqued interest.

Thad lifted the glass. “They call it bourbon. Said it’s made with corn, rye, and barley. It tastes like shit, but it works faster than wine or ale,” he shrugged and drained his glass before holding it up for another.

Archer watched him thoughtfully, then turned to Delyna. “I’ll have one too, miss... What’s your name?” he asked and sat down on a stool.

“Delyna. No ‘miss’ required,” she responded and slid a glass of bourbon across the bar.

A giant grey wolf sat up from his lying position on the floor near the barmaid’s feet, and the Autumn King jumped a foot in the air with a yelp.

Thad chuckled and pointed. “Archer, meet Rizo. He’s Delyna’s shadow.”

Archer’s eyes were as wide as saucers as he took in the beast. “Why is he looking at me like I’m a juicy steak?”

“He doesn’t like steak, so you’re safe,” Delyna deadpanned.

He nodded slowly and looked at Thad, who shrugged and said, “He seems nice.”

Archer threw back his drink and coughed, spewing the bourbon across the bar. “I think she tried to poison me,” he said with another cough. “Or was it you?” He glared at Rizo.

The wolf yawned and laid back down with a groan.

Delyna snickered from the other side of the bar. “I forget they don’t have liquor in your world.”

Thad lowered his glass. “It’s your world too.”

“No, it’s not,” she objected and slid Archer another drink. “Sip, don’t chug.”

He nodded and winced as he took a small drink. “Thanks,” he responded and turned to Thad. “Why are you down here wallowing, old friend?”

Thad cut his eyes to Archer. “You know why, *Archie*,” he sneered.

A deep laugh rumbled from the Autumn King’s chest. “I never took you as the jealous type, Thaddeus, and your assumption is incorrect.”

“I saw you two sleeping together. You can cut the shit.” Thad saw Delyna stiffen before she hurried off to help someone else. He had not meant to raise his voice, but the alcohol lowered his inhibitions.

Archer shook his head and looked at the barmaid. “I was in a chair across the room,” he called, slicing his eyes back to Thad. “Believe it or not, thinking you could be murdered at any moment for days on end can make you a little on edge.”

Shame churned in Thad’s stomach. “Shit,” he cursed and pushed his glass away. “I’m losing my mind, knowing she’s hurting because of me. I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

Archer took a drink and smacked his lips. "This really isn't bad once you get used to it," he said, holding his empty glass up for Delyna. "She feels betrayed. She's convinced you only want her because you think she's your *compeer* and not because you love her for who she was before your big revelation."

"I have to make her understand. She's wrong, and you know what's at stake if she doesn't believe me," Thad said miserably.

"You'll think of something."

"Why did you two sleep with the door open and the lights blazing?" he asked quietly.

Archer adjusted uncomfortably in his seat and took a long drink.

"Not being able to see out of the room makes me feel trapped," he admitted. "We were imprisoned without much light for so long, that too much darkness..." his voice trailed off. "I don't want to talk about it. Any word on when Larkin will arrive? We need to formulate a plan to kill Silas as soon as possible. The longer we wait, the more time we give him to commandeer more power. Our duchesses are hidden, as are yours, according to my reports, but Larkin's are still living in the open," Archer said.

Thad leaned back. "Ours are in the palace, not hidden. He could easily take them by force without me there. I don't usually go back until the Winter Sols--"

He was cut off when Archer stood, knocking his stool over, eyes wide. "I forgot about the Autumn Equinox," he mumbled, swinging his head to the barmaid. "Delyna, how long until the Autumn Equinox?"

"It's about three or four weeks away," she called over her shoulder.

He swore and waved a hand toward her. "Thank you." He motioned for Thad to follow him outside. "I have to find someone to marry, or my power will be weakened. We can't chance it."

Thad released a string of expletives that made Archer's outburst sound mild. "We have to find Naomi. Surely there is an eligible woman in Takita who wouldn't mind marrying a king."

Archer's face was grim. "If not, I must leave immediately to secure arrangements."

The next day, Thad stood with Henry inside one of the many grow houses on the outskirts of Takita. The design of the building was ingenious,

and he was thoroughly impressed. Finding a way to grow enough crops to feed their entire village when they have snow year-round is no small feat.

Each of the massive buildings had steel furnaces lining the outside, with ducts that directed the heat into the main areas. The ceilings were solid glass to allow in sunlight while still holding the warmth. There were rows of wooden troughs filled with soil and crops, and villagers worked throughout the day, tending to them. He had wondered how they were able to self-sustain for so long undetected, and now he knew.

But there was something that had been on his mind since the battle with Spring, and he needed answers. He had no idea why the snow fell red when he lost control. “What do you know about my powers? Why was the snow in Spring the color of blood? It has never happened before,” he asked Henry.

Henry turned and scratched his head. “My guess is, because you were so angry, the chemical composition changed. There is a small planet called Pluto that has red snow for the same reason.”

Thad stared at his friend like he’d grown a second head. “What the fuck is a Pluto?”

Henry looked at the ceiling, mumbling to himself. “It’s too much to explain, and you’re better off not knowing; besides, don’t take this the wrong way, but you look like shit,” he said as he leaned over a box to inspect the blueberry bushes that lined the soil. “Maybe if you pinched your cheeks for some color or wore a fresh shirt, Winnie would take you back.”

Thad glared at him. “I look dashing in everything. We don’t all have to try hard like you. Speaking of which, I need your help.”

Henry pivoted toward him, and his eyebrows almost launched off his face. “Do you need me to remove the stick that’s been up your ass? I do fancy both men and women, so it might be fu-“

“Piss off,” Thad laughed. “No, I need yours and everyone else’s help. I’m going to regain Winnie’s trust, and when I feel like I have, I need everyone to be ready.”

“Tell me what you need, and I will make it happen,” Henry promised.

He smiled. “Let’s walk. This will take a while.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Can you believe they have snow all year?” Winnie asked Archie, her eyes wide. “And they grow food in buildings with glass roofs they call grow houses.”

She speared a green bean into her mouth. She could not believe they had been here for four days of summer and had to wear a cloak every day.

“Have you seen their training arena yet? It’s bigger than the one in Kore,” Archie asked around a mouthful of food.

She smiled. “Let’s go tomorrow. I need to build my muscles back. I haven’t trained in almost two weeks.”

He made his voice high-pitched, “Two whole weeks? Oh my gods, whatever will we do?”

She frowned and threw her roll at his head. “Shut up, or I’ll wax your eyebrows when you sleep.”

“You’d pour candle wax on my face?” he asked incredulously.

She shook her head. “No. Actually, I don’t know. Delyna told me they have women here who use a type of wax to remove hair instead of a straight blade. She said it makes it smoother for longer.”

He looked mortified. “Doesn’t it hurt?”

She shrugged. “Probably, but women have to push babies out of their vaginas, so ripping hair out is nothing.”

He choked on his food and began beating his fist against his chest. “Please never say that in my presence again.”

“Who knew the great Autumn King was scared of vaginas,” she teased.

The color drained from his face, and Delyna burst out laughing from behind the bar. Winnie wiggled her eyebrows at her before she turned back to him with a huge grin.

“I’m going to find some of that wax and rip *your* eyebrows out tonight,” he threatened across the table.

“I told you you’d like it here,” said a deep voice from behind them.

Winnie flipped around and stood in shock. “Rustin?”

His handsome face pulled into a bigger smile as he strolled to where she stood. “I knew you were from here the moment I saw you. Only a true Takitian could have your beauty.”

She blushed at his syrupy compliment, and a ghost of a smile pulled at her mouth. “You must be a runner,” she realized.

He nodded. “And you’re Naomi’s niece.”

Archie stepped beside her with a scowl. “How do you two know each other?”

Without looking away from her, Rustin said, “I passed through her inn on my way to gather supplies. Her boyfriend almost split my skull in two.”

Archie chuckled. “That sounds like Thad.”

“He’s not my boyfriend anymore,” she grumbled.

Rustin shifted on his feet. “Is that so? Maybe you and I could have dinner tomorrow night.”

“Not a chance,” Archie scoffed.

Rustin finally turned to the Autumn King and sized him up. “New boyfriend?”

Winnie huffed. “No, and I wish men would stop speaking for me,” she bit out and turned an annoyed glare on Archie.

His mouth tipped up. “No, but I was trying to save your skull. Thad is here too.”

Rustin smirked and took a step back. “In that case, I’ll see you around, Winnie.”

He turned as she stared after him.

She punched Archie in the arm. “You are definitely losing your eyebrows tonight.”

After dinner, Archie and Winnie headed to their rooms early so they could head to the arena at sunrise.

She stopped abruptly when she saw a man remove her door from the hinges. “Excuse me, sir? Is there a problem with my door?”

Thad stepped from her room with his hands in his pockets. “I had them switch the door,” he said and motioned for her and Archie to step into the room. “I had them create a door that was solid glass so you wouldn’t feel trapped.”

He knocked on the glass pane and turned to Archie. “I had them bring a more comfortable chair,” he said and pointed to the lush, oversized chair in the corner of the room before tipping his head toward the far corner of the ceiling. “I also had them install a larger lantern that is guaranteed to burn from dusk to dawn.”

Winnie’s hand flew to her chest with a gasp.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to bathe before turning in for the night,” Archie said with a small wave and retreated to his room.

She was staring at Thad in shock, and his lip twitched with uncertainty. “I hope I didn’t overstep; I just wanted you to be comf-”

She threw her arms around him, and her anger was momentarily forgotten. Pulling back, she ran a thumb across his chiseled jaw and whispered, “Thank you.”

The last of the workers left quietly, leaving them alone.

His wintry blue eyes bore into hers, and he pulled her to his chest. “Whatever you need, it’s yours. I know you don’t believe me, but I love you,” he murmured and brushed his lips over hers. “I will always regret making you doubt that, and I will never forgive myself for letting my past relationship hold me back from you.”

“Tell me about her,” she prodded. “I need to know what was so bad that it kept you from loving me.”

“It never kept me from loving you,” he corrected. “It only kept me from admitting it.”

He let out a slow breath and sat in the new chair across the room.

“Lana and I met one Summer when I was staying in Conso for my off-seasons. She and her father had moved there from the Spring Kingdom six years prior. She worked at the local market, selling fresh-cut tulips from her father’s pasture.” He smiled fondly at the memory, and it made Winnie’s stomach clench.

“She was beautiful, and I was immediately taken with her. I used to find my own bride back then,” he recalled, “We spent almost every day together that Summer, and we quickly fell in love. I had never felt for

anyone the way I felt for her. I was sure she was my *compeer*; I would have bet my life on it.”

Hearing about this other woman was complete torture for her, but she needed to know. “What happened?”

His jaw clenched. “Two weeks before the Winter Solstice, she slept with Silas.”

Winnie gasped and covered her mouth. “What?”

He nodded. “She came to me crying and said she was sorry. I couldn’t even look at her. I thought we would be together forever, have children, and ascend into the heavens. Meanwhile, she was fucking the King of Spring,” he spat.

She sat motionlessly. She thought that hearing why he’d been so reserved would make her feel better, but it somehow made her feel worse. “You’ve already made a mistake about your *compeer* once. What makes you think you aren’t making it again?”

He was across the room in the blink of an eye. He knelt on the ground at her feet with her knees touching his chest and cupped her cheek. “You have no idea the way I feel about you, or you wouldn’t ask that question. The way I loved Lana is nothing compared to the way I love you. It was foolish, fickle love with her. It is world-shattering, heart-binding love with you,” he insisted. “Don’t you see? You are my soul. Without you, I am no one and nothing.”

She rested her forehead on his. “How can someone who says they love me that much hurt me this bad?”

He made a strangled sound and stood. “I will never forgive myself for making you feel this way, but I will make you see that what I say is true. You are it for me. You always have been.”

He turned to leave but stopped at the door without turning around. “I love you, hellcat. Even from the stars.”

He was gone when she whispered into the empty room, “I love you too, King of Winter. Even from the stars.”



Two days later, Archie sat at the bar alone, and Delyna poured him a golden liquor she called tequila. He liked it better than bourbon, but she said you could only drink it in smaller quantities. He ran a frustrated hand through his hair as he thought about his conundrum.

Naomi said he could marry anyone from the village, but he had to find his wife himself. In all his years, he had never had to find his own bride. He had no problem finding women to bed but asking someone to marry you for three months was something else entirely.

“Why do you look like Rizo ate your favorite pair of boots?” Delyna asked.

“I have to find a woman to marry in the next three weeks,” he sighed and sat his chin on his hand. “Usually, my advisers find one for me, but Naomi said I’d have to ask someone myself. No problem, right? ‘Hi, miss, I know our customs are strange to you, but would you please marry me for the next three months? Oh, we must sleep together at least the first night for the bond to solidify.’” He groaned and threw back his drink. “I would get slapped before I finished.”

“We know your customs and the reasons. It may not be as hard as you think,” she said.

He shrugged. “Back home, a woman is elevated in status and paid handsomely for the rest of her life once the marriage is terminated. Women beg the matchmakers to consider them. Here, none of that matters unless she decides to move out of Takita at some point.” He rested his forehead against the bar. “You wouldn’t want to marry me, would you?”

She paused before shrugging. “Sure, I’ll marry you.”

He kept his head down and chuckled. “Ha-ha. Can I have another tequila, please?”

“I’m serious,” she countered, filling his glass. “If you need a temporary wife so the world does not end, I’ll marry you.”

He sat up and narrowed his eyes. “Don’t joke with me.”

She tipped the side of her mouth, revealing a dimple. “I’m not joking. I’ll do it.”

“Do you understand what that entails? You would be married to me for the entire Autumn season. We would have to break the bond on the Winter Solstice no matter what. You’d have to consummate our marriage at least on the first night.” His eyes searched hers. He needed to make sure she understood what she agreed to.

“I know how the royal weddings work. We’re hidden from the world; the world is not hidden from us,” she shot back, putting her hands on her hips. “Do you need a wife or not?”

He jumped over the bar effortlessly and pulled her into a crushing hug. “You just saved my ass. Anything you want is yours. And call me Archie. All of my close friends do.”



A week later, Winnie flitted around her room and straightened her bedding before she dug around for her boots. Emmy would be here any minute with their dresses for the Takita Summer Festival, and she did not want to keep anyone waiting. She thought it was strange that they would hold their Summer Festival so close to the Autumn Equinox, but she learned not to question their strange customs.

Sitting on her bed with a sigh, she thought about the past few days. She’d spent more time with Thad and Henry in the tavern, just like she used to in Anorak. She always knew trying to keep her distance from Thad was futile, but she had not imagined it would have been as painful as it was.

She loved him too much to stay away, no matter how bad he hurt her. Every night before she retired to her room, he grabbed her hand and told her that his heart was hers whenever she was ready to take it.

Despite being able to see through her bedroom door, she and Archie keep it cracked. Thad stopped by her room every night when he thought they were sleeping and whispered ‘*I love you*’ into the night. She could always hear his words float through the lamplight, and it took all her self-control not to follow him to his room.

She gave in to him two days ago. There was no use in denying how she felt. Since then, they only separated to sleep.

Emmy knocked on her door, holding a bundle of white fabric. “This was the only dress they could find in your size for today until our wardrobes are finished,” she blabbered, rushing into the room and dumped the dress on the bed.

Winnie picked it up and gasped. It was breathtakingly beautiful, but too much to wear to a festival. The sleeves were long and fitted with tiny silver beads that wound down the arms in branched spirals. They looked like ice-covered tree branches and sparkled when the light hit them. The bodice was fitted with a low V in the back, covered in the same beadwork as the sleeves. The skirt was thin and made of silk in an unusual style Winnie had never seen before. The bottom had a slight train, and she scoffed. "Is this some kind of joke? I can't wear this to a festival."

Emmy shrugged and held her hands out, revealing a flashy blue dress. "We'll look snobby together. I guess party dresses are all that were available."

Winnie found herself laughing as she fell into her old routine with her best friend. She missed her, and the last few days, Emmy had stopped in her room for small things here and there. She twisted Winnie's hair back and chattered about how much fun they were going to have tonight.

When she finished, she clapped excitedly. "There. We're supposed to meet the others at the festival, so we'd better go." She sat down two more garment bags and pulled out two cloaks. "Naomi sent these too. It's cold out." Her cloak was a darker shade of blue than her dress, and Winnie's was a beautiful white with a light grey fur-lined hood and collar.

"Gods," Winnie breathed. "Their fashion here is stunning."

She quickly followed Emmy downstairs, excited for Thad to see her in such finery. When they stepped onto the cobblestone sidewalk covered in a light layer of snow, she looked at the hundreds of lanterns strung across the street. It was almost dusk, and the light danced across the glittering ground.

She started in surprise at the sight of her mother and Chaz. They were dressed in the nicest clothes she'd ever seen either of them wear. Apparently, no one had gotten their clothes back from the seamstress yet.

She looked past them to see if everyone else was dressed as pretentiously, but no one else was there.

"What is this?" she asked, confused by the lack of people.

Chaz grinned. "Why don't you come with me and see."

Some of the villagers lined the sidewalk with bright smiles and curious glances. In the middle of the street stood Archie, the 'guardians,' Naomi, and Delyna on either side of a narrow path. At the end of the path

stood Thad in a white shirt, white jacket, and matching white trousers. Behind him was a massive arch made of ice, and her mouth parted in awe.

She walked down the aisle toward him, her eyes drinking in the twinkling sculpture. When she was closer, she realized the arch was covered in hundreds of flowers carved into the ice, and her hand flew to her mouth.

She looked at him, stunned. “Thad?”

He grabbed her hand, pulled her to him, and knelt in the snow. “I have loved you from the very beginning. It was always supposed to be you and me. I’m not asking you to marry me because you’re my *compeer*; I’m asking you to marry me because I can’t imagine a day of my life that doesn’t have you in it. You deserve the wedding you want, and I would bring you the moon if you’d only ask. I will spend every day of my life loving you, and even when it’s over, I’ll love you from the stars.

“If you do not want to do the blood bond, then we will marry in name only, and when you take your last breath, I will take mine too. I love you more than my own life, Winnie Hayward, and I’d like to be your husband if you’ll have me.”

She stared down at the man who had made her feel beautiful when no one else could; the man who built her a glass door when she was broken; the man who has all her firsts and her heart. She knew there was never going to be anyone else because he was hers, and she was his. She knelt with him in the snow, pressing her forehead to his, and murmured, “I’ve been yours from the moment my dagger pressed into your neck.”

He gently cupped her chin and brought his mouth to hers. She grabbed his arms and deepened their kiss, causing icy sparks to hum through her veins.

Chaz cleared his throat loudly. “Is that a yes?”

Winnie and Thad laughed as they broke apart and looked at their friends and family. He helped her to her feet and looked at Naomi, who stepped forward.

“Winnie, would you like a traditional Takitian wedding, or will you be doing the Winter blood-bonding ceremony?” she asked.

Winnie looked at Thad before she turned back to her aunt. “We’ll do both.”

He pulled her to his chest, his relief radiating off him in waves. When he released her, a small, continuous breeze blew her hair back gently.

Her eyes found Archie's, and he silently mouthed, "*Bad. Ass.*" A laugh bubbled from her throat, and she turned back to Thad.

A realization struck her like a lightning bolt, and her heart sank. "Wait..." she began before turning to Francis. "I thought the Winter King could only marry on the Winter Solstice. It's not even Autumn yet."

Francis shook his finger at her with a smile. "You *have* been listening to my stories. Yes, it is true that the Winter King can only marry a conduit bride on the Winter Solstice, but he can marry his *compeer* at any time. The sooner he has his True Queen, the better."

Her heart began to race as panic set in. "But what if I'm not?"

Thad swallowed her words with a soft kiss. "You are. If you are not, then I am not the Winter King," he insisted. He saw her doubt and stroked his thumbs over the inside of her wrists. "Trust me, hellcat."

She blew out a breath and nodded.

Naomi stood behind them while they held hands and said, "King Thaddeus of Winter, do you take Winnie Hayward of Takita to be your wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?"

He never took his eyes from hers as he answered, "Yes. Even from the stars."

Naomi turned to her. "Winnie Hayward, do you take King Thaddeus of Winter to be your husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?"

She let a single tear fall and murmured, "Yes. Even from the stars."

Naomi tied a ribbon around their joined hands and announced, "As council leader of Takita, and under the eyes of the gods, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Thad placed a gentle kiss on Winnie's lips before he straightened and took Henry's small dagger.

His eyes bounced between hers. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

She gave him a small smile. "Yes. I want to be completely yours, forever."

He swallowed hard, removed the ribbon, and sliced a small cut across each of their palms. They pressed their hands together, and he whispered for only her to hear, "Repeat my words: I bond my blood to thee."

My power is your power. My home is your home. My land is your land. Under the gods.”

She folded her fingers through his and whispered back, “I bond my blood to thee. My power is your power. My home is your home. My land is your land. Under the gods.”

Ice formed over their joined hands and wound around their arms before it covered their entire bodies. She could see the faint outline of Chaz and Archie lurching toward them, but Clarence and Henry held them back.

“This is what happens when the Winter King marries his *compeer*. Just wait,” Henry said.

Within seconds, the ice that covered them exploded into a fine mist. Winnie and Thad’s faces were etched in shock as they looked at their hands. Shimmering silver lines that matched the beadwork in her dress spread from their fingers and swirled under their sleeves. They each pushed up the fabric on their arms and saw the design twisted around their forearms.

Everyone around them cheered, even the villagers who had been silently watching from the sidewalks.

Winnie looked from her hand to her dress and glanced at Gilda. “You made my dress,” she breathed in disbelief. “You knew.”

Gilda nodded. “I could never forget the markings of Winter’s True Queen. I wanted you dressed to match your station.” Winnie dropped Thad’s hand and wrapped her arms around the dressmaker before doing the same to every one of her friends.

She clasped her hand around Thad’s and looked back to her patchwork family. Her eyes found Emmy’s, and she smiled.

“Now, will you tell me who you really are? As your True Queen, I demand it,” she joked.

Everyone laughed, and Francis stepped forward. “Indeed, we will, lass, but first, let’s celebrate.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Silas and Edwin dismounted their steeds and led them into the cave they used as a stable.

“Do you think they were able to force the two to marry, your grace?” Edwin asked thoughtfully.

Silas stood up straight. Edwin was a loyal dog but sometimes doubted his wisdom, and it was infuriating.

“Yes,” he snapped. “Do not question me again. Come.”

They entered the mouth of the main cave and made their way down the long corridor. The torches were burned out, and he slowed his pace.

“What’s happened? Why is there no light?” he demanded, whipping his head to Edwin and growled, “I knew we should have come earlier. The men probably tucked tail and left the girl to rot.”

Edwin had routed Silas to safety when Thaddeus lost his mind over the mortal girl. Silas sneered to himself. *If I ever find my compeer, I will kill her immediately. They are only a weakness.*

He clenched his fists, and pieces of rock began to crumble from the walls. Thaddeus had bested him this time, but it would not happen again.

He turned to Edwin. “Light these gods-damned torches and meet me back in the cavern with the girl. Do not underestimate the Autumn King, boy. He may not have access to moving air, but he is still strong and fast.”

Edwin nodded and jogged to the horses to retrieve flint from the saddlebags.

Once they each had a torch, they made their way toward the cavern. Edwin stepped down the hall toward the prisoners’ cell, and Silas continued toward his throne room. He stepped into the spacious room and began lighting the torches but stopped when the light illuminated a body.

“*Edwin!*” he yelled, his booming voice echoing through the chamber.

His trusted guard sprinted through the opening and halted when his foot collided with another body on the floor. Silas could hardly contain his rage, and the walls began to shake with his fury.

“Light the torches, *now.*”

“Yes, your grace.” Edwin darted around the room and as more light filled the space, so did more bodies.

Silas walked to the guard closest to him and squatted beside him, searching for wounds. “Check the men. I need to know how they died.” He stalked across the room and sat upon his throne, looking out at the sea of bodies. He was going to enjoy ripping the life from Winnie Hayward while Thaddeus watched; of that, he was sure.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Archie leaned against his headboard and wondered why the gods did not grant him the power to fall asleep on command. Usually, he and Winnie talked each other to sleep, but now that she's married, he would have to find other ways to drift into dreamland.

When he thought Winnie was ready, Thad had approached him and the rest of their group to ask for help in readying the clothes and decorations for the ceremony. Gilda demanded everyone come to her immediately, but Winnie begged him to accompany her and Thad at the training arena. He appeased her every time because he would do anything she asked. If not for her quick thinking in the caverns, they would both be dead.

A lump formed in his throat as he remembered her hugging him after her wedding ceremony. She had whispered in his ear for only him to hear, "*Now you have a friend for the rest of your life, Archie.*"

One night in the cave, he told her how hard it was to lose everyone but still go on living, and she remembered.

He had not realized how alone he was until he met her, and he imagined this was what having a sibling felt like. Of course, he would not know because kings only had one child, their heir, but he assumed it was the same.

He was lost in thought when a wet nose prodded his arm. He jumped in alarm and stared into the big blue eyes of Rizo. "Hello, you hellacious beast."

He scratched Rizo behind his ear and heard a soft snicker from the hallway.

His eyes darted to the open door, and he saw Delyna shaking her head. "I was just snuffing out some of the lamps, and he decided to tell you

goodnight,” she laughed and walked into the room, looking around. “Why do you and Winnie always have your doors open?”

He let out a humorless laugh and rubbed the back of his neck. “We were held captive, as I’m sure you know.” She nodded, a silky black strand of hair coming loose from her braid.

“We were shut into a dark, windowless room for days on end. Being behind a closed door for too long isn’t exactly a good time anymore,” he shrugged.

She eyed him thoughtfully. “And it’s also hard for you to be alone. That’s why you’re still awake at this hour.” It was not a question. He nodded, and she made her way to him and sat on the bed. “Then I suppose I will have to bore you to sleep,” she declared and leaned against the headboard, crossing her feet on the bed.

“I’ve never seen anything outside of Takita. I’ve always wondered what everything looked like without snow. We have books, of course, in our village library, and some are from the Old World, but it’s not the same. Though, I don’t think I could live anywhere but Takita. It is my home, and I love it here. One day you will have to tell me all about your kingdom.”

He grinned, “I will put *you* to sleep with my ramblings of my kingdom. I want to hear more about you and your shadow.”

She flashed a row of white teeth. “I found Rizo behind the grow houses, huddled next to a furnace. Wolves normally have no problem with the cold, but he was a pup who still needed his mother’s teat and was barely bigger than a shoe.”

Archie looked at Rizo and gave him extra pets.

“He was cold and hungry, so I scooped him into my apron and took him home. We do not normally take wild animals as pets, but I could not leave him to die. I begged my mother to let him stay with us. This was only a few years ago, so I was already an adult, but in Takita, it is a tradition for children to stay with their families until they are wed. She agreed, as long as he didn’t ruin anything.” She smiled tenderly at the miniature horse beside them. “He’s been my shadow ever since.”

Archie watched her in awe. “You truly are a spectacular woman.”

She blushed and waved him off. “Anyone would have done it. People here are generally kind. Fierce and protective, but kind.”

He felt guilt tug at his gut and knew he couldn’t let her give up a night’s rest for him, so he slowly closed his eyes and feigned sleep.



Thad emerged from the washroom naked, looking every bit the god incarnate he was. He covered the glass door in a thick layer of ice, blocking them from everyone's view.

Winnie sat in her shift and examined the lines on her arm, completely enraptured by their beauty. They wound all the way to the top of her shoulder, and they were breathtaking.

She was still trying to wrap her mind around everything that happened. It felt like a dream, and she was afraid she would wake at any moment.

She began to piece together Naomi's words last week about the guardians and the fact that Gilda said she remembered the Winter Queen's mark. That was impossible, or at least she had thought it was. That would make the 'guardians' older than Thad.

He picked her up and situated himself on the bed with her in his lap. His closeness thrust heat to her core and caused wetness to gather between her thighs. She gave his waist a slight squeeze and tried to tamp the desire that coursed through her.

He moved his face closer to hers and said, "Thank you for making me the happiest man in the world. Now let me return the favor."

A shiver ran down her spine, hardening her nipples. It did not go unnoticed by him, and he trailed his eyes to her breasts. Slowly, he eased the straps of her shift off her shoulders until it pooled around her waist. He ran his nose up her chest to her neck and flicked his tongue against her racing pulse, making her rock forward with a moan. The full length of him pressed against her, creating more tension in her belly.

He claimed her mouth with a world-shattering kiss, his tongue trailing fire across hers.

He stood, placed her on the bed, and knelt in front of her. Painfully slow, he ran his hands up her thighs.

He trailed his mouth down her body, and her head rolled back. “You taste like forever,” he mumbled against her skin.

Slowly, his hand made its way to her center, stroking through the slickness he found there. “Gods, you are so wet,” he growled.

His mouth found her throbbing, and his tongue did things she had only heard about. She palmed her breasts and arched her back, riding his face as he lapped up her arousal. Her body began to tingle with an icy caress, and she exploded, screaming in ecstasy.

He looked up, his voice husky, “How do you want it tonight, hellcat?”

She chewed her bottom lip nervously and sat up on her elbows. “What do you mean?”

His mouth tipped in a sensual smile. “I mean, I’m going to show you how your first time should have been, and I’m going to take my time worshipping every inch of you. But before we start, I need to know how you want it.”

He leaned forward and kissed her thigh, making her whimper. “Do you want it on your hands and knees?” Another kiss. “On your back?” He ran his tongue the length of her thigh. “Against the wall?” His breath was warm on her skin, and she began to squirm. “Or do you want to ride me until you scream?”

Every word sent a bolt of heat through her, the tension becoming too much. “Thad,” she whispered. “Please.” She was panting now, needing to feel him.

His voice was low and gruff, “You’re killing me, hellcat. I need to start soon before I lose control and devour you whole.”

She sat up slowly and smiled, running her tongue around the shell of his ear, and whispered, “I want them all.”

He pounced, flipping her to bend over the edge of the bed. His tongue slid down her backside, grazing one hole on its way to the other.

He ate her again until she was screaming, and when she was about to fall over the edge, he stood, aligned himself with her entrance, and showed her position number one.



Archie awoke with a start and felt a warm body pressed against his. He hadn't intended to *actually* fall asleep last night, but apparently, Delyna's presence was more soothing than he thought.

He opened his eyes, and surprise flitted across his chest at the sight before him. Rizo was snuggled next to him, with his back pressed along the length of Archie's leg as soft snores huffed from his nose.

He smiled and gave the mammoth a scratch on his belly. Rizo slowly sat up, yawned, and stretched before he licked his hand. The wolf stood up and left without a backward glance.

Archie was going to enjoy being the beast's father for a few months. Hopefully, he could stomach letting them both go at Autumn's end.



Winnie paused halfway down the stairs when she noticed everyone sitting at a table, staring at her.

Emmy stood at the bottom of the steps and beamed. "We'd like to answer all of your questions now. Will you please sit with us?"

Winnie turned to Thad behind her, and he gave a slight tip of his head. "You should sit," he suggested. Her stomach churned as she approached the table and sat down.

Francis, Henry, Gilda, Clarence, and Emmy sat on one side, while Chaz, Suki, Archie, and Thad sat on the bench with her.

Clarence rapped his fist on the table. "We know you have a lot of questions for us, little dove. Ask whatever you would like. We promise complete transparency."

She chewed on the inside of her cheek and wondered where to start. Lifting her head, she met each pair of eyes. “Which of you are guardians?”

Clarence motioned to the five of them on his side of the table. “All of us, plus Luther.”

Chaz spit out his ale, a look of astonishment on his face. “Luther too? Gods, who else?” he cried, throwing his hands in the air.

Francis chuckled. “There are only six Winter guardians, lad.”

Chaz shook his head and drained his mug in one swallow, mumbling to himself.

She turned to Henry. “Even you?”

He blew out a slow breath. “Yes, even me. Thad didn’t even know.”

Thad’s hand landed on her thigh and squeezed. “Why did you all lie to me, and what is a guardian?”

Francis leaned on his elbows. “There are guardians in every kingdom who came from the Old World. The gods chose those they felt were the purest of the mortals and bestowed upon them immortality. Our sole job was to protect the kingdom’s *compeers* when they were born until they either wedded the king or died before their thirty-sixth birthday.”

Winnie blanched. Now Chaz’s statement from her first day in Takita made sense. She wondered how many times her soul had died before now.

“In the years between *compeers*, we protect the kingdom,” the old man finished.

She shifted. “How is it possible that the kings don’t know who you are?”

“When a king and his *compeer* wed, we explain ourselves to them, and how important it is that when they have a child, we are not to be revealed to them. We visit their parents until their ascension into the heavens but never interact with the children until they are grown. Even then, we have to space our time long enough so they will forget our faces,” Gilda said.

Thad’s head jolted. “Have I met you five before?”

Francis grinned. “You’ve met us here and there. There is always one guardian stationed to stay with the king. Usually it’s in an invisible position, but this is the first time two of us have been so close to you. It is because we could tell something was brewing.”

Thad looked like he was going to faint. “Even you, Henry?”

Henry winked. “Even me, big boy.”

Thad barked out a laugh and shook his head. Henry always knew how to diffuse a situation, and Winnie wondered if he'd always been that way.

She turned to Archie. "Have you met your guardians?"

His face was unreadable. "I don't know. I didn't know guardians existed until I met them, and until now, I didn't know the full extent of what they were." He eyed them suspiciously. "Do you know who the Autumn guardians are?"

Emmy leaned forward, her every word laced with seduction. "Now, now, King Archer, you know we can't tell you that." She winked, and his face blazed with embarrassment. She had that effect on men, and Winnie's shoulders shook as she tried to hold in a laugh.

Archie glared at her. "It wasn't that funny," he mumbled.

She leaned back and looked at her mother and Chaz. "What secrets do you two have?"

Suki rolled her eyes, and Chaz held his hands up. "I only knew about the guardians because they brought us here. Other than that, I know nothing," he swore.

Winnie sighed. "Why couldn't you just tell me?"

Emmy's voice was soft. "We aren't allowed to interfere. If we do, the gods will yank us to the heavens and replace us with another guardian, just as they do when a god inhabits our body."

Winnie's mouth parted in surprise. "Oh. Has that ever happened before? And why do the gods insist we find each other on our own?"

Emmy shrugged as if they were discussing the weather. "It hasn't happened to us, but we've heard rumors of it happening in other kingdoms. As far as your second question, the gods want the kings to experience finding real love on their own. They already have so much taken from them as it is."

Winnie's face twisted. "So, I'm immortal now, right?" The guardians nodded, and Thad gave her thigh another reassuring squeeze. She glanced at her mother and Chaz, emotion clogging her throat. "Oh."

Suki stood and walked behind her. She wrapped her arms around her shoulders and placed a kiss on her cheek. "You would have lost us anyway, dear. Now you get to live on to enjoy your time with everyone else here."

Winnie could not reply to her mother without losing her composure, so she addressed the guardians instead. "I apologize for being upset with

you all. I understand now why you had to lie. I was just hurt and felt betrayed.”

Emmy reached across the table and clasped her hand. “All you did was cry and stomp around. I would have cut your hair off in your sleep if it were me,” she teased.

Winnie giggled, but Thad scowled. “Are we forgetting when she tried to crush my windpipe? She was vicious.”

Emmy’s eyes turned to slits. “You also didn’t have to lie to her, *your majesty*. You got what you deserved.”

Winnie smirked. “You did deserve it.”

He leaned over and kissed her, murmuring against her lips, “I’ll never deserve it again. I promise you that.”

“I actually have an announcement,” Archie said. When he had everyone’s attention, he waved Delyna over. “Delyna has agreed to marry me on the Autumn Equinox.”

“Oh shit, I forgot about the Equinox,” Henry said. “That would have been *really* bad.”

“Hopefully, Larkin is here by then to break his bond. If he’s not, he can do it on his own, but surely Luther will have him and his Queen Regent back before then?” Archie looked to Thad for reassurance.

Thad’s brows lowered. “Luther was going to travel to Kore before Zoris so he could bring back a report. He should be arriving at the Summer capital any day now.”

Archie nodded. “Either way, plan to attend another wedding in three weeks.” He turned to Delyna. “We owe you many thanks. You do me a great honor.”

She lifted a shoulder. “I don’t have anything else to do.”

Henry slapped his hands on the table and stood. “This calls for a round of Coin Cup.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Edwin led the Spring King down the dark hallways of the Summer Palace in Zoris. Silas was thankful his hideout was only a day and a half ride from the Summer capital. They could not afford to waste any more time.

He needed to test his powers to see if he had enough from each king to kill them. Thaddeus and Archer were missing, so that left the idiot Larkin as his test subject. Knowing the Summer King, he was drunk and passed out, making the job easier.

Edwin killed two guards outside of the palace walls and removed their uniforms for him and the Spring King. Silas hated dressing below his station, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

He had found homeless boys and taken them in to train as his perfect soldiers. They were loyal to him for saving them from a lonely death and would do anything he asked. Edwin had an impeccable memory and unmatched loyalty, even among the street rats. He was a bit of a fanatic, but right now, Silas was glad for it.

He required all his spies to memorize the palace where they were stationed, but Edwin, ever the pleaser, took it upon himself to memorize them all.

Edwin approached the two guards who stood outside of the king's chambers, and in one swift motion, slashed both of their throats. He wiped his daggers on their uniforms and motioned toward the door.

He pulled a glass vial and cloth from his pocket and eased the door open. Larkin and a woman were sound asleep, without a stitch of clothing. Silas lingered on the curves of the woman and licked his lips. It had been a couple months since he'd fucked, and his dick jumped. He would have to

pay Seren Longspeak a visit when he was back in Uruk if she was still alive.

Edwin pressed the cloth to the top of the vial and turned it over quickly before he covered Larkin's nose. The Summer King's eyes flashed open for a second before they rolled back in his head. He did the same to the sleeping woman and returned the vial to his pocket.

Silas pulled him away from the bed and stood before Larkin, his lip curled in disgust. His fingertips itched to release all he had, but he could not alert the palace to their presence. He had practiced this time and time again, and each power now came easily when summoned. They were not strong enough to destroy anything, especially his Autumn wind, but they may be enough for this.

He pulled a tiny sprout from his pocket and placed it in his palm. It started to stretch and grow at his command, and once it twirled through the air toward the Summer King, he pushed the ice and wind with it, twisting them like a rope. He gave a final hard push and shot them into Larkin's chest with a grunt.

The Summer King's body arched off the bed, and a golden light shone through his eyes. After a few minutes of Silas pushing the powers into him, he exploded.

Silas didn't know what he expected but being covered in bits of flesh and bone was not it. Still, he reveled in what he had done, and an insidious smile curled his lip when he looked at Edwin.

"Now, we plan."



Winnie and the rest of their group met Naomi in the courtyard behind their barracks. She wanted to show everyone their better equipment so they could begin to train harder. They had been training on their own in the spare arena space but needed more. The fight against Silas would not be easy, and everyone needed to be at their best.

“As long as you do not get in my soldiers’ way, you can do as you please. You are welcome to any of our weapons and facilities at any time,” Naomi said as she finished their tour.

Thad stepped forward and shook her hand. “We appreciate all you and the council are doing for us. The Winter Kingdom will not soon forget it.”

“Neither will the Autumn Kingdom. Anything you need, we will provide,” Archie added.

She nodded. “Noted, gentlemen.”

Winnie’s shoulders slumped. “I wish I had the arrows you made for me, Clarence.”

Clarence laughed and clapped her on the shoulder. “When we head out to battle, we’ll make a stop in Anorak to pick them up.”

Chaz stepped forward. “Uh, hi,” he said, waving a hand. “Over my dead body is my little sister going into battle against the Spring King.” He looked at everyone as though they were insane.

Winnie scowled. “I can fight as well as your warriors. I’m going.”

Her brother narrowed his eyes. “No, you are not.”

She pulled her shoulders back and set her jaw. “I am your queen. I will do as I please.”

Everyone went still, and Chaz’s jaw dropped, but he quickly recovered. “Don’t pull that shit on me. You may be queen, but I am still your older brother. *No.*”

Thad yanked him into the air by the front of his shirt. Winnie’s eyes bugged out of her head at the sight of his feet dangling above the ground. The veins on Thad’s arms and neck were starting to bulge, and the anger was rolling off him in waves.

“Don’t ever speak to my wife like that again. I don’t care if you’re her gods-damned brother. I *will* kill you.” He let go of Chaz’s shirt and moved behind Winnie, with murder in his eyes.

She did not want Chaz embarrassed, but then again, he had no right to tell her what to do. Still, he was her brother. She stepped forward and lowered her voice, “Please understand that I need to defend my kingdom. I also want to put a dagger into Edwin’s heart for what he has done.”

His face filled with alarm. “Why would you stab Edwin, and what do you mean ‘what he has done?’ You have known him for years! He’s like a brother to me.”

“He was the one who kidnapped her, Chazriel,” Henry bit out. “He locked her in a cell like a dog and left her to die by Silas’ hand.”

Chaz’s face paled. “Edwin?” He looked at her, confusion on his face. “Winnie?” She nodded solemnly. “Why am I just now hearing about this? We’ve been here for weeks, and no one thought to tell me that I brought a maniac into our family, and *he kidnapped my fucking sister?*”

His chest heaved, and she moved to close the distance. “You couldn’t have known. He fooled us all...”

His entire body erupted in flames. Winnie screamed and stumbled backward. Thad yanked her arm and pushed her behind him. Chaz made a noise between a scream and yelp and started beating his body with his hands to tamp down the flames.

The guardians rushed over and surrounded him to keep the fire from spreading. “Stop, drop, and roll, lad!” Francis shouted.

“What?” Chaz’s voice was frantic as he continued to beat himself, but the more upset he became, the higher the flames licked the air.

“It’s what they taught children in the Old World,” Emmy shouted over his cries. “Stop what you’re doing.” He held still as the flames blazed brightly. “Now drop to the ground and roll around,” she commanded.

He threw himself on the ground and started to tumble through the snow like a log.

Emmy whispered to Winnie out of the side of her mouth, “I have no idea if this actually works.”

Winnie stared in disbelief as he rolled back and forth and made a whimpering noise.

Thad had been quiet while he watched and finally said, “Chazriel, stop.” Chaz froze, and Thad approached him. “You need to calm down.”

Chaz twisted his head around to Thad, snow flying. “Calm down? I’m on fire, Thad. *Fire!*” The snow around him was melting into water, but still, the flames burned brighter.

“I see that,” Thad said in a calm voice. “But are you in pain?”

Chaz’s face pinched. “No. Actually, it doesn’t hurt at all,” he admitted as the flames started to die down.

“Then calm down. I remember Larkin telling a story about when he was a boy and was learning to control his power. He caught everything, including himself, on fire when he was upset.” The group collectively gasped, as did Chaz. “I think you need to get your emotions under control.”

Chaz sat up and nodded. He closed his eyes and slowed his breathing. The flames turned to a bluish-orange glow on his skin before dying out completely.

Everyone stared at his naked body, dumbfounded. He looked down and gave a sheepish grin. "I'd normally make a dick joke, but I'm more concerned about the fact that I set myself on fire."

Henry doubled over laughing and fanned his face. "I know that wasn't funny, but watching you flail around like a fire sprite was one of the best things I've seen in centuries!" Tears streamed down his cheeks while the other guardians pinched their lips together and tried not to laugh as well.

Chaz frowned and packed snow into a ball before launching it at Henry's head. "I'm glad it was amusing to you," he huffed and stood to dust the snow from his bare body. "Can we find me clothes and figure out what in the hell just happened?"

Thad and Archie's faces were grim as the group filed into the barracks. Winnie could practically see the wheels turning in their heads.

Whatever had just happened, it was not good.

Everyone took a seat at a large round table in one of the barracks' meeting rooms. Archie glanced at Thad before he stood. "I am not sure how this is possible." He rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. Chazriel has acquired the same power as the Summer King. This has never happened before." He looked like he was at a loss.

Thad pinched his lips together. "It shouldn't be possible. We need to speak to Larkin. If he is not here in five days, we will ride to Zoris."

Suki sighed, "Larkin is likely dead."

Thad gave her his full attention. "What makes you think that? We cannot be killed unless three of us come together." He motioned to Archie. "Here, two of us sit."

Winnie sat ramrod straight and looked at Archie. "Didn't you say Silas has been collecting powers to try and kill you all?"

Archie clasped his hands in front of his face and nodded. "Yes. I believe that was his intention, but he only acquired one Autumn duchess. I didn't think..."

Thad cursed. "He may have only needed one. A king has never died in the history of Rodina. They have only ever ascended to the heavens with

an heir already in place.” His eyes found Archie’s. “Silas likely thought killing us would do away with the line altogether,” he said, glancing at Chaz. “It seems the gods had other plans.”

Chaz’s face drained of blood. He worked his mouth, but no words came out, so Winnie spoke instead, “But why him? We’ve never even *been* to the Summer Kingdom.”

Suki stood. “I believe I know why.” Every head in the room whipped to her, and she gave them a rueful smile. “I am a descendent of the royal Summer line, as are you two.” The only sound in the room was the wind against the roof as everyone stared at her in disbelief. “My ancestor was the brother of the last True Queen of Summer, Larkin’s mother. It is why everyone in our family is trained to defend themselves and taught never to reveal their lineage. My father said people would do terrible things for a bit of power.” She scoffed, “We don’t have any power, but people are ignorant and evil.”

Winnie and Chaz gaped at their mother. Suki grabbed Chaz’s hand reassuringly. “I don’t know what is going on with Larkin, but if he is truly dead and the gods needed another heir, you are the perfect candidate.”

He shook his head with frustration and slammed his fist on the table. The wood erupted in flames, and everyone jumped back.

His frustrated growl echoed through the room, “*Gods Dammit!*”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Silas stood at the mouth of the training facility in Zoris, smiling gently at the flanks of soldiers before him.

“Great warriors of Summer, I am here to offer you solace. The kings of the other kingdoms are treacherously abandoning their people. No one has seen the Winter and Autumn kings in weeks, despite the Autumn Equinox quickly approaching. Your own King Larkin has disappeared as well.” He scanned the masses and lifted his hands.

“I would never abandon my people. Even after my kingdom was attacked and the palace ravaged by King Thaddeus himself. There were good people lost that day. Yet, amidst the tragedy, here I stand. I am offering you unity within my lands. Fight with me to defeat the kings who have left you to fend for yourselves. They will attack again; of that, I am sure. The question is, will you allow yourselves to be their puppets and destroy innocent lives, or will you fight for justice? The choice is yours.”

The men looked from one another, murmurs rising from the ranks. A general on the front row stepped forward and pressed his fist to his heart. “I will fight with you, your grace.” He knelt and bowed his head.

One by one, the other soldiers followed suit, and Silas smiled. “I am honored by your loyalty to keep your people safe. Generals, ready your men for battle and have them report to Uruk. We shall train and fight as one.”

He pressed his hands together in front of his chest and gave a slight bow of thanks. He followed Edwin to the carriage they had procured from a noble on the Summer border.

Once inside, he chuckled to himself, “Sometimes, it is too easy.”

Edwin returned his sentiment and sat up straighter. “I am humbled to be by your side, your grace. You will do great things.”

Silas watched the scenery pass them by. “Yes, I will be a great ruler. Now to Kore to strengthen our numbers and secure my reign.”



Thad clenched his jaw and tried not to blast Chazriel across the training field. “You’re not even trying,” he ground out. “Your heat comes from within. Feel for it, like a pocket of air in your core, and push it out.”

Chazriel shot him a crude gesture. “I am trying, asshole. I didn’t have five hundred years to learn this.”

Winnie placed a hand on her brother’s shoulder. “Think of it as using your core to pull yourself up. Remember when Luther would tie our ankles to a branch and tell us to touch our toes?” He pursed his lips and nodded. “You had to squeeze your core to pull up. Try that, but instead of pulling your body up, pull your fire. Think of touching your toes as pushing it to your hand.”

She stepped back and gave him an encouraging nod. Thad watched his wife in utter amazement. She was fierce and gentle at the same time. *And she was his.*

Chazriel shook out his arms and bounced on the balls of his feet. The guardians stood to the side watching, and everyone stepped back to give him a wide berth since he tended to catch things on fire.

He closed his eyes, held out his arm, and took a deep breath. A minute passed, but then his palm began to glow a bluish-orange before it erupted in flames. His eyes popped open, and he lunged at Winnie to hug her.

She yelped and jumped out of his path. “You’re going to burn me!”

He looked down and extinguished his hand. “Sorry, but you have to admit that was awesome. How did you know?”

“I can’t reveal my secrets,” she teased.

Thad clapped to get their attention. “Perfect, now that you know how to summon your power, we can really begin to train.”

The guardians, along with Archer, Naomi, and Delyna, kept to the far side of the arena where they sparred. Thad had been surprised when Delyna insisted on training with them. She was quite fierce in her own right, and he was pleased to learn that most Takitians are trained to fight from a young age.

With her tall stature and piercing gaze, Naomi was frightening to behold when she swung her battle-ax. He was fairly sure she could kill Silas with her bare hands; no powers needed. He shuddered and turned back to Chazriel and Winnie.

“The first thing you have to learn is control, especially when your emotions run high. No one gets hurt if I freeze the ground around me, but fire is a different story.”

Chazriel scratched his neck and clenched his teeth. “I don’t want this. Can’t the gods pick someone else?”

Thad looked in the distance before he turned back to him. “The best leaders are those who don’t want to lead but have to. The worst leaders are those who don’t have to lead but want to.” He placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “You will be a great king. You might be an asshole, but you’re still a good man.”

Chazriel rolled his eyes and gave him a light shove. “Go stand by your wife so I don’t burn off that pretty hair, *your majesty*.”



Everyone trailed back to the inn, utterly exhausted. Winnie’s body seemed to be stronger and faster, but she still tired out the same as when she was mortal. Emmy smiled awkwardly at Chaz and walked quickly ahead of the group.

She wondered what Emmy’s being a guardian and Chaz being a king meant for their unrequited feelings. On the one hand, they were both immortal, something they would not share with anyone outside their circle. But on the other hand, they could never marry or start a family.

Sadness pricked at her insides for her friend and brother. Perhaps Emmy's immortality is why she never pursued him, despite her obvious feelings for him.

"Why so gloomy, hellcat?" Thad asked as he slipped his hand under her hair and gave her neck a gentle squeeze.

She wrapped her arm around his waist and tucked her head against his chest as they walked. "Just thinking about Emmy and Chaz. They will never have a chance now. I always thought Emmy would become my sister one day."

He placed a kiss on the top of her head. "Being king is a hard road. While they may not be able to be together how they would like, they will be in each other's lives for a very long time. That's worth something."



Walking down the cobblestone sidewalk, Henry flipped around and hooted loudly before he scooped Winnie into the air and tossed her over his shoulder.

She yelped as he spun her around and called back to the group, "I'll bring her right back. There is a bakery with our name on it."

"They better have sticky buns, or I'm burying you in the snow," she threatened.

He smacked the back of her calf. "Quiet, woman! Do you take me for a fool?" He pulled open the bakery door without putting her down and walked to the counter. "We will take two sticky buns and two cinnamon rolls, please."

The man behind the counter snickered. "Coming right up."

"And a muffin for Archie!" she added, and the man nodded. "You can put me down," she told Henry, swatting at his legs.

Henry lowered her to the ground with a grin. "I wanted to get here as soon as possible, and you're too slow. I couldn't risk it."

"I'll have you know, I am much faster than I was."

He laughed and rubbed his jaw. “You think you could beat me in a race?”

She crossed her arms and popped a hip. “I know I could,” she boasted and waved a hand over her body. “Winter Queen, remember?”

He waved both of his hands over himself. “Winter guardian and resident stud muffin, remember?”

“Let’s do it then, *guardian*,” she challenged.

He rubbed his hands together. “A race?” The baker handed him their sack of pastries. “We need witnesses. To the tavern!” he exclaimed, pointing his finger into the air as he marched outside.

Inside the tavern, Archie sat at the bar while Delyna made drinks for customers. “Archie,” Winnie called. “We need you to be a witness for our race.”

He swiveled on his stool, and amusement danced across his features. “Who? You and Henry?” She nodded, and he laughed. “You would have to kill me to miss it. Can you step away and watch these two run around like buffoons,” he asked Delyna.

“Hey!” Winnie and Henry cried in unison.

Delyna snorted. “Let me grab Lyra. Give me five minutes.”

Winnie sprinted up the stairs and found Thad in their room, changing clothes. “Don’t take off your clothes yet,” she ordered.

“But taking off my clothes is one of my favorite pastimes,” he said, prowling toward her.

Her body heated at the image, and she shook her head to clear her thoughts. “We need you to witness our race.” His face glowed with amusement. “Henry and I are racing. He thinks he can beat me,” she added.

He bellowed out a laugh and nodded. “This I have got to see.”

Henry and Winnie stood side-by-side in the middle of the street outside of the inn. The good thing about Takita is they do not use carriages in the village, making it easy to clear the road. Archie, Delyna, Thad, and Emmy stood on the sidewalk with various looks of amusement.

She stretched her legs and jumped a few times to warm her muscles. She was still exhausted from training, but she would never admit it to Henry.

He pointed to Delyna. “You’re the only unbiased party here. We need you to stand at the finish line.” She chuckled and made her way down to the lamp post they agreed on. Once she was in place, Winnie tipped her chin to Archie. “Count us down.”

He stood between the two and lifted both arms. “*Three. Two. One,*” he yelled and chopped his hands down.

They shot off like bloodhounds. She pumped her legs harder than she ever had before, her breathing steady. She did not waste time looking at Henry but instead focused on Delyna at the end of the street.

When she crossed the line, she spun around, drawing gulps of air into her lungs. Her eyes widened when she realized he was about twenty paces behind her. Their friends stood with their mouths agape, and he stopped running altogether.

“I’m not sure how, but I’m certain you cheated,” he said and turned to Archie. “Did you give her a boost, air boy?”

Archie was still looking at her and silently shook his head. Thad made his way over, his face unreadable. “You’ve gotten really fast,” he said, cutting his gaze to Henry. “Did you pull up at all?”

Henry scoffed. “That’s just offensive. Of course not. I bet she’s almost as fast as you or Archer.”

Thad grabbed her hand and turned to Archie. “Line up.”

Archie didn’t say a word, his look calculating as he stepped behind the starting line. She put her hands on her hips and harrumphed. “I didn’t cheat! I won fair and square.”

Thad pushed a loose piece of hair behind her ear. “I know you did. I want to see how fast you are now. A little faster is common, but *that* much faster...” his voice trailed off. “I want to test a theory.”

“So do I,” Archie said, leaning forward.

“Men,” she mumbled and rolled her eyes.

Emmy counted them down from the sidewalk. “*Three. Two. One.*”

They all three kicked up snow and bolted toward Delyna. She stayed shoulder-to-shoulder with both men until they got closer to the finish line. Archie and Thad pulled slightly ahead, and Thad crossed the line first, with Winnie pulling up last.

By the time she crossed the mark, she had a stitch in her side, and she bent over with her hands on her knees. “Happy now, you gloating cow?”

He studied her, then had a hushed conversation with Archie. She stood up straight and kicked his legs out from under him. “Don’t whisper about me, or I’ll feed you to Rizo.”

He smiled at her from the snowy street and grabbed her behind the knees to pull her on top of him.

He gave her a saccharine smile and said low enough for only her to hear, “If you keep assaulting me like that, I’ll have to spank you right here in the streets.”

She swatted his chest and stood to follow everyone into the tavern.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A laugh rumbled from Archie's chest as Delyna finished one of her infamous stories. Every night for the past two weeks, she stopped by his room after closing down the bar and talked him to sleep. When he woke in the mornings, she was gone, and Rizo was snoring next to him.

He looked into her dark eyes, his chest sparking. "Stay tonight," he murmured.

Her light laughter faded, and her eyes flicked to his lips. "Why?"

He chuckled and ran a hand through his hair. "Because we'll be married this coming week," he said. "And because I can't stop thinking about you."

She sat forward, gently stroked his cheek, and kissed him hungrily.

He grabbed her around the waist and moved her into his lap, her legs straddling his. He wrapped his hands around her neck and brushed his thumb across her throat with a light squeeze. She leaned forward and nipped at his bottom lip with a smile. A husky growl rolled from his throat, and he claimed her mouth with deep strokes of his tongue. He grabbed her braid and yanked her head back, licking his way across her skin.

"The door," she rasped. Rizo bolted for the hallway as Archie flicked his hand, sending a burst of air to slam it closed.

He stood, deposited her on the bed, and licked his lips. "Take your dress off," he said, his voice rough. She stood, never breaking eye contact, and undressed painfully slow. He tracked her movements like a beast of prey, hungry for the taste of her.

It had been almost a year since he fucked, and even longer since he had been with someone he cared for. He pulled her up and walked her around the bed frame.

"Face the end of the bed," he commanded.

He took his shirt off and began ripping it into strips, then took a piece and gently grabbed her wrist before he caught her gaze. "Is this ok?"

She nodded and breathed, "Do your worst, Autumn King."

Her words made him feral. He secured both of her hands to the footboard before he released himself from his trousers. He ran a hand down her silky back, and she arched her body into him.

He swiped his fingers through her wetness before rubbing his throbbing head against her slits, eliciting a low moan from her. He quickly replaced himself with his thumb, working her into a frenzy.

When he could feel her walls clench, he pulled his hand back. She whined and tried to press into him. "Not yet," he drawled. He lowered himself to the ground and slid between her legs, facing her. He placed his mouth on her clit, sucking as he pumped a finger into her. She thrust forward into his mouth, groaning with pleasure. Without warning, he bit her clit, and she screamed.

She bucked against him, moaning like a cat in heat. "Again," she begged.

He smiled against her and obliged. She was panting one second and screaming the next.

He stood, aligned himself with her entrance, and grabbed her braid before slamming into her from behind. She cried out, pushing back as far as her arms would allow. He moved his other hand to her throat and squeezed, choking her.

They were both wild with want, chasing the tension that had been building between them. Before long, he felt her walls clench, and he grunted as they came together, chests heaving and bodies damp with sweat.

He released her braid and throat, placing a light kiss on her back before he pulled out and untied her hands. He used the restraints to clean her thighs before he carried her to bed. He pulled her body into his chest and relaxed against her back.

The next morning when he opened his eyes, he realized it was the first night he had slept with his door closed since he arrived in Takita.



When Naomi walked into the tavern, Winnie stopped eating. It was early, and Naomi usually met them at the training arena around midday. The others seemed to take notice, too, because they all laid down their utensils and gave her their undivided attention.

All except Henry. He was still shoveling eggs into his mouth like it was his last meal. Emmy reached across the table to pop the side of his head and gave him a look that seemed to say, "*Don't make me come over there.*"

Now that Winnie knew the guardians had been around since the beginning of time together, she noticed little things she hadn't before. Emmy and Henry have a sibling-like quality to their relationship, while Clarence and Gilda seem to be in a romantic one. On the other hand, Francis is the same Francis she had always known, just not elderly and frail like he led everyone to believe.

Naomi scanned their table. "Another guardian of Winter has arrived with a guardian of Summer. They wish to speak with you all."

As if on cue, Luther walked into the building. The world around Winnie faded to a distant buzz, and she scrambled across the room as fast as she could. She rammed into him and squeezed her arms around his wide shoulders.

"What took you so long, you old goat?" she mumbled against his chest.

A low chuckle vibrated through him. "I missed you too." She pulled back, and his gaze flicked to her hand. "Your majesty."

She wiggled her fingers in the air. "This old thing? It's alright, I guess."

"I take offense to that," Thad grunted from behind her. "Good to see you, General. We have much to discuss."

Luther searched the room until his eyes landed on Chaz. "Yes, we do."

"Hello, your highness," an elderly man who looked to be older than Francis said, stepping forward.

Thad nodded in greeting. "Hello, please call me Thad. You must be the Summer guardian."

The man's sharp eyes turned to him with amusement. "Pleased to meet you, King Thaddeus, but I was speaking to the Summer King."

Chaz choked from behind Winnie and stepped forward. "Excuse me?" His wild eyes looked around. "It's true then? King Larkin is dead, and you expect *me* to run the Summer Kingdom?" he asked in disbelief.

The older man assessed him. "Yes, Larkin is dead, and you are the new king. We do not choose heirs lightly. When a king is slain, only someone pure of soul from the royal line can be chosen." The older man turned to Winnie. "Your family has been blessed twice. It is not uncommon for *compeers* to come from other royal lines, though very distantly."

Her face pinched with confusion. "Why is that?"

"The soul of a *compeer* is pure and more likely to breed pure as well. It is why only a *compeer* can produce a royal heir," the guardian said.

She shook her head, unable to understand. "But my mother said we aren't descended from a True Queen of Summer. We are descended from her brother."

The older man gave a patient smile. "In the Old World, they called it *genetics*, a concept not yet investigated here. The bloodline that breeds a True Queen is strong."

"What do you mean 'we'?" Francis asked, stepping forward. The look on his face was akin to awe.

Thad and Archie snapped their heads back to the Summer guardian, and he laughed. "I was getting to that. I really do miss being around humans. It's fulfilling to watch you piece things together."

"What's a human?" Chaz asked.

The man sighed. "It is what you call mortals. I wish I could teach you all the things I know. I have always enjoyed academia. However, there are more pressing matters. I am Aestas, the god of Summer."

Everyone collectively stopped breathing. "How?" Winnie asked, finally finding her voice.

Aestas clasped his arms in front of him. "Guardians are more than protectors. They are also vessels for the gods in the event that we need to communicate with you. We do not come to Earth lightly because the vessel, once they have held our power, cannot survive when we ascend back into

the heavens. It's too much for a worldly body to handle, even immortal ones."

He continued, his voice quieter, "We choose a vessel that has lived a full life in the Old World and the new. Their soul ascends into the heavens when they are gone, and they survive for a small amount of time after we leave. It enables them to say goodbye to their loved ones. I will take this vessel back to the Summer guardians before leaving so that he may see them one last time," he said, sounding remorseful. "We are not cruel gods. We do not take from you lightly."

Luther broke the silence, "Aestas has come because of Chazriel. These are unprecedented times for Rodina, and he has come to offer guidance. Please sit."

Everyone obeyed his command and gathered around the table. The god of Summer remained standing and looked to Chaz. "You have been chosen as the new King of Summer. When you return to your kingdom, a guardian will be there, ready to train you on your duties. While you do not have to be in your kingdom to control your season, it is advised under normal circumstances. As you know, you must marry a conduit bride on the Summer Solstice each year to survive your surge of power. Not doing so will require Archer to wed early, and your power will mostly be passed to him until your season is over."

Chaz interrupted, "How have I not exploded or whatever? It's summer and I'm not married. And what do you mean 'mostly' passed to Archer?"

Aestas pointed at him and clapped. "I love inquisitive minds! Summer is nearly over, and your power is not fully transferred yet. You will still possess a small amount of your power if you do not wed. However, it will not be half as strong as it normally is." His expression turned serious. "You must not shirk your responsibilities, Chazriel. We know you have doubts, but you will make a great king, and your powers will become crucial in time." Thad and Archie exchanged a confused look.

"Thaddeus, continue your training with him on controlling and wielding his fire. We understand that Silas's soul has been corrupted, and he must be stopped. It will take three of you to end his life, allowing us to bring in the next Spring heir."

Delyna raised her hand. "Since you are here, can you not smite him yourself?"

He gave a tight smile. "Our power is so great that if we used it on Earth, it would decimate the entire planet, and we'd have to start over again. Your world is still young, and we do not wish to do that yet." He stepped back and motioned to Luther. "Luther will inform you of Silas' current position so that you may act accordingly, but I must leave immediately. We can only stay in a human vessel for so long."

Archie stood. "We are honored to have met you. I hope to see you again someday."

The god nodded. "You will. You all will." Without another word, he turned and left as quietly as he came.

"Shit," Chaz cursed.

Their group sat around the table later that night and listened intently to Luther. "Silas has gone to Summer and Autumn to garner troops. He spoke to them about you two abandoning your people in the midst of war," Luther said to Archie and Chaz. "He is back in Spring, and your troops are expected to arrive at his kingdom in a fortnight."

"Why did he not go to Winter," Thad wondered aloud.

"My best guess is he knew he could not sway them since they have seen his evil firsthand."

Everyone absorbed this information, and a sense of doom burrowed into Winnie's chest. They could not get to him if he had the protection of three battalions.

Archie cleared his throat. "When I learned of Silas' plans and that myself and the other two kings would be in hiding, I anticipated this. I had Rogan deliver a message to my generals." Everyone stared at him, dumbfounded, and he gave them a wicked smile. "They do not call me a master strategist for nothing. Let me fill you in."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Archie's breath stalled when he saw Delyna step into the tavern in her wedding dress, with Rizo close behind. Her dress was simple. They agreed not to make a big production of the ceremony, but she still looked beautiful.

She flashed a bright smile and wiggled her fingers at him from across the room. Winnie and Emmy scurried to her and began fussing over her dress and hair.

"You look great, Delyna," Emmy squealed.

Winnie nodded enthusiastically. "I love your hair twisted like that. It accentuates your collarbones."

Thad stood next to Archie and chuckled, "It's different when it's not so clinical. More enjoyable."

Archie's arms began to tingle. He had been trying to ignore the fact that he and Delyna would have to break their bond in three months, but it was all he could think about. A small part of him wondered if she was his *compeer*, and perhaps the Autumn guardians were hidden in plain sight. After all, he does not know who they are, nor would he until he recognizes his mate, according to the Winter guardians.

"Let's get this show on the road," Delyna said as she crossed the space to stand next to him. They had cleared out the tavern's back corner for the ceremony so they could celebrate with alcohol and food when it was over.

When midnight struck, he pulled a small dagger from his belt. "This will sting, but it will be over soon," he murmured.

She nodded and winced when he sliced the dagger across her palm before cutting his own. He pressed his hand to hers and peered into her dark

eyes. "I bond my blood to thee. My power is your power. My home is your home. My land is your land. Under the gods."

The corner of her mouth quirked. "I bond my blood to thee. My power is your power. My home is your home. My land is your land. Under the gods."

A light wind caressed their skin before dying down. The ceremony was over, and disappointment blazed in his throat. He had been holding the smallest hope that she would be his forever, but it seemed he would lose her too.

"Let's celebrate," Henry bellowed and signaled the barmaid for a round of drinks.

Archie looked to Delyna and rubbed his thumb over the top of her hand, the blood smearing with each stroke. "Would you like to finish our ceremony upstairs," he asked, his voice heavy with lust and grief.

"Yes, very much," she purred.

They disappeared upstairs and stayed there for the rest of the night.



"We need to leave today," Luther said the next morning around the breakfast table. "Archer, you need to reconvene with your council in Kore and set Delyna up with her rooms." He turned to Chaz. "Chazriel: Emmy and I will take you to Zoris to meet the guardian who has been assigned to you. You will also need to be adorned in Summer armor instead of Winter and have fireproof clothing made."

Chaz sat back and folded his arms over his chest. "Why can't I wear my normal armor?"

Winnie understood why he would not want to wear the armor of Summer. She had never seen it herself, but each kingdom's armor was the same except for the color and crest. Winter was silver with a frozen tree, Autumn was copper with a swirl of air, Spring was bronze with twisting vines, and Summer was gold with a burning flame.

She giggled, "You'll look divine in gold, Chaz. It will complement your pretty blonde hair perfectly."

He stabbed at his eggs and mumbled to himself. He was not thrilled about his new title and position, but she knew he would be good to his people and protect them at all costs. It was who he was.

Luther pointed his fork at Thad. "You and Winnie will return to Eridu with Henry and introduce her to your kingdom. The people need to meet their True Queen before they ride into battle." He looked to Archie. "Archer, we will send Clarence and Gilda with you to help where needed, and Francis will ride to Uruk to seek out any information he can."

"We ride on Spring in a fortnight. I expect your battalions will be joining Silas not long after your arrival. We will meet the Winter soldiers on the Winter and Spring border and ride in together."

Everyone sat in silence with the weight of the impending war ahead that loomed over them. Winnie turned to Suki and placed a hand on her arm. "Mother, Naomi said you could stay here. I would rather you not be in Anorak alone. We don't know what's become of Hayward's Place, and I don't want you in danger."

Suki smoothed a hand over her hair. "I will not sit by while my children ride headfirst into danger. I will be fighting at your side." Her voice was strong as she met Winnie and Chaz's gazes. "I will not stay, and Francis has already agreed to my joining him in Uruk."

Winnie bit her cheek to hold in her retort. She did not want her mother in harm's way, but she remembered how it felt when Chaz told her she couldn't fight.

"While we're on the subject," Delyna interjected, "I'm fighting as well." Archie started to object, but she held up a hand. "I may only be your temporary Queen Regent, but those are my people for the next three months. I will not sit idly by while their safety is at stake."

Archie smiled. "You're the best wife I have ever had."

"I'll be coming too," a commanding voice carried across the room. Winnie turned to see Naomi standing in the door, looking like a lethal storm cloud in her grey fighting leathers.

She grinned at her aunt. "We wouldn't have it any other way."

"Well," Henry said, standing. "Let's blow this pop stand."

She shook her head. He and Francis would randomly use sayings from the Old World that no one understood, and she loved it.



They arrived in Anorak two days later, and Thad saw Winnie visibly relax when they stopped at Hayward's Place.

"I never thought I'd see this place again," she said wistfully.

"Naomi and I will be in the village buying food while you two gather whatever you need here," Henry said with a small wave as he and Naomi trotted toward the village.

Winnie climbed from her horse and ran through the front door. Patrons were sitting around, and a young girl Thad didn't recognize was working the bar. Winnie stopped short, and surprise colored her face. They had both assumed the place would be empty.

He approached the bar with a smile. "Can you tell me who is in charge here?"

The girl looked him up and down and smirked. "Sure thing, handsome."

Winnie stepped next to him and released a small growl when the girl disappeared into the kitchen. "I will rip her hair out if she looks at you like that again."

He chuckled. "I like it when you're feisty."

She rolled her eyes and froze when a plump older woman walked from the back. The woman had rosy cheeks and grey hair pulled back in a loose bun. "Winnie, dear! Are you and Suki back?"

"Miss Annie," she gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"Didn't Suki tell you? She asked me to take care of the place while you all were gone." She motioned to the barmaid. "This here is my granddaughter, Illa."

A laugh bubbled out of Winnie. "Thank you, but who is running the bakery while you are here?"

Annie waved the towel in her hand. "Fred's got it. It's about time he put in a little elbow grease." She seemed to notice Thad for the first time. "And who is this handsome young man?"

He stepped forward and held out his hand. "King Thaddeus, but any friend of my wife can call me Thad."

Annie and Illa gasped. Annie shook his hand and stammered, "Your majesty. It's an honor." She turned to Winnie. "You're his conduit bride? But how is that possible before the solstice?"

He looked down at Winnie with adoration. "Winnie is my True Queen. There will be no more conduit brides during our reign."

Annie started to speak rapidly in a language he had never heard. She threw her arms around Winnie and rocked side to side. "My sweet girl, I always knew you were destined for greatness. The True Queen!" She turned to Illa. "Can you believe it! I never thought I'd see a True Queen in my lifetime, and now I actually *know* one."

Illa smiled. "It's a pleasure to meet you both."

Winnie gave Illa a small nod before she turned back to Annie. "Mother will not be back for a while. Can you manage the place for us a little longer? I can compensate you however you need."

The woman looked offended. "I would never take payment for helping a friend. You take as long as you need."

Winnie and Thad said their goodbyes and stepped into the back courtyard, making their way toward the training clearing. They walked into the circle, and she ran to her weapons box with a squeal.

"I can't wait to have my own bow again. The ones in Takita were too loose for my liking," she said and pulled out her arsenal, her eyes alight with happiness.

He admired her from afar. "I know another reason why I love this place."

She looked up with a devilish grin. "Why don't you come over here and show me."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Chaz lounged lazily atop his throne, one leg slung over the arm and his new crown crooked upon his head. It was a circlet of brilliant gold flames and much lighter than he had expected.

Emmy approached with a look of disdain and crossed her arms. "Well, don't you fit the image of a spoiled boy king."

"This is what is expected of me, is it not?" he purred, sipping from his goblet of wine and wishing he had thought to bring Takitian liquor with him.

"You have people here to see you. You cannot act as if you will destroy the kingdom with your immature antics," she snapped.

He stood and prowled toward her. "These people don't want me," he sneered. "I am a warrior from Winter who has never set foot in this humid hellhole. Do you really think they want me on their throne?"

She closed the distance between them and placed a gentle hand on his arm. "Chaz, they will love you because you are who the gods have chosen. Their king was brutally murdered, something no one thought was possible, and it left them vulnerable. They need a leader."

He turned and rubbed the stubble on his jaw. "I don't know how to do this," he admitted quietly.

She grabbed his chin and turned his face to hers. "You do. You protect your people, and you make sure they have what they need, just like you have always done for your family. Stop wallowing."

His mouth tugged toward his cheek. She was fire wrapped in a sexy dress, and he had always loved her for it. *She can never be yours*, he thought bitterly. Now, he knew her aversion to him in the flower field was because of what she was, not him. That somehow made it worse. With his eyes still on hers, he brushed his lips lightly over her mouth.

Her breath hitched, and she took a step back. "We can't," she reminded him. "Do not make this harder than it already is."

He gave a humorless laugh. "Yet another perk that comes with the job."

He turned on his heel and walked toward the outside dais without looking back.

Resler was a small man with a straight nose and brown hair. What he lacked in size, he made up for with patience. For the last week, he had explained to Chaz his responsibilities, what is expected of him, how the marriages work, and even gave him a map of the castle, the capital, and the kingdom.

Chaz never saw Luther, who was off doing gods know what, preparing for the war with Spring, and Resler had become his only friend as of late. He had Emmy, but they had never been just friends, and since he became king, their dynamic had changed drastically.

Resler explained that usually, the kings would never learn who the guardians were until they were with their *compeer*, but extenuating circumstances and all that. Long story short, Resler was reassigned to Chaz and would now be with him until he had an heir.

"Have you been working out?" Chaz asked with a smirk. He squeezed Resler's tiny arm. "The ladies will go berserk."

Resler pawed at his hand. "For your information, I have no interest in ladies. Not to mention, I do not need to work out; I have immortal strength, remember?"

"You can never have too many muscles, Res," he said and flexed his arms.

The guardian gave him a once-over and narrowed his eyes. "Must you dress like a sleazy card dealer when you receive people?"

Chaz looked down at his shirt, a long-sleeve button-down with palm trees embroidered all over. "What's wrong with my shirt? I found it at the market." He puffed out his chest. "I think it makes me look Summer-y, don't you?"

Resler pinched the bridge of his nose. "It's Autumn, Chazriel. Just because it doesn't get as cold here as it does in the other kingdoms does not mean you need to dress like a Winter tourist every day of the year." He gave him another once-over. "Not to mention the fact that it isn't fire-resistant

like the clothes I had sent over from the royal tailor. One outburst and you will flash all of Zoris."

Chaz pinched his lips to keep from laughing. "Ok, ok. I won't wear it again until Summer." He took a deep breath. "When will the people arrive?"

Resler gave him a sympathetic look. "I know you don't like this, Chazriel, but the kingdom needs you. Let's get back to the throne room so you can start receiving your subjects. Remember, this is just for some of your regular citizens to meet you; nothing more."

He huffed. "I told you to call me Chaz. All of my friends and family do."

He followed Resler into the gaudy throne room. Gold-coated everything and palm trees lined all the walls. He hated it.

He took his seat and sat up straight. He acted like an ass in front of his friends as an act of rebellion, but he would not disrespect the people of Summer. A man and woman who looked to be in their late thirties stepped through the door with a teenaged boy and a younger girl.

"You may approach," he waved them forward with a welcoming smile.

They stopped a respectful distance away and bowed lightly. "We are honored to meet you, your highness," the man said with conviction. "We will miss King Larkin. He was a good king, but we are glad the gods have bestowed upon us a ruler from humble beginnings."

Chaz's smile faltered. A pang of sadness for the late Summer King churned in his gut. He had never met the man, but Larkin was beloved by his people and shouldn't have met the fate bestowed upon him. He would see Silas destroyed if it was the last thing he did.

"Thank you for your kind words. What is your name?" he asked.

The man's eyes widened. "I-I am Benson, your highness, and this is my wife Taylen, my son Wren, and my daughter Devonny."

He stood from his throne and stepped off the dais toward the family. He held out his hand, and the man took it. "It's nice to meet you all."

"My brother is going to be a great warrior just like you," a small voice squeaked.

Wren straightened, and his cheeks colored. Devonny looked up at Chaz with her chin held high. She reminded him of Winnie, and he knelt in front of her with a chuckle.

"Is that so?" She nodded, and he looked at Wren. "How old are you?"

The boy swallowed nervously. "Seventeen, your highness. I'll be eighteen this spring."

Chaz nodded and turned back to the girl. "And what of you? Will you fight alongside your brother as a fierce warrior, or is there something else you wish to be?"

She shrugged. "Girls aren't allowed to fight."

He leaned in and whispered loud enough for the others to hear. "My sister is a great warrior and the True Queen of Winter." Her eyes widened, and he sat back. "If girls in Summer want to fight, then they will fight. If boys want to be dressmakers, they will be dressmakers. There will be no discrimination based on gender in my kingdom."

He stood and saw a look of surprise on the family's face. "Spread the word to your friends and fellow citizens. When I return from the war with Spring, I will issue a new decree. I will not tolerate gender bias under my rule."

Benson nodded. "You will make a great king, your highness."

They gave another small bow and left the way they came. He turned to Resler before calling in the next family. "Was that kingly enough?"

Resler cleared his throat. "It was. I am honored to serve you, Chaz. You will be a great king."



Archie released a sigh of relief when they crossed into Kore. He had always loved the sight of his kingdom's rolling hills and lush farmland. Francis once told them a story about how the Autumn Kingdom looked like his homeland in the Old World. He called it Scotland, and Archie wished he could have seen it with his own eyes.

He looked at Delyna sitting atop her horse next to his. "Welcome home."

She scanned the landscape in awe. "It's beautiful."

"You can stay," he said quietly. "I mean when Autumn is over. You will be well taken care of for the rest of your life." The thought of how short her life would be compared to his hollowed out his chest.

She smiled sadly. "The Takitian council granted me leave for Autumn only. If I do not return after the Winter Solstice, I will not be allowed back. It's my home, Archie. I have no future here."

He kneaded his fist across his chest to relieve the ache. "Then I will stay with you in Takita during my off-seasons. Thaddeus does it every year, and I can too."

She shook her head. "I will not ask you to do that. This kingdom is your home. Thad never leaves his kingdom, just his palace. You would be miserable."

He looked away, all too aware that Clarence and Gilda were witnessing his heart being cut into pieces. He clicked his reins. "Come, friends. I will show you the Autumn Palace."

The Autumn Palace was modest compared to the others, something Archie had always appreciated. The rulers of Autumn focused more on academia and the structure of their kingdom than anything else. The most thought-out room in the palace was his council chamber.

It was bigger than his throne room, with floor-to-ceiling bookcases that lined every wall. There was a large round table with chairs for his council members and smaller tables with each kingdom's models placed around the room.

He ached to smell the books and mahogany that filled the war room but instead led Delyna to her bridal suite. "You have a bedroom, a sitting room, a closet, and a washroom," he said as he led her to each area. He turned to her, hoping she liked it. Other conduit brides were already squealing by now, but she looked confused.

"I won't be staying with you?"

Warmth flooded his chest, and he jerked her hips to his. Her want to be with him filled his voice with heavy desire. "If that is what you want, then that is what you will get." He finished his sentence with a kiss and pulled back with a sultry smile.

He had only known her for five weeks, but he knew that he loved her. However, to love anyone but his *compeer* was a treacherous thing. It would always end with tragedy for him, but he couldn't seem to make himself care.



Winnie gasped when she stepped into the Winter Palace for the first time. She had never seen anything like it in all her twenty-three years. The throne room looked to be made of ice, but Thad said it was a type of special glass. The rest of the palace was stone on the inside, and this peculiar glass on the outside sparkled when the sun bounced off the panes.

"I can't believe this is our home," she said with awe.

His face was coated with lust. "Wait until you see our rooms."

"Henry and Naomi are right there," she hissed.

He leaned his head into the crook of her neck. "Even if they are across the palace, they will hear you tonight."

"This is not the place," she chided him, shivering with desire against her will.

He straightened with a smirk and pointed to the two thrones at the back of the room. "Which would you like?"

Her jaw dropped. "I get my own throne?"

"Of course. You are my equal. You have as much rule over Winter as I do."

Her chest fluttered with uncertainty, and she was beginning to understand how Chaz felt. She grabbed Thad's hand and laced her fingers through his. "I don't care which one. Wherever we feel like sitting that day will be fine with me."

Henry laughed with a shake of his head. "Only you would say that, Winnie. Only you."

She flashed him a crude gesture and turned to Thad. "I guess it's time for me to meet our people."

Thad sent a message to his council, telling them to announce the introduction of Winter's True Queen upon their arrival. They stayed in Anorak for a week before they continued to Eridu, and now that she was here, Winnie was a nervous wreck. She didn't know if the people would

accept her and wondered what would happen if they refused her. Her coloring was still considered strange in the kingdom since no one knew of Takita, and she was not sure how they would react.

Henry had given Naomi silver Winter armor, and Winnie thought she looked magnificent. Henry and Naomi flanked her and Thad as they stood on a raised dais in front of the large crowd. Her palms sweated, and she wondered silently if she would have to shake anyone's hands. She could hear the whispers now. '*Ghostly queen with soggy hands.*' The thought made her queasy.

She lightly touched her new crown. It was identical to Thad's and had belonged to every True Queen since the beginning of Rodina. The silver tree branches that circled her head had the tiniest of diamonds made to look like ice, and she thought they were beautiful.

Thad raised a hand for silence, and a hush fell over the audience. "Some of you may know of our country's history, and some of you may not. I am not the first King of Winter, nor will I be the last. Each king has one true mate who may take him thousands of years to find. She is his equal in every way and blessed by gods to rule at his side," he announced, easing Winnie to the front of the platform. "I have been lucky enough to find my forever bride this year, and I present to you, my *compeer* and your True Queen of Winter, Winnie Hayward of Anorak."

She jumped in surprise when the crowd erupted with deafening cheers, and a wave of emotion hit her square in the chest at their response. She kissed her fingers and held them out to the crowd with a small wave.

They quieted down, and she projected her voice as strongly as she could, "I am honored to serve as your queen. I have loved my kingdom since the day I was born into it, and I hope to serve you and future generations well. Thank you for your love. I can assure you; it is reciprocated."

The crowd went wild once more, and she turned to Thad. He watched her with a mixture of love and pride that made her heart double in size.

"We will protect them," she whispered to him. "Even if I have to rip Silas' heart out myself."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Before he left, Chaz forced Resler to stay in Zoris to rule in his absence. He trusted the guardian with his life and wanted him in a safe place in case he needed to train a new Summer King. He learned from Resler that the guardians are immortal but can be killed by a king's power or beheading.

It was too much of a risk for Chaz to feel comfortable with. He tried to convince Emmy to stay, but she told him to go fuck himself.

Chaz, Luther, and Emmy were meeting Suki and Francis at the Summer and Spring border. As they approached, he saw his mother and the old tavern regular emerging from the mist and breathed a sigh of relief. If he thought he could convince his mother to leave for Anorak and forego the battle, he would, but she and Winnie were both too stubborn for their own good.

His golden armor reflected the sunlight of the brilliant Autumn sunrise, and though he would never admit it, he thought he looked pretty damn good. Luther and Emmy rode on either side of him in Winter silver, making an impressive trio.

He was surprised to see Suki in golden armor, and his chest constricted. Francis, of course, was in Winter silver, like all the Winter guardians would be, as well as his sister.

Their horses met, and Luther pulled ahead. "Thaddeus and his battalion will be on the Winter and Spring border soon if they are not already there. The Autumn group left early to ride south to meet them as well. We will intercept them outside of Uruk and ride in together."

Francis fixed his eyes on Chaz. "You seem to be filling your role well, lad."

He gave an arrogant smile. "I make everything look good, Fran."

Suki rolled her eyes. "Honestly, dear, I'd hate to see you tip over from that big head of yours." Her expression morphed into one of tenderness. "You do look mighty handsome though, son."

Emmy tinkered out a laugh. "Now that everyone has complimented Chaz, we should head out."

"Everyone but you," he muttered under his breath.



Archie jerked his gaze from Delyna for the thousandth time. He could not stop staring at her in Autumn's copper armor, looking every bit the warrior queen she was. He tried relentlessly to convince her to stay in Kore, but she refused and would not speak to him for a day the last time he asked. She was not immortal, and if anything happened to her, he would blow the world to bits.

Rizo panted and kept pace with the horses as they trotted toward the Winter army. Clarence kept looking at the wolf with weary eyes.

"Why does he look at me like he's going to bite my leg off," he asked grumpily.

Delyna smirked, "Scared of a little puppy dog, are you? I must say, I'm surprised."

Gilda giggled. "He's always hated dogs! Even the small ones. Anytime he was an ass, I would threaten to bring Thelena's little pocket dog and turn her loose in his smithy."

Clarence turned his glare to her. "I told you, I'd burn your dress shop to the ground, woman." He turned back to Delyna. "And that is not a puppy dog. It is a horse-sized beast."

Gilda laughed again. The sound was light and airy, as if they were not riding to their possible deaths. "He's hardly horse-sized. He only comes up to the bottom of the stirrups."

The burly guardian grumbled under his breath, and Rizo's ears stood at attention when the group crested the last hill. At the bottom were the king

and queen of Winter, with their massive battalion, looking like something nightmares were made of.

When the Autumn riders approached, Winnie pulled her horse forward next to Delyna's and righted herself to her full height. "Delyna, this is not your battle, and I understand that. I wanted you to know how honored I am that you are fighting with us today."

Delyna tipped her head in respect. "I could never allow my friends or my people, no matter how temporary, to sacrifice themselves while I did nothing."

Winnie seemed to spot Rizo for the first time, and her eyes widened. "You mean to bring him with us?"

Delyna nodded. "Where I go, he goes. If I tried to lock him up, he would bend the bars to join me."

Thaddeus looked at the wolf with a smirk. "Then I guess we'll ride with a bear in our army."

"Told you he was big," Clarence mumbled.

Thaddeus nodded at Archie, "Are you ready for this, brother? We must keep close to Chazriel and find Silas together. Otherwise, this entire battle is useless."

Archie adjusted himself in the saddle. "Yes, I know what is at stake. I've spoken with the Autumn and Summer councils, and they assured me that our plans had been put into motion. Let's pray it will be enough."



Winnie saw Uruk rise over the horizon, and her stomach flipped. If Silas managed to get his hands on one of the kings before the three could kill him, they would lose.

Anger curled around her like tendrils of smoke. If that were to happen, she would take Martine's advice and keep Silas' head in a box for the rest of his pathetic existence. She did not know if that was possible or would work, but she would damn well try.

She spotted Emmy in the distance and waved. She had not realized how much she missed her until now. Everyone looked grim as they approached each other, the impending battle looming over their heads. They would lose men today and possibly each other, thanks to Silas having every power at his disposal.

She met her mother's stare and tipped her head. Suki sat tall on her horse, her grey and blonde hair in a tight bun, which made her features look more intense.

Luther and Francis rode closer, and Luther turned to Archie. "Yours and Chazriel's men arrived in Spring a week ago." He looked between the two kings. "Are you two ready for what we discussed?" They both gave solemn nods. "Good."

He rode to face the warriors. Some of them were men he had trained since they were eighteen years old, and her heart lurched when his voice rose above the wind.

"Men, our time has come. Look at your brother beside you, and remember his face because some of you will not make it past today. You fight for your brothers, your people, and your kingdom. Spring will not prevail today because you will not let them. You are warriors of Winter, and you do not falter." He looked slowly over their faces, lifted his sword and shouted, "*We. Are. Winter!*" The warriors raised their swords in a war cry, repeating his words.

They were Winter, and they would bring Spring to their knees.



The air was surprisingly calm when Winter approached the new Spring Palace. Like every other palace in Rodina, it was located outside of town near the training arenas. Silas had erected a small mountainous building in lieu of the rubble that Thad created. It was square in shape, with rough pillars lining the front. He had new doors and glass installed, and it was befitting the reprehensible man who resided there.

Around his makeshift palace was a field large enough to house an army. The field met a wall of earth that looked as if Silas raised it from the ground himself. He had left the gate open, taunting them as if he had already won. Outside the walls stood the Autumn, Summer, and Spring battalions looking deadly in their uniformed silence.

Silas sat behind his men on a large white steed, a cruel smile on his face. On either side of him was a row of archers with their bows drawn.

Thad and Archer pulled their horses slightly forward. They agreed to keep Chazriel's new role a secret until the last possible second.

"Silas. Let these men go back to their homes. We've no qualm with them. Face us like a man and let us finish what you have started," Thad called over the quiet field.

Silas released a jolly laugh and tsked. His shiny black hair blew in the light breeze. His brown skin glowed with a golden hue in the high sun, presenting a well-honed façade of a handsome, innocent man.

But it was his eyes that could not mask the evil that lurked beneath the surface. Thad wondered how he had missed it before. Silas's eyes were a dark green, where the other king's eyes were bright and vibrant. He had missed it, but Henry had seen the cold, calculated misery that was painted there.

Without saying a word, Silas waved his hand and signaled his archers to fire. Winter raised their shields, and the Spring King's laugh carried across the field. "Do you not understand that you are outnumbered?" he crooned across the field, spreading his arms to show the Autumn, Summer, and Spring battalions standing before him. "We will destroy you. Yield now, and *I* will let *your* men live."

Archer's eyes tightened, and he looked to Chazriel, giving a slight nod. They both walked forward, positioning themselves relative to the Autumn and Summer troops. The Autumn King carried his voice through the wind to Silas.

"We have offered you peace, and you have declined. The blood of your men is on your hands."

Chazriel and Archer both called to their troops.

"Autumn!"

"Summer!"

Together they bellowed. "**ATTACK!**"

With an uproarious sound, the Autumn and Summer battalions turned and rushed the Spring warriors from either side while Winter rode in from the front. Silas's horse stumbled back, and his face was painted in horror.

He met Thad's gaze with savage rage.
The battle had begun.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Archie fought with his sword and power to control the wind as he knocked men to the ground and drove the metal through their hard, bronze armor. Delyna fought by his side, slitting throats with her daggers and spinning like she was made of air. Blood coated their bodies as they cut their way toward the fortress walls.

Rizo was in front of them, leading the way through the throng of men. The Autumn warriors fought for their king, and their loyalty was unyielding.

He had anticipated that Silas would try to sway their warriors in their absence. He sent word to both councils to prepare for Silas' possible arrival and to feign loyalty to Spring.

He knew his men would not turn on him and had a feeling the Summer battalion would not betray their kingdom either. His greatest strength was being able to anticipate his enemy's movements before they happened, something his father taught him well.

He could see rocks and boulders flying as Silas cleared men by the dozens at the back of the battle. Archie cut a soldier's head off, blood spurting across his face.

A tortured yelp carried through the wind, stopping him dead in his tracks. Screaming, Delyna threw herself toward a man as he pulled a dagger from Rizo's stomach. She slashed her own dagger across his face, severing his jaw. She thrust again, ripping the man from his stomach to his heart with a sob.

She landed on her knees next to Rizo, and he lifted his head with a whimper. He was breathing hard, and blood coated his grey fur. When he saw her, the beast dropped his head to the earth.

She looked at Archie with tears running down her face, and it was too much for him to bear. He could only see the red of Rizo's blood, and he raged, sending a cyclone toward the men around them. Bodies flew in every direction, and the remaining warriors ran in fear. He threw his arms to the side, sending wind to clear a path through the battle. "Take him now!"

She shook her head. "I can't leave you."

"Delyna, *NOW!*"

She scooped Rizo into her arms and ran toward the abandoned horses in the back of the field. He turned his lethal gaze toward the fortress walls and sliced his arm downward, blasting the men and rock into the air.

Silas would suffer for what he had done.



Chaz had never seen Luther in battle before, and it was mesmerizing. His sword in one hand, dagger in the other, he moved his arms fluidly through the air. Chaz stayed by his mother, though she did not need his help. He now understood how Winnie could pick up her skills so easily; it was in their blood.

He had been instructed not to use his fire unless necessary until they reached Silas. The Spring King still didn't know a new heir had been crowned king and hadn't caught onto the fact that Chaz rallied the Summer soldiers. A part of the fortress wall blew to bits on the opposite side of the field, and he knew Archer was responsible.

"*We need to get beyond the wall,*" he yelled to Suki. She gave a brief nod, and they altered their course.

Silas retreated inside his courtyard, whipping his arms around him, throwing bits of rock through the air. Winter had broken through the barriers, and Autumn and Summer were now fighting their way in. The Spring battalion was almost completely decimated, and Silas was now the primary focus of every man on the field.

Chaz and Suki broke through the open gate and came face-to-face with Edwin. He pulled his sword from a Winter warrior's throat, and Chaz

faltered.

He was still in shock over his best friend's betrayal, but hearing about it and seeing it in person were two completely different things. Anger seeped through his pores, and he could feel himself losing control of his power.

He rocketed toward Edwin but was cut off by Suki, who swung her sword at him with a furious scream. "*You took my baby girl,*" she cried and plunged her sword into his side, causing a gaping wound.

She went to finish him off, but he swung a left hook and lodged a dagger into her temple. She dropped to the ground, eyes open and unmoving.

Chaz exploded, sending a stream of fire to Edwin's chest before he could control himself. He would burn the bastard to his bones and grind his ashes into the dirt.

He stalked toward his friend and grabbed him around the throat, letting the flames consume him. Edwin twisted in agony, and he clawed at Chaz's hand.

"You took my sister and killed my mother," he snarled. "You will burn in our world before you burn in the seven rings of hell." He pushed more heat into Edwin and incinerated him from the inside out.

He would not stop until Edwin's body was ash in his hands. Summer warriors flanked his back and sides, and the one closest to him said, "Wherever you go, your highness, we will follow."

Chaz gave a curt nod and pointed his sword. "We are going to kill the Spring King."



Winnie yanked her sword with a squelch from a Spring warrior's abdomen and frantically looked around for Thad. He had been advancing on Silas while she and the guardians fought on the front lines with their men.

Part of the fortress wall erupted, and flames exploded on the other side. She knew Archie and Chaz made it through the barrier, and she began stabbing her way toward them. She was the True Queen of Winter, and she would not leave her husband and brothers to fight Silas alone.

Emmy ran to her from behind and grabbed her arm, breathless. "You have to get to him."

Winnie's eyes widened with panic. "Who?"

"Thad. Silas has him. Thad broke through the guard, and Silas blasted him in the chest with a rope of everyone's powers. He is out cold but still alive for now. The second the blast hit Thad, a Winter warrior attacked Silas, stopping him momentarily."

Everything around Winnie disappeared as she spun and sprinted toward the crumbled wall. Silas had taken so much from her already; he would not take her heart.

She climbed to the top of the crumbled rocks and surveyed the yard. She spotted Archie on one side and Chaz on the other as they fought their way forward. At the front of the palace, she saw Silas dragging Thad backward toward the open doors.

"*SILAS*," she thundered across the field. He found her standing atop his pathetic wall and smiled. He actually *smiled*. Anger threaded through her veins like sleet on a black Winter's night.

Without breaking eye contact with the monster before her, she ran down the wall and launched herself toward him with inhuman strength. She hit the ground in a graceful crouch and caused the ground to splinter with ice in every direction.

When she stood, the Spring King's eyes were wide with disbelief. No one knew a True Queen could wield the same power as her husband because no queen had ever tried. When they discovered what she could do in Takita, she started training with Thad and Chaz to prepare for battle.

Silas dropped her husband and stomped the ground, sending a boulder into the air, hurtling it toward her. She swiped her hand in front of her and created an arc of ice around her body to deflect the blow.

She grabbed her bow and a silver-tipped arrow from her quiver and bolted toward him to save her husband.

Winnie, Archie, and Chaz reached Silas together and threw everything they had at him. He deflected their attacks with pieces of earth

like one would swat a fly.

Archie threw a gust of air and yelled to her, "He has to have access to earth! We have to seclude him!"

Chaz's body was slick with sweat, and Winnie concentrated on deflecting another boulder, her eyes on Thad's limp body. "How?"

"We have to get close enough for you to enclose us in ice with him. Like our cell when I had no air. *Enclose him*," Archie instructed.

"Chaz, we have to get closer," she called to her brother. Silas was making it nearly impossible to close the distance.

"On three, run as hard as you can toward him, and start on the barricade," Archie commanded. "One. Two. *Three*."

On three, he sent a tornado at Silas, which ate up anything he threw at them. Winnie and Chaz ran toward him, with Archie on their heels. She concentrated on the area around them and sent a sheet of ice from her feet to Silas. Once it reached the Spring King, a wall of ice erected behind him.

Silas backed up and cursed. He looked below him and tried to run to the side, but she was ready. She threw up walls on both sides before she closed in the back and the top, making sure to leave the smallest holes for Archie to pull in wind.

"It's over, Silas," Archie said, his voice hard. "It didn't have to be this way."

"It *did* have to be this way," Silas hissed. "You all may be content with being lapdogs, but I was made for more. Rodina *will* be mine."

It was clear he was delusional.

He picked up Thad and snaked fire, wind, and ice toward his chest.

Winnie screamed and, without thinking, nocked an arrow and fired. It struck true through the base of his neck and pinned him to the ice wall at his back. His eyes bulged as he yanked on the shaft, but it wouldn't budge. Clarence told her he made the arrows to hold an enemy down if she needed to escape.

But she was not running this time.

She ran to Thad and pulled him back, skirting her hands over him to search for injuries.

Silas laughed around gargled blood. "He's dying, little ice queen. Did you really think he could take a hit of *my* power and live? You really are a stupid bitch," he spat, blood spraying in her direction.

She stood, and a lethal calm blanketed her like a shield. "Did you really think you could take a hit of *our* power and live?" she asked, her words murderous. "Now!"

Before Silas could respond, Archie, Winnie, and Chaz shot a stream of ice, wind, and fire as hard as they could toward his chest. He screamed as much as one could with an arrow lodged in their throat. A blinding light shot from his eyes and mouth before he exploded into a sprinkle of flesh and bones.

The three royals stood in the ice cage, stunned. Chaz looked at his arms and heaved the contents of his stomach all over the ice floor.

He looked at Archie and Winnie in disbelief. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Winnie, you and I will get Thaddeus to the horses. Chazriel, you need to melt us out of here," Archie said as though he were ordering dinner and not covered in human remains.

Chaz turned into a torch and cut through the ice like butter, creating a hole large enough for them to walk through.

He reached out and put a bloody hand on Winnie's arm, his eyes filled with pain. "Edwin killed Mother," he choked out.

The ground fell out from under her feet. She sank to her knees next to Thad and released a cry of despair, her pain mixing with the sounds of battle. She looked at her brother through blurry eyes. "Did you kill him?"

His body glowed a bluish-orange with unchecked emotion. "I burned him to ash."

She stood and wiped the blood from her face. "Good."



Thad's chest ached, and he lifted his fist to massage the pain with a groan. He heard a rustling sound nearby, and two gentle hands began to skirt over his limbs.

"Thad," Winnie hiccupped. "Are you awake?"

He slowly opened his eyes and turned to her. She covered her mouth with a sob and ran to the doorway. She returned with Henry, who had seen better days.

"It's about time you woke up, you lazy bastard," he said weakly.

"What happened?" Thad remembered the battle and sat up, his chest smarting with the movement. "Where's Silas?"

Winnie sat on the bed next to him. "He's dead. He..." her voice broke, and she had to pause before she continued, "He hit you with a stream of his stolen powers but was interrupted. He tried to drag you back to his palace to finish. Archie, Chaz, and I barely got there in time. Thank gods his powers were too weak to kill you instantly."

He absorbed this information and looked from her to Henry. "How many casualties?"

Henry shifted on his feet. "Too many."

He closed his eyes, the sting of loss increasing the pain in his chest. "What about our friends?" he asked, afraid to know the answer.

"Edwin killed my mother," Winnie said meekly.

"Don't worry, Chazriel turned him to ash," Naomi said as she barreled into the room. "Everyone else is in one piece. We will be holding a memorial in Suki's honor when I return to Takita. She was a brave woman and should be honored as such."

Winnie nodded, her eyes never leaving his. He rubbed a thumb across her bottom lip and murmured, "I can't imagine the pain you are feeling. We will go to Takita if that is what you wish, and we will honor her here as well. Her sacrifice will not be in vain."

She sniffed and wiped her nose with her sleeve. "You've been out for a week. We didn't know if you would wake or not. How are you feeling?"

"My chest is sore like I took a punch, but other than that, I feel completely normal."

"Good." She reared back and punched his arm playfully. "If you ever die, I will bring you back to kill you myself. You'll never go into danger alone again, got it?"

He bit his bottom lip to keep from laughing. "Yes, your majesty. I understand."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Delyna walked into their rooms at the Winter Palace in a burnt orange gown that flowed around her hips. Her black hair fell in loose waves over her shoulders, and her eyes sparkled in the lamplight.

Archie's heart skipped a beat at the sight of her, and he sent thanks to the gods for placing her in his path. He didn't know how he'd give her up when Autumn was over, and his heart twisted at the thought.

When she approached the settee and draped herself across his lap, Rizo whimpered from the floor. She leaned forward and scratched the top of his head with a chuckle. "I didn't forget about you, you pitiful little creature."

Archie bit back a smirk. Rizo was injured badly on the battlefield, but the knife missed his organs. Warriors who witnessed his attack have whispered beliefs that the gods blessed the beast.

He thought the wolf was stubborn and wouldn't let something as trivial as being stabbed kill him.

Delyna kissed Archie and whispered against his lips, "I've decided I want to stay."

He pulled back, surprised. "You want to stay in Kore after Autumn ends?"

She nodded slightly. "I know you have to marry other women, but..."

"You understand that I have to consummate my marriage every year?" he clarified. It was the last thing he wanted, but it had to be done.

Pain flitted across her pretty face. "Yes, but it's only one night?"

"Yes," he answered quickly. "I won't touch another woman except on my wedding night."

"Then I am yours. I would rather share you one night a year than not have you at all."

Hot emotion mixed with love trailed down his body, caressing every limb. "You can stay with me in the palace. Every bride will be told they must respect you, or I will strip them of their duchess title at Autumn's end. I promise, our life here will be the best I can make it."

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I love you, King Archer of Autumn."

"And I love you," he said with conviction. "I'll love you, always."



Chaz stayed in Eridu with Winnie after the war until Thad woke from his coma. He sent for Resler to join him at the Winter Palace so they could go over what needed to be done when he returned to Zoris, and their list was longer than the road to Anorak. It had been two weeks since the Spring battle, and it was finally time to return home.

He and Resler trailed into the breakfast room to eat and say goodbye before their long trek to the Summer Kingdom. Archer and Delyna were leaving today as well, and he could tell Winnie was more than a little sad.

Before he could say a word, Francis' voice came from behind him. "I am glad to have caught you all together." Chaz whirled and studied the guardian. His voice was different somehow, but he looked the same.

Winnie stood and crossed the room. "Fran, is everything ok?"

The old man smiled kindly. "True Queen of Winter, you have pleased us beyond measure." He turned to Chaz. "As have you, Summer King. Your line has proven to be pure and true."

Thad stood quickly, knocking over his chair. Archer was across the room in a flash, a look of concern on both of their faces.

Winnie's brow lowered. "Francis?"

Suddenly, Chaz knew what this was, and it was a punch to the gut. "You're not Francis," he stated.

Francis shook his head and clasped his hands in front of him. "I am Heims, the God of Winter."

Winnie choked on a gasp. "But...but that means that Francis..."

The god nodded his head solemnly. "This message was too important and had to be delivered. He was the oldest of the Winter guardians," Heims lamented as he smoothed a hand over Winnie's hair in a fatherly way. "Do not worry, child. You will see him again."

She nodded and straightened her spine. "How can we be of service?"

He sighed heavily. "I'm afraid this might come as a shock to you all. Would you like to sit?"

The group collectively shook their heads. He surveyed the guardians and royals before continuing, "Very well. I should start from the beginning. When we created the new world, we created three lands: Rodina, Cylon, and Mesika."

"What?" Thad blurted. "Do you mean to tell us that we are not the only ones in this world?"

Heims smiled tightly. "That is precisely what I mean. We intentionally led you to believe you were the only ones occupying this world. In the Old World, many lands existed, and they were often at war. We did not wish for that to happen again and tried to prevent it the best we could."

Archer looked like he was going to pass out, but the guardians were eerily quiet. "You all knew," Chaz accused.

"They were sworn to silence," the god of Winter interrupted. "We have more pressing matters to discuss. In Cylon, the Summer King has achieved what Silas sought out to do, though he went about it differently. He rules their land with fear and brutality, and the citizens are suffering under his cruelty. He must be stopped."

Archer rubbed his jaw in thought. "What about the other three kings?"

"He keeps them chained in solid metal coffins. The Autumn and Spring heirs cannot access the elements needed to free themselves, and the Winter heir's box stays in an incinerator."

"He's torturing them to keep them contained?" Winnie asked in horror.

He pressed his mouth into a grim line. "He *was*. What he does not know is we pulled the heir's souls into the heavens. The Summer King does not know guardians exist, and they have sought out the new heirs and placed them in hiding."

"Why can't you pull this evil king out like that?" Winnie wondered aloud.

"Because we do not want him in the heavens. He would have to be retrieved by Orcus, the god of the seven rings of hell," he said. "We have no intention of involving him. The world would be worse for it."

Chaz rarely heard anyone mention Orcus, and he shuddered. "What is it you need from us?"

Heims tipped his mouth. "I need you to sail to Cylon and kill him."

The room fell silent, but Archer, always ten steps ahead, strode forward. "Who will regulate our seasons while we are across the world? How will we marry if we are in a foreign land? I think a blood-bonding ceremony would raise a few flags." He paused, thinking. "Better yet, how are Cylon's seasons being regulated?"

"They're not," Heims said simply. "They are in a constant state of Summer. Your seasons will not be regulated, so it is best if you leave after the Spring Equinox so your citizens will be able to grow crops to sustain their food supply. When you come back, the weather will even back out. Being far from your lands, your powers will not be as strong, eliminating the need for a conduit bride."

"Then how do you expect us to beat Mr. Hot Pants without our full powers?" Chaz asked. "And how are we expected to get off Rodina when we cannot access the water?"

Heims pinned him with a knowing look. "You will help guard the other three, allowing them to get close enough to him." Chaz sputtered, but he continued, "You will be in a perpetual state of Summer in Cylon, and your power will be at a normal capacity despite being far from Rodina." He locked eyes with Archer. "And the rocks surrounding Rodina are the reason you need the Spring heir. Only their power can move the barrier we put in place."

The land of Rodina was separated from the ocean on all sides by a monstrous rock wall raised from the earth itself. It was impossible to climb, making the shores of the vast water beyond inaccessible. It's a wonder Silas' greed never led him to clear the wall himself.

While Chaz blinked in shock, Winnie tilted her head. "How does the conduit bride work for the Summer King if he is in power at all times?"

"His powers are strong because the other kings do not take brides and their power transfers to him. It is also why it is always Summer, even

with the new heirs. He performs a new blood-bonding ceremony on every Solstice and Equinox.

"You will need to find the new Spring heir and train them to take with you. They will not marry a conduit on the Spring Equinox. Instead, Chazriel will. It will bring Summer early, and you will need to inform your kingdoms. The Spring heir's powers will also not be as strong during the Spring season, but it is important to train anyway."

"Are we to all go?" Clarence asked.

Heims shook his head. "Only two guardians of Winter will accompany the royals. Resler may accompany Chazriel, and all other guardians are to stay behind with their kingdoms or stay with their *compeers*." Everyone stared at the Winter god in various stages of uncertainty.

Thad rubbed a hand down his face and heaved a sigh. "Thank you, Heims. We will do what we can to help Cylon."

"I have left a drawn map of the locations of Cylon and Mesika on the throne, as well as architectural plans for a ship. If you will please lead me to Francis' rooms, I will leave and allow you to say goodbye," he said quietly. "As I'm sure you remember, the guardian's bodies cannot survive long after holding the power of a god."

A somber silence fell over the room. Winnie headed toward the hall and turned back to the god with a sad smile. "Follow me."



The royals hung back and allowed the Winter guardians to say their goodbyes in private. They were losing a friend they had known for thousands of years, and Winnie could not imagine their grief.

When the guardians exited the room, their eyes were filled with tears, and Gilda motioned for the royals to proceed.

Archie and Delyna gave him quick hugs and murmured their goodbyes before making way for the others. Winnie approached the bed where Francis sat, unable to form words around the tightness in her chest.

Chaz grabbed the old man's shoulder and squeezed. "It was an honor to know you and fight alongside you, Fran. You were our family, and we will not forget you."

Francis laughed, even though his eyes were glistening. "Don't cry for me. I'll see you again one day." He reached up and patted Chaz's hand on his shoulder. "You Haywards have been some of the best kids I have ever had the pleasure of watching over."

At that, Winnie released a sob. Thad rubbed a soothing hand down her back, but her pain was inconsolable. She had already lost her mother, and now she would lose Francis, too.

She wrapped her arms around his body and cried into his shoulder. "I love you. I will tell everyone your story." The air in the room grew cold, and the ground began to freeze with her grief.

A single tear slipped down his wrinkled face, wetting her hair. "There, there, lass. No need to freeze us all. But I need you to do more than remember me," he said. "I need you to tell *all* of my stories. Don't ever let Rodina forget."

She nodded as her tears fell like rain.

Thad leaned forward and clasped his arm. "It has been an honor. Thank you for protecting my wife when I couldn't."

Francis nodded. "You have been a good king, Thaddeus. I am proud to have served you in Winter." He turned back to the Hayward siblings. "Your parents and I will be waiting for you."

He laid his head against the pillow, closed his eyes, and took his last breath.



"What now?" Chazriel asked, looking at the other royals and guardians around the council table.

Archer was staring at the map and ship blueprints with pinched brows. "We need to start construction on the ship as soon as possible. It will take months to build, especially since no one in Rodina has ever built one before."

Thad nodded. "We need to scour the royal libraries and find literature on how to sail the ship as well."

Archer tapped the map and slid it to Thad. "We should leave from Summer. It would be wise to begin the construction next to the rock barrier, here," he said, pointing to the map. "It would be too difficult to move the ship much farther than that."

Chazriel blew out a breath and looked at Resler. "Can you round up trustworthy workers to begin construction? They will need to understand the importance of secrecy as well."

Resler nodded. "I will contact the council and other Summer guardians to assist with finding able-bodied men."

"And women," Chazriel added. "If they are capable and wish to help, let them."

Resler tried to hide a small smile as he nodded. "Of course."

"How will we find the Spring heir? Why couldn't Heims tell us where to find him?" Winnie asked, looking around the table before grumbling under her breath, "The gods aren't very helpful."

Gilda rubbed a soothing hand in circles on her back. "He likely did not know who the new heir was, dear. Each god assigns the guardians for their own kingdom; I imagine the same goes for the heirs."

Archer turned to Delyna. "I suppose I can't convince you to stay here, can I?"

Her eyes sharpened, and her mouth pressed into a thin line. "No. Do not ask again."

Henry burst out laughing. "Delyna, you're scarier than Luther."

Luther shook his head. "I will oversee the ship's construction. Each guardian will search for literature on sailing. Henry, Emmy, and Resler, you will be in charge of *learning* the literature."

Everyone nodded in understanding.

"Do we know who the Spring guardians are? Could they help find the new heir?" Winnie inquired, leaning forward.

Clarence sighed. "We will do our best to find them, but we will have tasks of our own before we can search."

"What will we do when we get there?" Chazriel asked. "We have no idea what their world is like. It would be foolish to assume it is like ours."

"When did Chaz become the rational one in the group," Emmy laughed. "We truly are in trouble."

Thad couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. "There's a first time for everything." His expression turned serious. "But he is correct; we need to be prepared for every possible scenario. We will need someone on the ship to learn to sew. We will take plenty of fabric to fashion new clothes to match the Cylon styles if needed. We need to blend in."

Henry raised his hand. "I know how." Everyone balked except for the Winter guardians. "What?" he asked with a shrug. "I had Gilda teach me once. After thousands of years, you tend to pick up a few new hobbies."

"I can too," Emmy said with a smirk.

"Me too," Resler added.

Thad shook his head at his friends. "Luther, if you tell me you can sew as well, I will have a heart attack right here and now."

Luther smirked. "You'll never know, your majesty."

"We can meet in Summer on the Spring Equinox and leave from there when the ship is finished. Hopefully, it will be done with construction by then. I think we're done here unless someone has something to add," Archer said diplomatically.

Everyone looked around with various rueful looks, shaking their heads.

Winnie stood slowly. "Fate has put Cylon in our hands. Let's go save them."

EPILOGUE

Lana swore under her breath when she walked from Trya's room. The old woman passed away after Ver, the god of Spring, left her body. Trya had been the guardian to find her when the gods first blessed her, and she would miss her oldest friend terribly. What was worse was the news that Ver delivered to her and the rest of the Spring guardians.

She turned to Stratton, another guardian, and shook her head. "Please don't make me do this. Send one of the others."

"You heard Ver. We can't disobey the very god who blessed us, Lana. We are the newest guardians, and we must go," he said.

"Exactly!" she exclaimed. "The guardians with more experience should be protecting our new *compeer*. Not the two newbies."

He pursed his lips. "You know as well as I do that the guardians with more experience need to find and train the newest guardian. You should remember better than any of us how frightening it can be."

She blew out a long breath. When a god used a guardian as a vessel, the guardian died because their body couldn't handle the overwhelming power of a god. The god then informed the remaining guardians who would be the newly blessed guardian before ascending back into the heavens.

Ver came to visit the Spring guardians a century ago to warn them of the possibility that Silas was becoming corrupt. That was how Lana was blessed all those years ago. She was a replacement.

"It will be too hard to face Thad," she whispered. "It was hard enough to leave him the first time; I don't think I can handle a second."

He eyed her carefully. "What exactly happened between you and the Winter King?"

Her eyes began to spill over, and she swiped furiously at her cheeks. "We were in love. We thought I was his *compeer*," she laughed bitterly.

"Obviously, I wasn't, but we both believed it and were betrothed to be married. When Trya found me, she told me I had to leave my old life behind. I refused to believe her, of course, but she was persistent," Lana sniffed. "Then she stabbed me in the heart. I was hysterical, but once she pulled the dagger from my chest, the pain started to subside, and my skin began to heal rapidly. I knew then she was telling the truth."

"And you left him," Stratton guessed.

She gave him a false smile. "It's worse than that. I knew he would never stop looking for me if I simply left. I told him I slept with King Silas," she said bitterly. "He hated me and told me as much."

"Why King Silas? Why not a random man?" he asked curiously.

"I knew sleeping with one of his equals was the only way to hurt him enough to never forgive me."

He squeezed her shoulder. "Our duty to our *compeer* is more important than your heartbreak. I am sorry, but we need Thaddeus' help. We must go to him and the True Queen of Winter to fulfill our duty."

The thought of Thad with another woman gutted her to her core, and the fact that he found his real *compeer* singed her from the inside out. She knew Stratton was right. She needed to put her duty above all else.

She wasn't sure how she would manage when her heart had been torn from her body and smashed in the palms of the Winter King.



Winnie still could not believe the splendor of the Winter Palace. It was exquisite in every way while still being simple. The beauty was in the structure and the materials they used.

They sat at the shorter, informal dining table where she and Thad shared dinner with the Winter guardians. The table was quiet tonight because they still hadn't located the Spring King, and everyone was getting anxious. They discussed tactics before dinner, but no one had any useful ideas.

"Where is Henry?" Emmy asked irritably. He was late again, which didn't surprise Winnie one bit.

"Why, did you miss me?" he asked, sauntering into the dining room. "This time, I have a good reason. I met this gangly lot on the way in," he said and jerked his thumb behind him.

Winnie looked up and stared in surprise. "Rogan!" She rounded the table and gave him a quick hug. She had not seen him since he and the other guardians found her and Archie in Silas' cave. She found out later from Emmy that the three Autumn 'warriors' were actually guardians.

She looked at his companion but did not recognize her. The girl was petite with short blonde hair. "I'm Winnie," she said to the girl with a small wave.

The girl smiled. "Willow."

"Please, sit," she said with a flourish. "You're just in time for dinner, and we have plenty." It was then that she noticed a woman standing behind them.

The woman had the same dark skin and green eyes as Silas, though where the late Spring King's were dark and haunting, hers were bright and full of life. Her dark hair fell in shiny waves down her back and not a single strand was out of place. She had high cheekbones and prominent brows, and Winnie's lips parted in awe.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you. I'm Winnie," she stammered in surprise and held out her hand.

The woman shook her hand with a polite smile. Winnie noticed she was dressed like a noblewoman and thought that fitting for someone of her beauty.

"Pleased to meet you, your majesty. I'm Adira Keren."

Rogan cleared his throat and looked pointedly at Thad. "We believe you've been looking for Adira."

Thad's face screwed up in confusion, and Willow stepped forward. "She is the new Spring heir."

The entire room stilled. Even Henry was rendered speechless, which Winnie thought was an impressive feat in and of itself.

Finally, Gilda spoke, "How do you know?"

Rogan's expression was hard. "We've seen her power with our own eyes. We brought her here straight away."

"No offense to the ladies in the room, but there has never been a female heir. Ever," Clarence pointed out.

Rogan shrugged. "There's also never been a king killed until recently, so I guess the rules are changing."

Winnie could see Emmy chewing on her cheek while she mulled over the information. Suddenly, her friend whipped her head to Rogan with wide eyes. "Why were you with the *Spring* heir, Rogan?"

He and Willow exchanged a look before looking back at the room. They raised their eyebrows and tilted their heads slightly as if to say, '*You know why.*'

It took a second for their presence to register, and when it did, the entire room shot to their feet. Winnie covered her mouth with both hands, and her eyes locked with Adira's.

They all knew they could not say what they had just realized.

Adira, the new queen of Spring, was Archie's *compeer*.

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Acknowledgments

I'm not one for mushy words, so I'll keep this short and sweet.

Thank you to my amazing support system that has encouraged me from the beginning of *The Compeer* until the end: my husband, Ray; my beta readers, Katelyn, Ashley, Maddie, and Christal; and my author friend, Heather.

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And last but definitely not least, thank you to my readers for giving me a chance. I hope you enjoyed reading Thad and Winnie's story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

I love you all, even from the stars.

Jamie

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