



THE
SOUL
OF THE
DRAGON

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THE SOUL OF THE DRAGON

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GYPSY INK BOOKS

The Soul of the Dragon

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PROLOGUE

Isaac

Scotland, 1910

“**S**top glaring at me, son, and do what needs to be done. It’s the only way.” My father pressed his knife into my hand and took another step closer.

How the hell had the world come to this?

Standing on the edge of a cliff with my father demanding I plunge a knife into his heart. All because of a curse we’d been unable to break since that fateful day of my twin brother’s wedding.

Honestly, it still seemed like only yesterday.

One minute, I was watching my brother Ian marry the woman meant for me, and the next, I was engulfed in a flash of unbearable heat and my body turning to ash. I’d been lucky enough to not only be in my dragon form at the time, but I also landed in the ocean when I came through whatever magical portal I’d been forced into.

I’d quickly recovered and taken to the skies to search for the rest of my family.

With every beat of my wings, my fear had grown until I had spotted Ian on the beach. My twin had not fared well. His human bones had shattered into so many pieces he couldn’t shift to start the necessary healing process. It had taken hours,

and every ounce of magic I possessed to heal him enough so his body would take over.

Now, with several years past, I faced my father in an argument over his life. “This is bullshit,” I argued. “There has to be another way.”

“There’s not. There aren’t many ways to kill a dragon, but this will do the trick. If you make it clean and quick, there won’t be much pain either.”

I scoffed. “That’s not what I goddamned meant and you know it. I’ve done a lot of shit I’m not proud of in my life, but I draw the line at killing my own father.”

“It’s not killing me if I tell you to do it.”

I shook my head. “No!” I roared, letting my frustration seep into my voice. I was tired of taking orders, and sick of this fight. “I’m not doing this with you anymore. I think it’s time we faced the truth. We’re stuck. We can’t go back to our old life.”

“No!” he roared back at me twice as loud, spit flying from his mouth, and a hint of fire aimed in my direction. “This isn’t over until I say it’s over. Besides, I didn’t raise you to quit.” He shoved me backwards, advancing as I fell. “I raised you to be a king. To take what you wanted, when you wanted, and now it’s time for you to stand up, take your duty seriously, and do the right thing. This isn’t about you. Now, take the knife.”

He shoved it into my hand again, and without thinking, I wrapped my fingers around the bejeweled hilt. The power buried within shot through my arm and raced into my blood, flooding my system with an infusion of intense magic.

“Holy shit.”

My father laughed. “Dragon blade. There’s nothing like it. The power it contains will aid you in ways that you’ll never expect. It’s yours now, and where you’re going, you’ll need it.”

Shaking my head, I thrust it back in his direction. “I don’t want it. This is the king’s blade.”

“Exactly.” He pushed my hand away. “It’s time, son. Stop denying what we both know. Neither one of us had a set-in-stone plan for when this would happen, but as fate would have it, the time has come, whether you like it or not.”

“This isn’t fate. This is an excuse.”

My father glowered. “An excuse for what?”

“You’ve given up. Life got too hard, and you’d rather check out than see this through.”

“You are skirting dangerously close to the edge, son. Are you sure this is the conversation you want to be our last? One of anger and resentment? With words spoken that cannot be taken back? You’re not a child, and I’m afraid our world is done putting up with your immature actions. If I just wanted to kill myself, I wouldn’t need you to get the job done. But this is far more complicated, and suicide won’t make the spell work.

“What of mother? If I manage to break that curse, what shall I tell her?”

He scrubbed his hands over his face. “The truth. That her king made the ultimate sacrifice for her sons. Trust me. She would expect nothing less and would make the same choice in my stead.”

“And the mate bond? What happens to her without you?”

“She is already without me, son. We had a long and happy life together. Once this hardship is over, she’ll have her sons back. It *will* be enough.”

“She won’t forgive me.”

“She will. Take my word for that, Isaac, if nothing else. She loves her children above all else.”

I still thought this whole thing sounded insane. “How can you put so much faith in an amulet you’ve never seen? If it doesn’t exist or cannot break the curse, then this will all be for nothing. Let me keep searching. I’ll find another way.”

He stepped closer until the tip of his knife poked at his chest in the exact location of his heart. “Your king has given you an order and you will do as he says.”

The power infused in his voice washed over me. My father was done talking. Instead the ruthless king had taken his place and nothing would change his stance. Not me. Not his mate. Not even—

“What are you doing? Stop!”

We both jerked at the sound of my brother’s loud, angry voice. Unfortunately, I moved forward as did my father, and the dragon blade pushed roughly between bones and muscle in his chest and directly into his heart. My eyes went wide at the same time my father’s mouth parted in a small smile.

He’d gotten what he wanted.

Fuck.

With my hand still on the hilt of the knife, I wrapped my free arm around his shoulder and a harsh whisper escaped me. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he whispered in return. “This is what had to be done. Don’t forget that. Now you must do what we talked about. Find the amulet and save your mother. It’s all I ask.”

“Get away from him!”

Before I could say anything by way of an explanation, I was jerked away from our father so fast, I lost my grip on the knife.

“Ian.”

“What have you done?” He eased our father to the ground. “Be still. I can heal you.”

Our father opened his mouth to say something, but blood bubbled out instead of words. Ian didn’t realize it yet, but no magic would heal a wound from a dragon blade. The iron was forged in sorcerer magic eons ago, and had stood the test of time.

He placed his hand against our father’s bleeding chest, and the warm glow of his magic lit the area. For a second there, I thought it might actually be working as our father grabbed his hand in a surprisingly quick move. But the now ashen color of his face told the truth as the blade quickly drained his dragon fire.

“No. Father. Hold on. You’re not going to die today. Isaac can’t become king!”

Again, he tried to form words but the gurgling sounds of him drowning in his own blood were all that escaped him. I squeezed my eyes against the sight. This wasn’t how I wanted to remember him. My king was invincible. He’d ruled over shifter kind for nearly a century with a decisive, iron fist. That he’d chosen this path for his end broke something inside me, and I had a feeling it would never be repaired.

A low rumble caught my attention, and my eyes popped open as my brother turned to me. Anger twisted his face a moment before a blast of his dragon fire scorched my skin.

Instinct took over and my body shifted into its dragon form instantly, both extinguishing the flames and ripping my clothing to shreds. As grief for my father fled my mind, my dragon focused on my twin and his attack.

Don’t do this. I don’t want to fight you.

I spoke the words in my mind, hoping that for once Ian would listen to me, instead of discounting my words as those of a madman. Despite my larger size, we were well matched. The last thing we needed was an encore to our last fight. I’d provoked him over his mate, Cordelia and threatened to take her from him. I’d learned a hard lesson that day. My twin might be smaller, a few minutes younger, and not quite as quick, but when properly motivated, he was a foe like no other.

You think I’m just going to let you get away with killing our father? You did this. And for once, you are going to reap the consequences.

I pawed at the ground and released a stream of dragon fire in pure rage and grief. How dare he? He would not be the only one who suffered from this.

It was an accident.

Ian snorted, returning my fire with his own. The black scales that covered my body protected me from his blast, but the

violence of it triggered something in my brain and what civility I'd recently found dropped from sight.

I launched in his direction, rolling him to the ground and attempting to pin him down. But my brother was not an easy adversary. He fought hard and vicious against the claws ripping into the red scales of his dragon. I released him and took to the skies. If I could put some space between us... maybe then he would listen.

He clearly didn't see it that way as he launched in my direction and caught up to me in mere seconds. I didn't realize how close he'd gotten until the sharp points of his dragon teeth pierced the tip of my tail and jerked me backwards.

I tumbled ass over end several times before finally regaining my balance.

I don't want to fight you, Ian.

I don't care what you want. I'm done with you. Not only are you not my brother any longer, but soon you will die at my hand as I avenge my father's death.

Not for a second did I doubt the ferocity of his words. His intentions were clear and as if he wanted to prove it, he lunged for my throat.

I twisted my body into a roll as I dove for the ground. I could feel his thirst for my blood through our twin bond and it instantly became clear that he would not stop coming for me until either I was dead or he was.

This was definitely not part of the plan. Father's sacrifice was going to be impossible to explain to Mother, but the death of her son? She'd probably rip my spine out herself. Everyone always underestimated how cunning and vicious Lillian Ferguson could be. I'd made that mistake once and the punishment for it had been swift.

I would never make that mistake again.

That left only one choice.

I had to leave. And it had to be now.

I beat my wings through the air as hard as I could before wrapping them around me in a death defying dive. The blood of my father had seeped into the sacred ground of this cliff and if I spoke the words now...

It had to work. Otherwise his death would be for naught.

“From the blood of my father, King Ferguson to the realm of the fae beyond, *via temporis, ima clamo ad te via spatti Tu ubio, aperire...Aperi.*” I whispered, keeping them from my mind.

I couldn't take the chance that Ian could follow me. If I never made it back, there was still the chance he could be reunited with his mate and our mother. They both would need him.

The knife, son. You must take it.

The voice of my father in my mind tore through my heart. If I still had one. At this point that was debatable. However, he was right. The dragon blade was the key to success. I twisted and turned until I got my body angled just right. I was fighting for my life against Ian and hoping this fucking spell would work at the same time.

Isaac!

Another shot of dragon fire accompanied my brother's shout in my mind, barely missing my left wing. The twists and turns it took to evade were wasting precious seconds. The magic of the spell had sparked to life, sending shards of fiery sensation through my veins. But it wouldn't last long. It was now or never.

This is what he wanted. I swear it.

That was the last thought I could send to Ian. He wouldn't believe any of it, but with any luck, my words would haunt him until I returned. The bastard wanted me dead, but for the wrong damned reason.

With the edge of the cliff only yards away, I rolled fifty feet in the opposite direction, evened out two feet above the ground and reached for the blade. The hilt recognized me as my father's successor and sang its welcoming tune as I grabbed it, pulling with all my strength.

Ian's roar of anguish ripped through me at the same time I realized the blade still clung to my father's flesh and the two of us were headed over the edge of the cliff together.

My heart beat frantically. If he went with me there would be no formal burial on sacred ground. His soul would be lost.

Do what you must. Be a king.

Fuck. Equal parts rage and anguish tore through me as I tucked my wings tighter and dove for the veil. Forgiveness be damned, I had to try.

The darkness ahead winked and shimmered to life, reminding me that I had little knowledge of what I was getting into. But the crazy in me no longer cared as it leapt through the magic that kept one world away from another.

My dead father clutched in its claws.

CHAPTER
ONE

Kitra

Holy hellfire, praise the Goddess. I was free.

The door to my cage had popped open. I pocketed the small knife I'd used to work it loose and darted out between the bars.

"What's going on?" One of the other prisoner's called out. I jerked in surprise and threw up my hands to create a shield to protect me, only to stumble when the pain of an empty core stole my breath.

The pain of losing all but the most basic forms of magic burned through my blood as I once again reached for that part of me that was as intrinsic as an organ. Imprisoned was one thing. Bound another. I was going to do whatever it took to fix that situation.

And then I was going to find a way to strike back at my stepfather, the king of this realm, for everything he'd done.

But first I had to escape.

I picked myself up and ran. Not blindly either. Because this castle was my home too and I knew it inside and out and better than any person here. Not even my stepfather or his pet dragon, Magnus could find all of the nooks and crannies.

After weeks of being trapped in my stepfather's dungeon I was finally loose, and I planned to stay that way. The bastard was going to be livid when he found me gone, and I'd likely be

hunted by his dragon. I stiffened my shoulders. That was a small price to pay, and a risk I was willing to take, for the chance at freedom.

Sliding feet first into the closest tunnel to the dungeon that would lead me out, I disappeared into the bowels of the castle. I moved as quickly as I could, clamping my lips tight so as not to squeal over every little sound behind me.

By the time I reached the kitchen and the drain that led directly outside, I could feel the weight of my world pressing down on me. I had nothing but sheer will to keep me going. And the memory of my mother. I could almost hear her voice in my head telling me to keep going. I couldn't give up now.

I emerged through the foul mud and forced myself to breathe through my mouth, not my nose. I should have been used to gross smells by now after my time in the King's dungeon, but just when I thought it couldn't get worse, it did.

There were other, more pleasant ways out of the castle, but I couldn't risk the time they would take or the chance that I'd be seen.

Plus, this tunnel led directly into the wooded area of the estate that made it easier for me to disappear in a hurry.

As I ran through the dark forest, I used what little magic I could conjure to light my way. Which meant nothing more than simple spells even a child could do. He thought he was teaching me to toe the line by locking me away, but all I knew for sure was that I hated him for this.

My mother's body had barely turned to ash when he'd arrived in my room to inform me that I would take her place by his side and in his bed.

My stomach revolted, and I choked on my own spit. If there had been anything in my stomach it would be on the ground at my feet by now. No amount of time in a locked, dank cell could ever make me want that man's hands on my body.

I leaned against a tree and heaved for breath. I'd been running for what felt like hours and my lungs burned because of it. But no matter how far I'd gone, it wouldn't be far enough.

Not with my stepfather determined to claim my virgin body and my magic. My stomach churned again as I remembered those words coming out of his mouth.

That bastard could go straight to hell. Right after I wiped the smug grin off his face. For that, though, I would need my power restored and I didn't have the first clue how to go about doing that. Well, I kind of had a clue. Or at least the name of a woman who might be able to help me. I just had to get to her before Magnus found me.

Only then did I stand a chance of surviving any of this.

I looked skyward and prayed to the Goddess that my mother couldn't see me now. It would break her heart to see what her death had led to. Or if she had to see me, then I hoped she could offer me a guiding light. Because I sure as hell needed all the help I could get.

I braced my hands on my knees and took long, deep breaths until I got my breathing under control. Magnus may be big, fast and an asshole, but I probably knew this forest better than he did. And he wouldn't risk flying at night and getting attacked by the imps and their poisonous arrows. So if he was already in pursuit, it would be on foot and I would not allow him to find me like that.

I looked around, my eyes adjusting easily to the darkness the farther ahead I looked. Some powers the king could bind, and some he could not. Short of damaging my eyes, he couldn't take my sight. And since it was a queen he wanted, I doubted he would deform me to get it. Same with my hearing.

Now that I could breathe normally again, I sucked in enough air to fill my lungs and held it.

Like this, I could focus on the sounds around me instead of in me. The leaves rustling in the wind. The branches of the trees swaying, and— Was that—?

Oh my Goddess, yes it was. I could just hear the falls and the faint tinkling of the water as it splashed into the depths below. The falls separated this kingdom from the others, and judging by the sound, they were probably less than ten miles away. I

released the air in my lungs and smiled wide. That bastard had thought to put me in a cage and keep me there until I changed my mind. Ha!

Not in this lifetime.

I wanted nothing more than my freedom, and he had no idea how far I would go to get it. Just then a crack sounded behind me. I pulled the knife at my belt, swiveled around, and drew my arms in for an attack. I didn't see anything, but I had not mistaken that sound. Something or someone had stepped on a branch and broke it in half.

I surveyed the area in every direction possible, but could find nothing out of place. Still, the hairs on the back of my neck were standing on end and I knew never to ignore my instincts. If I was being followed, then it was on me to keep moving and do everything I could to lose them.

Keeping the knife at the ready I ran in the direction of the falls. Soon I would have to take a real rest and try to find some food in order to keep up this pace. But until then, I wove back and forth in different directions without ever losing sight of my intended path. And by the time my body gave out and I stumbled to the forest floor, I was pretty sure whoever followed me had to be lost.

I needed food and shelter. And more importantly, water. I was going on twenty-four hours since I'd escaped my prison cell and there'd been no time to grab supplies before bolting from the castle. The forest itself could offer shelter. I would find a tree worth climbing and take rest amongst sturdy branches. Food I could likely find as well, although without my power, it would be difficult to know what was safe to ingest other than a few berries.

I sighed as the frustration of my situation settled coldly into my bones. I wasn't even close to giving up, but what I wouldn't give for my comfortable bed, a meal provided for me, and the warm embrace of my mother's arms...

Wearier than I could ever recall, I pushed back to my feet and quickly found a tree to climb. A tree wouldn't protect me one hundred percent, but it would make it difficult for all but the

most cunning predators to find me. Which meant I first needed to do something to hide my scent.

I wandered away from the tree in the opposite direction I intended to travel in the morning. At every quarter of a mile, I scooped up dirt and fallen leaves and rubbed them on my clothes and skin. It wasn't foolproof, but it was better than nothing. I eventually wove my way back to my chosen tree and began to climb.

After making my way about halfway up, I found the perfect spot. Where the big old branches met the trunk, nature had worn them down leaving a natural curve that would not only give me a comfortable place to rest but allow me to remain almost completely hidden. I grabbed a few of the smaller, leaf-heavy branches and broke them free. I then curled against the trunk and used the smaller branches and leaves to cover me and provide warmth.

I'd done this many times before. The nights I'd spent in the forest alone felt like an entirely different lifetime. And, well, technically they were. When the king took my mother as his bride, she had to put more of her focus on him than me, and I learned to entertain myself. I didn't mind, mostly. I preferred my company over others most days.

And the woods that surrounded the castle became my playground, my babysitter, and eventually my best friend. It was there I was free to imagine what my life could be like when I grew up. There were no rules or limits beyond what nature required to keep the balance of life and magic, and I spent every waking, and often the sleeping moments as well, under an open sky.

Although never this deep into the dark forest.

Out here on the border of the realm, the wilder creatures lived. Danger lurked around every corner, and if I wasn't careful I could fall victim. However, given the choice of the unknown versus my stepfather and his dungeon, I'd choose the chaos of the forest every time.

As my eyes drooped shut, my worries began to fade. I believed in the power of fae and even without mine, magic still thrived

around me. It was all I had, and it had to be enough.

“Boo!”

I screamed, bolting upright and losing my balance. My body rolled and my hands slipped. Automatically, I reached for my magic only for the binding spell to tighten and squeeze the air from my lungs. As the pain of the spell tore through me again, I scrambled for something—anything to stop me, but it was too late. I was falling through the air when a hard, thin hand caught my wrist.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you fall.”

I blinked up at the imp standing in my tree, her arm outstretched to an unnatural length as she held me firmly in her grasp.

“Please don’t drop me,” I begged as fear still gripped my heart. Imps weren’t known to have kind hearts. They were troublemakers filled with malice.

But I was entirely too high up to survive if I fell from here. I don’t know what I’d been thinking when I’d chosen that spot to sleep. I’d been so tired and I’d climbed on instinct not even considering that without my magic I could get into serious trouble.

“Can’t you just—” She drew her brows together and looked at me with a myriad of questions in her dark, beady eyes. “Who would do such a thing?”

I had no idea what exactly she was talking about, but I really needed her to focus on keeping her grip on my wrist tight. “Pull me up,” I pleaded.

This time she seemed to understand and she pulled me all the way into the tree until I could steady myself back into my chosen spot. “Thank you,” I gasped as my heart beat out of control.

“Are you crazy then?” she asked. “What are you doing up so high if you can’t fly down?”

“Habit. And I wanted to make sure no one found me, although that obviously didn’t work.”

She smirked. “Oh please. I’ve been following you for a while now as you ran through the forest like a panicked deer. Everyone out this way will have heard you by now.”

I winced at her assessment. She wasn’t wrong. “I did what I had to in order to make it this far. But I have to rest before I can keep going.”

“And where is it you’re trying to go? Isn’t your kingdom back the other way?”

I looked in the direction of the castle as the grief and sadness once again washed over me. “Nay. There is nothing back there for me anymore. It’s time to find a new life.”

The imp looked at me like I was insane. “Out here? Are you daft? Your kind belongs in one of the fancy kingdom villages with all the baubles and pretty things. Especially someone as pretty as you.”

I doubted I resembled anything remotely pretty at the moment. I was covered in dirt and sweat and certainly didn’t smell pretty. “Not everything is as it seems. That fancy kingdom has its fair share of darkness too.”

“And that’s what you’re running from? The darkness?”

I bristled against her too close assessment once again. How had we gotten into this conversation in the first place? “I never said I was running. I just need to get away.”

Her brow furrowed. “That sounds like the same thing. Are you trying to trick me?”

I shook my head. “No. You’re the one who scared the life out of me, remember? I’m just not into telling strangers my life story. Why were you following me anyways? What do you want?” From my meager experience and knowledge of imps, they always wanted something and it usually came with a price you didn’t want to pay.

She shrugged. “It gave me something to do.”

That sounded like she needed to get a life and a total load of bullshit. I only hoped she wasn’t going to try and take mine.

“I’m hardly worthy of such a game. Maybe you should head back home for the night before you are missed.”

The imp laughed, a throaty, gravelly sound dark and almost threatening. “What’s your name, young one?”

I blinked at her. I was the young one? She was tiny and petite—almost childlike. Since I’d never seen an imp who looked more than a child, maybe this was how they all looked no matter their age.

“How old are you?” I didn’t want to give her my name. I knew how much power a name contained among the fae, and I was already feeling vulnerable enough.

“A might bit more than you,” she laughed. “If that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking I’m grateful you helped me back into the tree, but now I need to get some sleep. I have a long journey ahead of me, and I really need some rest to get through it.” I probably wouldn’t sleep a wink after this incident, but I’d say anything to get rid of her.

“That’s not all you need,” she mumbled. “But aye, I can see you’re done talking for now. Rest. I will stay close by in case you need me.”

I thought that was an odd sentiment from a stranger. And an imp at that. I’d never heard of them being particularly friendly. Most fae did their best to steer clear of them. However, I was on the verge of collapse and thus far she’d done nothing to warrant my mistrust.

I settled back into my nest, wishing it had more to keep me safe while I fought to stay alert. But my eyes drooped, and as hard as I tried to keep them open to watch her leave, I couldn’t do it. Like it or not, I had to trust her intentions...

CHAPTER
TWO

Isaac

Standing in the shadows between buildings, I glanced skyward, ignoring the ache to shift into dragon form and take to the skies. Flying would get me where I wanted to go in a lot less time, but I'd learned the hard way that it also made me a target.

I rubbed the scar on my shoulder where I'd been shot with a poison arrow. Fucking fae.

It hadn't been enough to kill me, but it had hurt like hell, and while magic had helped heal it, it had taken more time and power than usual. Something I was running low on by the way. I pulled the dragon blade from its sheath at my side and wrapped my fingers around the hilt until I felt the familiar jolt of power sing its way through my veins.

I didn't know much about this world yet, but I'd learned pretty quick that they didn't like outsiders. And in my dragon form, I didn't exactly blend in. There were rumors that dragons existed in this realm. Apparently, one even belonged to the king's guard.

Magnus Aegron.

First, I had to find my way into the damned castle. And I was trying to get there on my own two feet instead of via the dungeon in shackles. I'd learned the man my father told me to seek out, rarely left the stone walls of his fortress. But now

that I was finally here I had no intention of leaving without getting in.

Tonight, he and I would discuss a trade.

The crowd of men I'd been waiting on walked out of the bar and turned in the direction I wanted to go. Taking that as a sign of my luck turning, I joined them, blending into the shadows as best I could.

They all looked like they'd enjoyed their fair share of ale, and not a one noticed they had an extra person in their group. Perfect.

Or so I thought.

When we turned the corner into an alleyway, three large men brandishing swords approached. Fuck.

Dealing with troublemakers looking to steal from these men was not on my agenda for the evening. I had half a mind to disappear into the shadows. I could find another way into the castle.

"Give us your coins," the man in the middle demanded.

The men halted, some bouncing into some of the others. So much for stealthy.

"Excuse me. Do you know who we are?" The one who might be the least intoxicated of them spoke up, but the obvious slur of his words didn't help.

"Don't care. We just want your coins."

The drunk harrumphed and I couldn't help the slight upturn at the corners of my mouth. "Perhaps you should speak to the barkeep. I believe he has most of our coins."

All the men in the group laughed as the jaw muscles of the would-be assailant ticced angrily.

"Look," I interrupted, before these assholes turned vicious and the scene turned into a blood bath. I could best them all, but then my secret would be out. "These men are part of the King's Guard. Attacking them come with severe consequences from the crown. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Each of the attackers eyed me up and down. However, it was the one who hung back that caught most of my attention. He held himself differently than the other two men, and his eyes had a different look in them. Something was amiss.

“We don’t care about no crown. We just want coins. If you don’t give them to us, then we’ll simply gut you. See if your King will help you then.”

I shook my head, knowing full well where this was headed. These men I’d joined were drunk *and* stupid. As if to prove my thought, they all drew a weapon. Most swords, but a couple only carried small knives.

Not that I could say much. I only had my dragon blade, but it was more than enough. Although as a last resort I could call on my dragon fire if need be. That would certainly get me into the castle. And directly into the dungeon.

“Give them the coin,” I suggested. “Whatever it is, it’s not worth anyone’s life tonight.”

A couple of the men turned to see who had spoken up, and while many blank faces stared at me, a couple of them looked confused.

“Who the hell are you?” One of the confused asked.

” Just someone who would like to avoid trouble is all.”

“Is that right?” These idiots were now focused on me and had taken their attention away from the thieves. And since they seemed as frustrated as I was, the first one lunged forward with his sword pointed at a deathly angle to that man’s neck.

I blew out a breath and jumped. My dragon blade clanged with his sword and the magic raced along the iron and into the man’s hand. He lost his grip and his weapon dropped to the ground, his eyes wide and mouth agape at the turn of events. Two breaths later he turned and ran deep into the alley until he disappeared into the darkness

The crowd of king’s guards were stunned silent for a moment, before they erupted into cheers as they one by one realized I’d saved their leader.

However, there were still two men with swords drawn, threatening to attack us. Including the one giving off a weird vibe. It was difficult to get a good look at him with his cloak obscuring his face, and for some reason that bothered me. My instincts were telling me something was off.

“Do you still want to fight?” I asked that man in specific, ignoring the other. I doubted he posed much of a threat. At least, no more than the man who’d run.

“Possibly, but first, I do have some questions.” He re-sheathed his sword. “Like who the hell are you?”

I ignored that question for now because I had the same for him. His voice sounded familiar and yet, I knew no one from this realm.

“You men had better run before this one teaches you a lesson with that short sword of his.” The drunk guards were either too stupid or—nah, they were just stupid. They couldn’t recognize the danger they were in.

“Go home,” I instructed. “I can take care of these two for you.”

They all cheered again and shockingly took my advice as they edged around the other two men, who let them pass with no fight, and continued in the direction they’d started. Towards the castle.

Since the second man had yet to drop his sword I turned my attention solely to him. “So are we doing this or what?”

He looked back at the third man, who shook his head no, and then in the direction his friend had run. For whatever reason, he too took my advice and started down the alleyway.

That only left myself and the one man still shrouded by his cloak.

“And what about you?” I asked. “What is it you’d like to do? Care to take a round at the end of my blade?”

The man eyed his full sword at his side and then my tiny blade and laughed. “Cocky,” he said.

“Confident,” I responded.

“What’s your name?” When I didn’t answer right away, he continued. “If it’s your knife you’d like to run through me, then the least you can do is give me a name of my would-be murderer.”

I grunted, feeling neither inclined nor obligated to give this man anything. But I was curious about him and there was nothing about my name that would trigger anyone in this realm.

“Isaac Ferguson.”

He lifted his chin and stepped forward, into the light cast over us by the moon. “Well, Isaac. I have to say that’s not what I expected to hear.”

“Why, what did you expect?”

He lifted his hand, brushed back his cloak from his face, and I dropped back a step. He’d revealed his face, and the condition of it took me by surprise. Scars covered two-thirds of his skin and neck. Yet there was an eerie familiarity to it that I couldn’t quite place.

Considering I would have remembered seeing scars like that before I dismissed the hairs rising on the back of my neck.

“I thought you would be someone else is all.”

“How is it—”

“What? You actually thought the king wouldn’t know when someone new entered his kingdom, invited or NOT?”

An eerie shiver worked over me as I took a deep breath and sheathed my blade. If he intended me harm, I could retrieve it quick enough. For now, though, I wanted nothing more than to pry some information out of this git.

“Who did you expect?” There was no way for the king to know about me and my trip here. I had never set foot outside of our own realm. I hadn’t even known all of this existed. Our parents had not been forthcoming. It wasn’t until my father grew desperate that he shared, and still, he’d left out many details.

Those little evil sprite creatures, for one. It would have been nice to know they could attack me in the skies.

“Some fae make it a point to know everything. Including the details of strangers.”

Since I did not like the way this conversation was going, I chose to keep quiet. I would deny everything until he offered some kind of proof. I’d been warned the fae were tricky, and couldn’t be trusted not to use their knowledge to twist the facts.

“I’m pretty sure you have mistaken me for someone else. I’m a lowly guard out on his night off.”

He snorted. “Those weren’t your men, and you aren’t one of the guards for the crown.”

I frowned. “I certainly could be. You don’t know me and I don’t know you.”

His laugh grew louder. “I’m familiar with the entire guard regiment and you definitely aren’t one of them. So you might as well cut the bull and tell me what it is you really want here.”

My eyes narrowed on this man who’d so easily seen through my attempt to get inside the castle through the guard regiment. And had expected someone else. Who the hell was this cad? And why was he so interested in what I might want to do?

“Look, I don’t know who you are, but there’s no need to be so parano—”

“It’s obvious you don’t belong here so let’s just cut to the chase,” he interrupted. “I’ll ask again. What is it you want?”

I hated that I kind of admired his directness. Even if it was none of his business why I was here.

“I gave you my name. Isn’t that enough?”

“Okay then, Isaac the dragon. Now tell me why you are here.”

I reeled back at that. “How in the hell?”

Scarface laughed a moment before a growl rolled through his chest, and his eyes changed to the slits of a dragon. I leashed

my surprise as I realized I'd finally encountered the king's leader of the guard. Well, at least now I understood why he was so curious.

"I'd heard there were dragons here. Although I'd yet to see any, so I wasn't sure."

"I'm the only one in this kingdom. Which begs the question of where you came from."

"I'm a long way from home."

"That's a non-answer."

I shrugged. "It's the only one you're going to get."

His eyes narrowed. "So then I should call the guard and have you hauled off to the dungeon? That's what we do with people who refuse to answer questions. Especially mine."

"Who the hell are—?"

"My liege," someone from the darkness called out a moment before he appeared before them. One thing about the fae that made them difficult to be around was their ability to sneak up on someone. If I wasn't careful one showed up at every turn.

"My liege?" I balked.

Scarface smiled and turned to the fae. "What is happening?" he asked.

"Your uncle, your grace, has asked to see you. I've come to accompany you back to the palace."

Well, that explained a lot. Great.

He nodded at the guard and started to walk away. Only a few feet later, he stopped and turned back.

"Care to join me? If it's an audience with my uncle you seek, this may be your only chance."

Shocked, I hesitated before I regained my bearing. "What the hell. I guess if you're going to take me to the dungeon afterwards at least I'll be in the right vicinity."

He snickered, but moved on, forcing me to follow. I had a feeling the smug bastard knew a lot more than he'd let on. He

didn't seem all that surprised to discover me amongst those drunken guards. It was as if he'd known I was coming. Except he thought I would be someone else. I couldn't get past that as I continued to puzzle it out. My father maybe?

But that was impossible. While my father had told me that the king from this specific kingdom would be able to help with the search for the amulet, he'd given me no other indication that he knew anything else about them.

Maybe if things had turned out differently and he'd traveled here as a partner in this quest, I'd have made more progress by now. One dragon intimidated, but two created a kind of fear that paved the way for whatever they needed.

I stopped. Had my father sent me here because of this man? Had he known I would need an ally and that the king's nephew was the perfect candidate? Goddess, I certainly hoped not, because I hated his mocking tone, and I'd sooner eat him than work with him.

"What's going on here?" I demanded.

Scarface turned back, a sly grin curving at his lips. "You tell me, dragon man. You're the one who came here looking for something. Care to share?"

"You are ridiculously persistent. Do you know who I am?"

Laughter rang out. "Sure, you're Isaac Ferguson. Son of Duncan Ferguson. Although, I have to admit, I thought it would be Ian who came through."

CHAPTER
THREE

Isaac

Still seething from this bastard's assessment of my family dynamics, I followed the king's nephew through the bowels of the palace. However, I was growing concerned about where he intended to lead me. I trusted no one, but after weeks of trying to get in, I was out of ideas to get in front of the king, short of storming the castle in dragon form and burning the place to the ground.

Since that could be problematic, despite how much fun it would be, I'd try this tactic first.

"Where are we going?" I asked, coming up beside scar face as we passed what looked like an entrance to the dungeon. Not to mention the smell. Piss and rancid body odor were clear signs.

"Shortcut," he said. "You were hoping to talk to my uncle, yes?"

"How did you know that?"

"There isn't much I don't know about what happens in this kingdom, including your less than subtle inquiries about how the palace runs and when my uncle makes appearances. Which is never, by the way."

"What kind of king hides from his own kingdom?"

"The paranoid kind."

That sounded ridiculous. There was no way to keep rule, if a leader didn't engage one way or another. Even if that meant fear. But I opted to hold my tongue of any further criticisms of the king or his strange ways. I needed help, and as my mother used to tell me when I was young, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

And dragon fire. That was my preferred way of doing things.

“So you're just going to march me in and present me to the king? Wouldn't that fly in the face of his paranoia?”

He shrugged. “My uncle trusts anyone I might present. To an extent. So as long as you don't do anything crazy or start any trouble, he should listen to what you have to say. Which is...?”

“I was sent here by my father. He said the fae king would help me locate something we need.”

Scarface halted next to me and raised a brow. “Your father? Sent you here?”

“He said the king would help, but I am starting to have my doubts. His reputation has preceded him. There's ruling with an iron fist, and then there's excessive fearmongering.” I probably should have kept my assessment of this man's uncle to myself, but I'd never been one to hold my tongue. I said what I said, and the consequences be damned. “I don't know why my father trusted the king, but he lived a long life and I never knew him to lack intelligence. How long has your uncle ruled over the fae?”

He shrugged. “I couldn't say. A lot longer than I've lived. A hundred years maybe. And he only rules over this realm. There are two others with their own kings.”

I nodded as he continued down the corridor. I had a sinking feeling that my King had left out pertinent details about the fae. No one seemed all that surprised by my appearance, and this sudden offer of help from the King's dragon guard made no sense at all.

“Even if your father did know him from some time in the past, I'm afraid he has changed in recent years. Whatever it is you

need help with, there will likely be a high price. I hope you are prepared to pay it.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have any gold with me. I had to travel light.”

Scarface laughed. “The last thing he needs is more gold. Trust me though, he’ll find something of value he wants from you. He always does.”

I couldn’t imagine what. But if it was in my power to give it to him, I would. Nothing was more important than returning home with that amulet. *Nothing*.

“Have you enjoyed your stay here thus far?”

What the hell was up with this unimportant small talk? I was beginning to think I was wrong about my initial assessment of this man.

“I’m not here for enjoyment. I have business to conduct and then if it’s all the same, I’d like to return home as soon as possible.”

He smiled, and again I got the impression that something was amiss. His eager to oblige attitude didn’t suit him. It was all a facade I was sure of it.

“Here we are.” He waved his hand at the door, and it swept open in front of us. “Stay close until you’ve been introduced and then let him guide the conversation. Be mindful of how you ask for his help or you’ll be shut out before you can ask a question. He’s more curious than helpful.”

I drew my brows together in confusion a moment before scarface entered the room and I followed. What the hell choice did I have? This was going to be my do or die moment whether I liked it or not.

To prove I was ready I let loose a low growl that only he and I would hear.

His head swung in my direction and a huge smile broke over his face.

What the hell?

“Your highness,” the man began. “You wished to speak to me?”

“Magnus, my boy,” a voice thundered from the back corner of the room. “Took you long enough.”

The edge of warning in that tone set me on alert. Whatever he was, I guessed it wasn't happy.

Power crackled in the room like electricity. It coated my skin and prickled my tongue.

Whatever his reasons were for hiding, it certainly wasn't from lack of power. This fae made the whole room tremble and that was saying something because no one other than my father had ever given me a moment's pause.

“We had an incident with some of the guard. It's handled.”

“I would hope so,” he said, finally turning to face his nephew and me standing next to him. “What the fuck? Who is this?” he roared, the power in his voice shaking the entire room.

“Isaac Ferguson.”

I turned sharply at the way my name rolled off his tongue as if he'd just brought his uncle the prize of the century.

The room turned eerily silent as the king stared down at me from his position on the dais. His eyes narrowed, and he studied me as if he was looking for something specific.

“Ferguson, you say? That's a name I haven't heard in a very long time. And to be honest, never thought I would again.”

My muscles tightened and I shot a look over to Magnus as if he might explain to me what the hell was going on. I had the feeling he'd brought me here for some other reason than for me to ask the King for a favor.

“Yes, your Majesty. Isaac Gunn Ferguson.”

“Well, isn't this interesting. Magnus where did you find *this* Mr. Ferguson?”

“In the village. He's been in and out for days, but today he made a move to get inside the castle, so I thought I would save

us all the trouble and brought him here directly. I figured you'd want to talk with him."

"Indeed," the king said, moving closer while still keeping well out of arm's reach.

"Am I missing something? Do you already know who I am?"

"Impatient, I see. Yes, I can see the Ferguson in him." The king's eyes tracked back and forth several times between me and his nephew.

To top off that confusion, Magnus and his uncle continued their conversation as if I wasn't there. It was all starting to piss me off and I struggled to contain my temper.

"You look like you have something you need to say." The king finally turned fully to me.

"I do."

"Well, go ahead then. Let's hear what Duncan has sent you for that he couldn't come and ask for himself."

I jerked at the sound of my father's name again. "So, you do know my father."

"I do. Have known him all my life actually."

I waited for more, but when the King looked expectantly at me I decided I needed to get on with this before he grew bored with me.

"We are in need of an item. An artifact with certain properties." I hesitated, not feeling comfortable at revealing every detail of what we needed and why. These two were turning out to be strange fuckers, and I didn't think I could trust either one of them. And my father's dire warnings were stuck in my head. Especially the one where I was supposed to be careful how much personal information I gave to a fae.

"That's rather vague. What kind of properties are we talking about?"

"Magical ones."

"Again, that's too little information. In this realm, most things have something magical about them." The King shifted on his

feet. “Look, I’m not into guessing games. So either you tell me what you want or we’re done.”

Taking a deep breath and swallowing the dragon’s growl, I spat it out. “I’m in need of an amulet that will break a dark magic curse. A powerful one.”

His spine straightened, and I even caught Magnus’s jerk to attention in my peripheral vision. Little fucker.

“Okay. I have to admit that’s a tad more interesting. And why isn’t Duncan here himself asking?”

“He’s dead.” I wasn’t going to get into the details of my father’s sacrifice, or the fact that it had taken that sacrifice to get me here. It was clear they knew much more about me than me them.

A look of darkness passed over the Kings face for a flash. It was so quick I almost missed it. But it was too brief for me to begin to figure out what it might have meant.

“Well, that certainly changes things. Who is his successor as the dragon king?”

“As his oldest, it is to be me. However, until I return to the human realm, it will have to be my younger twin in my stead.”

“Twins, huh? Is that what he told you then? Interesting.”

“What does that mean?”

The king and his nephew exchanged a knowing glance.

“Never you mind. We’ll worry about that later. Tell me more about this curse that needs to be broken. I didn’t think there were any in your realm who delved into dark magics. It’s usually considered far too dangerous outside this realm. Even here, there are only a handful of practitioners allowed to wield it.”

“It is against our laws and was used without our consent or knowledge until it was too late. That’s why I’m here. So we can fix it and see to it that the witches who dared to defy us are properly taken care of.”

The King's laughter rolled through the chamber. "There is always someone, isn't there? A faction of rebels just dying to break the laws and usurp power?"

I wasn't sure if he was talking about our land or his now. "Power is a seductive mistress," I agreed. "He who has it rules the world."

The King instantly sobered, his laughter dying in a flash. "And he who has it always wants more and will do anything to get it."

That sounded perilously close to a warning, and I didn't like it. I came here with the odds against me and this mission. But I wasn't about to give up because I had to face down a power hungry king. Politics was not my game, but putting an opponent in his place was.

"Let's say I could help you find what you are looking for. What do you have to offer for my help?"

"My services." I'd considered what I could offer on the way in, and it was all I had in a pinch. "If you have a need for them. I'm an excellent hunter, and an even better fighter. Surely, there must be something that has caused you trouble." I fought not to look at Scarface while I continued, "Tell me what you need, and I will do it."

The sly smile that crossed the King's face then told me everything I needed to know. Whatever he was about to tell me he needed, he thought I wouldn't like. Dirty work if I had to guess. But he didn't know me. What the fuck did I have to give a care about in this realm? I barely did in my own.

"That might be an offer I'm willing to take. Provided you can actually complete the task."

I bristled against his doubt. "I can. And the sooner the better. I'd like to return to my realm as quickly as possible."

Magnus and the King both laughed, while I saw nothing funny about what I'd said. But since I didn't fully understand the way of the fae, I would chalk it up to something their kind did.

“Good. Now since you want me to find something for you, I’d like the same in return.”

My brows pulled together on a frown. “You want me to find something for you?”

“I do. My stepdaughter has,” he hesitated and cleared his throat. “Gone missing.”

Magnus made a sound in his throat that sounded a lot like a snort. I jerked my gaze to his, but he had only a blank look on his face.

“If there’s a child missing, shouldn’t you have everyone looking for her?”

“She’s no child,” Magnus grumbled.

The King glared at his nephew, but they exchanged no words this time.

“Finding her is a delicate matter, one that calls for discretion. Under normal circumstances, Magnus would go after her. But at the moment he is needed here. So, as it turns out, it was fortuitous that you arrived asking for this favor.”

“How long has she been gone?” I’d need to figure out how much of a head start and what resources I would need to catch up with her. If she’d not gone too far I could probably have her back within twenty-four hours and then be back in Scotland in forty-eight.

“She was discovered missing this morning, so she likely left sometime in the night. She probably hasn’t gotten far.”

“So she ran away.” Now I wanted to know why. Although technically it didn’t matter. I had one real task for being here and it’s all that really mattered. A woman’s reasons for running from her family were not my concern.

“She has issues,” the King claimed. “Particularly against authority. Her mother indulged her far more than she should have. But now that the girl is gone, I can’t continue working on getting her in line.”

The tone in which he referred to the girl made my lip curl. None of my business I reminded myself. She’s just a female.

“I’ll need as much information about her that you can give me. Description, what clothes she was wearing, and if I can see her private chambers to get a sense of her. Her scent would help too.”

“Magnus,” he said, without taking his gaze from mine.

“Of course, your highness. I’ll take care of it.”

“That is all then. I don’t expect to see you back at my palace again until the job is done.”

I nodded and took a step back. I’d been dismissed and it was time to get the hell out of here.

Turning to go back the way I’d arrived. Magnus nodded his head to follow him down a different corridor.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking you’ve agreed to, but this isn’t going to be easy,” Magnus hissed as soon as we were out of earshot.

I smirked. “It’s one female. How hard can it be?”

Both Magnus and the guard next to him chuckled at the same time. My dragon stirred with annoyance at being mocked. I was starting to understand why my father didn’t like to talk about the fae. I could feel the deceit rolling off of them with every breath.

But this was my only choice—for now. I’d play their game. Return their little princess back to her castle and then we’d see if they lived up to their deal.

If not, I’d make them regret it.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Kitra

“Wake up, Princess.” A soft feminine voice whispered in my ear, the brush of it moving the hair away from my skin.

I swatted at the movement and groaned against the suggestion. It couldn't be time to get up so soon, I'd only just fallen asleep.

“You've been asleep too long. He's almost here.”

“Leave me—.” I jerked to attention, barely remembering to grab a branch this time before I pitched to the ground. “Who?” I glanced around wildly looking for—something.

“The black dragon,” the imp breathed from across the other side of the tree. “He's close.”

“What are you talking about? There's no black dragon here. You mean green, right?” Magnus was green, and I doubted he'd find me here. He hated the dark forest. My muscles slowly relaxed as I turned my gaze to the imp and focused on her. “Why are you still here?”

Since I was awake, and she apparently wasn't going away, I might as well get moving. Imps weren't exactly trustworthy and I couldn't afford any trouble from this one. There was no telling how long she'd sat there watching me sleep before she got bored and made up a wild excuse to wake me.

“You should pick up the pace,” she warned.

I took a bracing breath and finished lacing up my boots before climbing down the tree. She followed me down and I shot her a look. “Do not follow me, okay? I don’t have time for you.”

“Who did this to you?” she asked.

“What?” I asked, absently brushing the dirt from my skirt before I plucked a few leaves from my hair.

“I can sense the magic inside you, but there’s something wrong with it. It’s as if... it’s locked,” she cried. “Someone locked you up from the inside out. I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Why are you so curious about me? I’ve spent my entire life in these woods and not once have I met an imp so loose lipped as you.”

“I don’t know what that means. Loose lipped?”

I gave her one last look. “It means someone who talks a lot, of which you definitely fit the bill.”

If I didn’t know better I would have thought she smiled. “Imps are curious.”

“Nosy AND dangerous,” I corrected.

She sniffed as if offended by me before she disregarded my comment and continued. “I like to figure things out. Especially about others around me.”

“Well, I’m leaving so you don’t need to figure me out. I need to determine which way I’m going and get there. I need to get lost.”

“You won’t get lost going that way.”

I looked at the path that led towards the falls and then back to the imp. As far as I knew there was only one way out of this kingdom and that was it. My stepfather had turned his land into a fortress and almost no one got in or out without his express permission. And only a very few people knew about the secret pathway behind the falls.

“Thanks for the tip, but I’m going to take my chances.” I walked away, hoping that this time she stayed put and I got the hell out of this forest. She was giving me the creeps.

“You won’t find anyone to help your situation if you leave.”

I whipped around. “What is that supposed to mean?”

She tsked. “You need the Vostuzan amulet. It’s the only thing in this realm or the next that can break that binding and free you from the tyranny of the king.”

Little bumps arose on my skin and a shiver worked down my spine. This creature knew too much about me and it was just enough to plant the seeds of doubt.

“What did you say?”

“You heard me,” she pouted.

“Okay then. If you know so much, where can I find this mysterious amulet that you think will solve all my problems?”

“Not think. Know. But you—.” Her head whipped around and her wings fluttered madly. “It’s too late. You should have run while you had the chance.” She whisked away up into the trees and left me standing there more confused than ever. I opened my senses and found nothing other than the normal creatures of the forest. Or the absence of most of them actually.

Which could only mean one thing.

A real predator had entered the forest and scared the normal creatures away.

“Well, hello there, Princess.”

I turned towards the unfamiliar voice and almost gasped at the man standing there.

Not Magnus. In fact, I had no idea who this man was, but he didn’t smell like anything I’d ever encountered before.

He leaned casually against the tree I’d been sleeping in not fifteen minutes before. Black, wavy hair fell almost to his shoulders and he stared at me with green eyes so vivid, they reminded me of fresh spring grass between my toes, making me think I could get as lost in those as I did the forest.

Next, his lips drew my attention, because despite the fact they were compressed into a smirk, they were the perfect color and shape that I couldn’t tear my eyes away from. He reminded me

of a darker version of Magnus, if Magnus had not been ruined by his uncle. Which meant I was not to be fooled by a pretty face. If he was anything like my step-cousin, I could be in big trouble.

My stomach jerked. Maybe this kind of trouble wouldn't be so bad...

I took a few steps back. That was a horrible thought. And completely out of the blue. From my experience, men were always trouble and I didn't want to be a part of that.

"Why does everyone keep calling me Princess today? I'm about as far from a princess as I can get."

"Well, that's not quite the truth now is it? Even the stepdaughter of the King is going to be treated as a princess."

I snorted. He had no idea what he was talking about. "So he sent you, a stranger, to find me and do what? Take me back? Or worse?"

He shrugged and pushed off the tree. The lazy (and deceptive) posture he'd taken on disappeared in a blink. "I haven't decided what I'm going to do with you—yet."

He took several steps in my direction and I matched them with backwards steps. I had a feeling if he got too close to me, something bad was going to happen.

"Good. Then you can let me go. I'll be out of the kingdom soon and then we'll both be free of any obligation we have to the King."

A low rumble passed through his chest. It came out like one part growl and one part laughter. It had a unique sound that reminded me of a melody. I couldn't help but wonder if he made that noise frequently. If so, I might like to hear it again.

"I'm not letting you go," he stated simply, that look in his eye darkening.

"Why not?" I was still backing up and I threw a quick glance behind me to make sure I wasn't going to do something stupid like fall over a cliff and die while mesmerized by his deep, rumbly voice.

“Because I have use of you.”

My back stiffened as I imagined what use I could be to him, and with my imagination my anger grew proportionately. “If you think I’d let you touch me, then you’re out of your mind. I’d rather lie with a—”

“I’d be careful what you say next, Princess. I’ve been known to make a person’s worst ideas come to pass.” He stalked closer before he continued. “I wasn’t talking about your body, although if you want to ask nicely I might consider it. After you’ve bathed of course. At the moment, you look like a wild beast.”

I opened and closed my mouth so many times while still remaining speechless that I felt like a fish on a hook. I also inexplicably felt more trapped than ever before and that was saying something considering I’d just escaped from my stepfather’s dungeon. Who the hell was this man and where had my stepfather dug him up from?

And where was an imp when I needed one? She would have made an excellent distraction.

“Don’t hold your breath waiting for that. That’s not going to happen. But if you aren’t going to let me go, what is your plan? What exactly has the King instructed you to do?”

“He wants me to bring you back to him. He misses his daughter.”

I snorted.

The mocking tone of his words set me on edge, but it didn’t stop me from blurting out whatever thought came into my head. “Oh really? Is that what he told you? I’m his daughter now? So I guess he didn’t bother to tell you that he expects me to take my mother’s place at his side. Or that the nasty bastard intends to force me into his bed so he can steal my womanhood.”

I clamped my hand over my mouth at the same time his eyebrows shot up to the top of his forehead. One of these days I would learn to keep my mouth shut and my personal business to myself.

“That’s quite an interesting turn of phrase for a princess,” he mocked. “And quite an accusation.”

“Call it whatever you’d like. I told you I’m not a princess so there’s no need to keep up with that pretense. The King is a dark hearted bastard who tricked my mother into marrying him, and now he wants me.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. And King Aegron refuses to take no for an answer. And he never gives up.”

“As beautiful as the daughter?” he asked.

I gasped when he suddenly leaned forward and wrapped a strand of my hair around his finger. I hadn’t even realized he was that close until he touched me. When had that happened?

“She was much prettier than me.” Despite the fear and anger this man inspired, I could feel the tears of grief burn at the backs of my eyes. Just thinking of my mother and the fact I would never see or hear her voice again was enough to rip the wound across my heart open again and make it bleed. She’d been everything to me. Mother, best friend, savior...

“I find that hard to believe,” he said quietly as he lifted my long hair to his nose and inhaled deeply. Good Goddess. If any other man dared such a thing, not only would I hate it, but my knee would be aiming for his ball sac by now.

But this one?

He’d gotten so close I could feel his warm breath brush across my lips when he spoke. And his enticing scent of pine and man tickled my senses. Heat emanated from him and it made me want to lean closer. He was so big and powerful, and yet so interesting...

Maybe if I no longer possessed my womanhood, the king would let me go. His obsession with magical purity in recent years had frightened both my mother and I. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable option...

Suddenly his hand grabbed a handful of my hair and he yanked my head to the side. “Don’t think you can trick me with a pretty face and a little lust in your eyes. That kind of witchcraft is for fools and I am no fool,” he snarled the word in my face and the tears leaking from my eyes had nothing to do with the pain in my heart, but the pain of him nearly ripping out my hair.

“You evil bastard,” I spat. “Whatever it is you want from me, I wouldn’t give it if my life depended on it.”

He dropped his hold on my hair and took a step back. “I wouldn’t count on that. For a second there, you were thinking about it. I could smell it on you. Hell, I still can. That wetness between your thighs will betray a woman like you every time.”

Anger roared inside my head until I could barely think straight. I bent down and picked up the first thing I could find, which happened to be a hefty rock, and threw it at his head. But he was quick, a lot more so than me, and he easily deflected it before it could land anywhere near his body.

“You’re going to have to do a lot better than that, Princess.”

“Stop calling me that! My name is Kitra,” I screamed, the rage so hot inside me I didn’t understand it or know how to get it under control. My mouth, however, that would surely be my downfall.

“I’ll damn well call you whatever I’d like. Especially since it is I who holds your future in my hands, you little beast. Maybe you’re right, though. Despite the looks, you don’t have the manners or the temperament to be a princess.”

“Ahhgh!” I bellowed before flinging myself at him with my fists clenched tight and the need to pummel his handsome face until it resembled the mean and ugly words coming out of his mouth gripping my insides.

Somehow in the frantic melee, I got a good look at his eyes and the determination I saw in them nearly took my breath away. And it made his intentions clear. He wasn’t going to let me go. Or listen to anything that I had to say. That left me with

only one choice, no matter how slim my chance of success might be.

I twisted and turned, using every bone in my body as a weapon. Including my elbow into his gut. But it was just enough to break his grip on me and I took it. I turned and ran blindly away from him. Since I had no chance of escape on the trail that led to the falls, I ran off the path and deep into the thick brush that covered the edge of the forest.

Branches slapped at my arms, and I had to swerve sharply to prevent getting hit in the face by others. There'd been no time to think this through, which left me no choice but to move as quickly as possible and hope for the best.

I was afraid if I took the time to look behind me, I'd find him right on top of me. Or worse. So I just ran and ran and ran. I tripped over rocks, but managed to stay on my feet after a couple of tumbles. I couldn't even hear anything behind me because my ears were filled with the sound of my own frantically beating heart.

I tried not to hold my breath waiting for him to tackle me, but it was hard. The only possible way I could escape would be through the portal to the next realm, which was still too far away. Still I ran, taking whatever chance I could. My lungs burned, my eyes stung, and I had more rips in my dress from it getting caught on the brush.

"Don't make me chase you," he called out on a rumbled growl, that sound almost forcing me to my knees.

Only by fear was I able to keep going as my mind scrambled with images of the hulking man running behind me only a hair's breath away from catching me.

"You're only making this worse." His words coasted over my skin, informing me how close he truly was. I saw another large tree off to my right and I wondered if I could climb up it before he caught up to me. It was the only thing I could think of that might slow him down.

I stretched out my legs as much as possible and tore through the woods in my attempt to get there first. I could do this. How

many times had I practiced running and jumping into trees? More times than I could count. Two seconds later I was close enough to make my attempt. I leapt into the air and reached for the first branch that could propel me skyward.

But it wasn't enough. I'd overestimated what I could do without my magic, falling short of my destination, and making it all too easy for him to catch me. The tightness in my chest reminded me once again that I couldn't rely on old habits...

"Gotcha," he said a moment before his arms wrapped around my waist and hauled me practically midair back against his chest.

"No!" I screamed, squirming. "Let me go."

"Not happening. You ran, and I won fair and square."

"This isn't a stupid contest. This is life and death." I fought against his hold to no avail. He gripped me hard and there would be no getting away again.

"Then you shouldn't have run. My dragon took it as a challenge and now he wants his prize."

My blood froze at the same time heat exploded between my legs and naked images of our bodies intertwined together filled my head. His dragon was a perverted beast. What in the hell was actually happening?

"Your dragon can go to hell!" I spat.

A low rumble transferred from his chest into my back and my entire body vibrated from it, including my nipples.

"Eventually we both will, but not today. Today I can do whatever I want, and you, little beast, are just a means to an end."

"You are a horrible creature." I swung my arm, but again he moved quickly, and he caught my fist in his massive hand an inch before it connected with his cheek.

"At least we agree on something. I'm horrible and you're a beast." He grabbed my second hand before I could use it to attack him next and he pinned them behind my back. Before I

could kick, scream or any damned thing, he had my hands secured with rope and a smug smile on his face.

“There.” He grinned. “That’s more like it.”

CHAPTER
FIVE

Isaac

In the ten seconds it had taken me to tie her dangerous little hands behind her, I'd touched her in places I shouldn't have. I'd felt the swell of her small breasts brush against my arms, the indentation of her waist as I'd wrapped around her to fasten her bindings and even the generous swell of her hips as they'd pressed into my groin as she fought.

And it was ten seconds too long.

Because that's how long it took me to realize why she smelled so good when I first picked up her scent inside of her bedroom back at the palace. She smelled like an omega.

Was that even possible? I knew jack all about fae and their physiology.

However, if I was right, that knowledge gave me an instant understanding of why the King wanted her so badly. Although her story of him wanting to make her his queen didn't quite ring true. If that were the case, he would have come for her himself. He would not have risked sending an Alpha dragon out to find her and claiming her for himself.

I nearly reared back at that thought. I was not here to claim a mate. They were far too much trouble. I'd picked a fight with my twin over his because he'd taken her from me, and that had nearly gotten us both killed. And it had caused a rift between

us that would likely last an eternity. If that didn't, our father's death surely would.

"What have you done?" she screeched. "I demand you untie me this second."

I lifted my brow and a second before I started to tell little miss princess what I thought of her request, I remembered the name she'd so freely given. Kitra. Of all the names she could have possessed. She was literally named the crowned one. I knew because it was my grandmama's name, my father's mother.

I looked to the heaven's and silently cursed the fates. If they thought this was some kind of joke, I wasn't laughing.

"Little beasts need to learn their manners. So until you've proven you can be trusted, I'll keep you just as you are."

"Bastard," she seethed, kicking out her leg giving me barely enough time to turn and protect myself. She had quite the mean streak, which didn't coincide with what I thought an omega should be. Submissive. Compliant.

I sighed. Willful and disobedient also worked. It meant there'd be an opportunity to break her...

Another growl rumbled through my chest.

"I'm not above meting out discipline if that's what it takes."

Her eyes widened. "You wouldn't dare. The king would have your head for such a thing."

"Would he? Or would he thank me if I broke that feisty spirit and returned a woman capable of being queen at his side?" Maybe that's exactly what he sent me for. Find her, tame her, return her...

The anger she shot in my direction heated the space between us so much, I half expected one or both of us to spontaneously combust. I certainly felt like I could. But most of that came from the dragon. He thought he had a mind of his own, and he was ready to stake a claim.

Not going to happen. I reminded myself. The monster and I coexisted with neither fully in control, and neither able to override the decisions of the other. It was a crazy dynamic,

unlike other dragons, and manifested in chaotic behavior, but on the weirdest of levels, it worked. Unlike my brother, who had more control over his dragon, and didn't have to fight nearly as hard as I did.

"You truly are a horrible creature. What are you anyway? You don't smell like fae."

"What do I smell like?" I couldn't resist asking the question even though I doubted she would tell the truth. If I'd realized her importance as an omega, then surely she must sense an Alpha. It made me curious to know.

She wrinkled up her nose. "You smell about the same as you look, you evil monster trash. Disgusting," she lied, stinging my nose with the scent.

Of course.

I'd be a fool to believe she'd say anything else. "That's fine, little beast. If that's how you want to play it, I can give you tit for tat. Let's go." I grabbed her bound wrists and guided her back to the path she'd been heading to.

"Where are we going?" she asked, looking back at me with curious eyes.

"You tell me. This is the way you were headed and I'm curious as to where you thought you could go and hide."

Her spine straightened and I all but choked on laughter to watch it happen. "I'm not hiding, you bastard. I'm leaving. There's a difference."

I didn't believe that, but it didn't seem important enough to argue about. "Fine. Where were you going? Show me."

"Why? I thought you were taking me back to the King?"

"If you keep arguing with me about it, I'm going to assume that back to the king is where you actually want to go. Shall I go ahead and take you now?" I had no intention of returning her just yet. Not until I figured out the game they were all playing and I got ahead of them.

Why had the bastard sent me of all people on the hunt for an omega? It made no damned sense. Unless he didn't know.

She stared at me so long I thought we were both going to atrophy from standing there. But either she saw what she wanted or she gave up and did as I instructed. She headed along the path that led away from the palace and much deeper into the dark forest. As much as I wanted to pepper her with questions about this world, I knew she wouldn't answer. At least not truthfully.

First, she would have to become reliant on me. Then she'd have to believe I cared about her well-being. Then I might get something out of her. Until then, she was my captive and I was going to watch her sweet behind march ahead of me while I fantasized about her potential omega properties and what that meant for her immediate future.

My brother's mate had succumbed to the needs of mating heat quickly and he'd wasted no time laying claim to her. Physically at first, and then totally once he'd proven himself to her. I still thought he should have thanked me for that little provocation. If I'd not challenged him for her, and fought near to death, where would they have been then?

Of course they'd married the next day and her coven had cast a spell that cast out all dragons from their North American homes, so none of that had turned out particularly well. Although if not for mother being left behind it wouldn't have been that bad. I'd had no real desire to lead my father's shifter kingdom anytime soon. My first decree would have been declaring war on those witches for their use of dark magics anyways.

I shook those memories from my head and focused on the present. I'd gotten the distinct impression that the King had either flat out lied to me about helping me find the amulet or he didn't know where it was either. The smell of deceit had surrounded him in a poisonous cloak that had been impossible to miss.

Either he was unaware that shifters could scent emotions or he didn't care. Both made him reckless and dangerous. And since the scent of the little beast had led me right to her, I had some time to kill to figure out what my next move should be.

“What are you hoping to get out of this?” she glanced back as she asked.

“What do you care?” I grunted.

“Maybe we could help each other. If you aren’t taking me back to the King, then that tells me you don’t trust him to follow through on whatever it is he promised you. What did he offer you in return? Money? Gold?”

It didn’t surprise me that she was sharp. To escape the dungeon of the palace would take some effort.

“First, I’d like you to tell me something. Truthfully,” I added. “Were you really locked in the dungeon?”

She didn’t say anything right away, and since we had time I was content to let her think before she answered.

“I was.”

I could sense more information on the tip of her tongue so I prodded her again. “Why? It seems unusual that a female family member would be locked away in such a foul place. It’s no place for a woman, let alone one of such importance.”

She shrugged, and for a minute I thought she was done telling me anything.

“I wasn’t lying when I told you he wants me at his side. He was obsessed with my mother from the moment he met her, but she wasn’t the only one. I could see from the beginning that he had interest in me as well. It scared me and I guess instinctually I knew that I had to do something about it—eventually. I stayed as far away from him as I could. Always. I practically lived in this forest, although not this far from the palace. But when my mother got sick and died, he forbade me from leaving the palace and I did it anyways. When even locking me in my rooms couldn’t contain me, he took more and more drastic measures until I ended up in that disgusting place.” She gagged at the end of her story, and I couldn’t imagine someone so soft and pretty treated with such disregard.

And yet...

The rope I always carried now dug into the delicate skin of her wrists. I could already see the redness it had caused after she'd fought her restraints, and yet, I found nothing more exciting than marks I'd created on her body.

"The dungeon is an unusual place for a female. But if you persisted at escaping I might understand why it was done. Now tell me what else you did to deserve such harsh treatment because I doubt it was so cut and dry as you explained. From my experience, there is always more to the story."

She turned her head, but not before I caught a slight smile tipping at the corner of her lips. I tried not to laugh and failed.

This woman had a mischievous streak and I had to admit it piqued my curiosity more than I expected.

"I can't tell you everything. At least not on day one of whatever this is. What happens if you discover I am not as useful as you think I am? Will you discard me as callously as you tied my hands? Will you dispose of me in the dark forest where no one will ever know what happened to me?"

I frowned. "You have quite the imagination. But if it makes you feel any better, I have no desire or interest in seeing you dead. But I do need something from the King and the only thing he wants from me is you. So unless you can make me a better offer..."

After that comment we traveled in silence for quite some time. I wanted to hear more of her story, but I didn't want to push. Not yet. I had a hunch if she told me on her own, we'd both fare much better in all of this.

But my patience was already running thin.

What she didn't know is I'd heard her conversation with the little sprite creature. Without magic it was all but impossible to hide anything from my ears. And apparently hers had been bound. However, knowing that little bit of information only made me want to know more. Why had her magic been bound and by whom?

And that little winged friend of hers had mentioned the amulet she needed by name. My amulet. Or at least the one I was

searching for. So for now, we weren't going anywhere near that fucking palace. With this new information, maybe I wouldn't need the King and his nephew at all.

I could figure this shit out on my own, get the amulet, and then return to my world without ever having to sell my soul or her, to the devil.

Provided the Princess cooperated with me. Of course, I had a plan brewing for that too. If I was correct and she truly was an omega, then it shouldn't be that hard to get whatever I wanted from her.

I just had to keep my barb away from her...

CHAPTER
SIX

Ian

Scotland

Following my mother's footsteps to the edge of an ill-fated cliff did nothing to settle my mind or the anger that still coursed through me every time I thought of my father and his needless death.

No matter how much time passed, I would never understand my mother's easy forgiveness for what Isaac had done.

"Are you all right?" Cordelia asked, pressing her hand to mine as we walked arm in arm across the grassy slope.

"I'm fine," I managed through a clenched jaw.

"You're not. But you will be. You just have to get through today and then give it more time. Grieving the passing of your father is going to be like fighting through a maze of complex emotions whether you like it or not."

"My father didn't pass, he was murdered."

I caught her wince from the corner of my eye and sighed. She didn't deserve my anger. Isaac did. But his disappearance and probable death meant I couldn't lay out my anger on the one person who deserved it the most.

"I'm sorry," I said, leaning over to press a kiss to her temple. "You are right. Grief is a strange thing that tends to show up out of nowhere, and often when you least expect it."

“Honoring your father and his traditions today will go a long way to seeing you through. I know you didn’t want to go through an official coronation, but I think we both knew it had to be done.”

“Our shifter kingdom seemed too small to bother with pomp and circumstance. Especially now, with this cloud hanging over our family.”

She laughed and I drank in the sound like a man dying of thirst. Having her at my side again meant everything to me.

“It would seem the smaller, the more boisterous. At least that’s how I’ve seen it. And considering the growth as more shifters have chosen to align with you, I’m not surprised at all that they all wanted something official for their King.”

“My father is the King.”

She drew short, forcing me to stop walking and turn to her.

“You are the King, Ian. You’ve stepped up and taken over leadership. That makes you the Alpha now. Your father is gone, and I am without a doubt that this is what he would want for you.”

I soaked in her words as my gaze traveled from her face down to the swell of her stomach that she rubbed while she talked. Seeing her pregnant with another child made me smile. My beautiful omega had off-handedly expressed the desire to have a houseful of dragonlings, and I’d leapt onboard with that idea. She didn’t know it yet, but I’d made it my personal mission to ensure she got pregnant as often as she desired.

“And you don’t have to remind me about the part Isaac played in his death. But your mother paints a different picture.”

Her hard words pulled me from my sex-fueled thoughts and back into the cold light of this day. While it was for the best that I remained focused on today’s tasks, I made a mental note to show her just what I thought of when she looked at me while her hand soothed our restless unborn child.

“My mother is soft when it comes to her children. She can’t see the truth.” When Cordelia glared at me I chose to soften

my statement. “As it should be. A mother’s unconditional love is the most important thing.”

A tight smile crossed her face. “Nice save.” She smirked. “But I don’t think that’s all it is. Your mother has good instincts. She and I didn’t always see eye to eye, but her gift of sight cannot be discounted. And if she says there is more to the story to what happened, I can’t help but wonder what that might be.”

Since I didn’t see how we’d ever know, short of Isaac returning from the dead, I nodded my head and steered us toward the small crowd waiting at the cliffside. My mother was already there, waiting, her handkerchief pressing to the corner of her eye.

“I’m glad you agreed to have the coronation here after we’ve honored your father. The monument you had commissioned for him is stunning. It feels right.”

Some of my anger softened at her continued support. Despite all the hardships this woman had endured, her position of looking towards the future instead of dwelling on the past never wavered.

I could take a lesson or two from my mate.

The pain of my twin’s betrayal may never die, but after today I was determined to find a way to put it behind me. There were too many others depending on me to choose anything else.

I squeezed her hand in gratitude and kissed the top of her head. The one thing I would never do was take this precious gift for granted. She was already my queen in every way possible, but today we would make it official.

Cordelia Ferguson would get everything she deserved and more.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Kitra

As we traveled through the forest, the shadows grew, and the sun disappeared below the horizon. We'd been traveling for hours and I was hot, tired, and hungry.

The ten miles I'd thought we were from the falls had turned into much more, and I was beginning to doubt my plan to leave this realm. That imp had gotten into my head with her whispers about breaking my magic with a special amulet and I couldn't get it out of my mind.

Of course, I'd seen no sign of her since she'd flown off in fear of the man traipsing behind me. I didn't understand his game at all, but I could still feel his glare boring into my back as we continued.

When I tripped and fell to my knees, he grabbed me by the arms and hauled me to my feet before I slammed my face into the ground.

"Thanks," I mumbled, not feeling thankful at all. I needed a break and if that meant curled on my side in the cool grass at my feet, so be it.

"Stop," he ordered, and to my shame I followed his command immediately and almost tripped over my feet again. "It's getting late," he said, looking around at the forest that would soon be shrouded in total darkness.

"Thank the Goddess," I whispered.

His head turned to me sharply. “Are you tired? Why didn’t you say something? I’m an asshole, not a slave driver. If you need something speak up, so I can at least consider it.”

“Let me go then.”

“No.”

I rolled my eyes. So much for his consideration.

I attempted to lift my tied hands behind my back, but was too exhausted to move them more than a few inches. “I am tired. But you had to know that. No one in their right mind would actually think traveling like this all day would be comfortable. Not to mention I haven’t eaten all day.”

“You were the one who led me to believe these falls were not far.” He said sharply. “Maybe if you were honest...”

“I was. I mean I am. I heard them as I slept last night. They should have been much closer.” *Asshole.*

The silence between us had stretched on for so long, I suspected the last thing I wanted to do right now was antagonize him. Since my hands were tied, I had little control over simple things like food and water. And I didn’t trust whether he would withhold them as further punishment.

“Can you at least untie my hands?”

“No,” he said simply, removing the pack he carried from his back. “Until I can trust you won’t do something stupid like run away or try to kill me in my sleep, you will remain as you are.”

“You’re about as much fun as Magnus,” I said without thinking.

His head snapped up. “What does that mean? You know Magnus well? What can you tell me about him?”

I liked that I had finally piqued his curiosity about something other than this trek to the falls. “Other than he’s a selfish bastard who cares about no one but himself?”

His lips quirked, and that break in his facade went a long way towards giving me a little hope that he might be the lesser of

the evils I had to choose from at the moment. Although I sure had no plans to let my guard down.

“I might have gathered that much myself. No, I’d like to know more about him. Who are his parents?”

“I don’t know for sure. No one ever talks about it. The only thing I’ve gathered is that his father is the king’s brother, but that they’ve either been estranged forever or he’s dead. No one has ever spoken of him that I know of. But I can tell you that Magnus is probably the closest thing the King has to a son. As far as anyone knows he hasn’t been able to produce a child, but that’s definitely not for lack of trying.”

“Is that why he wants you? To give him a son?”

My head snapped up at his clear perception of the situation. I nodded. “In a house of royalty, it would seem that the right heir is one of the most important things.”

“I could see that. I mean it makes sense. A king has immense power, and he wants to ensure how that power is controlled both while he is here and after he is gone.”

“I am not a breeder.” He looked like he wanted to disagree, but something kept him quiet on the subject. Thank the Goddess. “I’m not interested in his power either. With my mother gone, all I want is my magic and my own life. I don’t think that is too much to ask for.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew I would regret them.

“Tell me about your magic.”

I balked. That wasn’t the inquiry I’d expected. But considering he knew nothing about me it made sense he’d be more interested in my magical abilities than my dead mother.

And yet everything inside me bristled at that notion. Was magic always more important than someone’s life?

I watched him gather some branches and clear an area for a fire before I responded.

Before my vicious stepfather had stolen my magic I could have made a fire for us with a wave of my hand. Now I’d have to rub sticks together and hope I could make it work.

“There’s nothing to tell other than I don’t have it and I don’t know how to get it back.”

“I’m sure that’s an oversimplification. Why don’t you start with telling me why you don’t have it anymore.”

I jerked at his words, barely holding in a snarl.

“How much did my stepfather exactly tell you?”

He sighed, his frustration with my non answer answers apparent.

“Very little actually. However, he did give me access to your rooms, and I have better than excellent hearing.”

My mouth dropped open and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t close it again.

He chuckled a moment before he bent over and blew a small stream of fire on a low growl at the wood he’d gathered and stacked together.

“What the hell?” I finally gasped.

“Dragon fire,” he said, making it sound like she’d been stupid not to realize.

“You’re a dragon?”

He smirked. “You don’t have to pretend to be surprised. I heard your friend warn you about me.”

“I thought she was making that up. And she’s not my friend. I just met her last night.”

“Is that why”—he moved lightning quick into the bushes and emerged a moment later carrying the imp by her neck—“she’s been following us all day?”

“Put me down, you brute,” she squeaked, grabbing at his hand before sinking her sharp little teeth into his skin.

He released her and dropped her into the middle of the fire. I dove to catch her, but sparks of magic and frantic beats of her singed wings kept her from falling too far.

A moment later she landed on a branch above us and out of reach.

“Was that necessary?” I asked.

“We need to eat and she’s as good as any other creature crawling through these woods.”

“What?!” The imp screeched as I gasped. “What did I ever do to you, nasty dragon boy?”

He shrugged and took a seat on a fallen log. “Girl’s got to eat.”

“Then give her something from that stash in your backpack. She’s not a wild animal-eating heathen like you.”

His right eyebrow lifted, and the look he gave the imp could have scorched her. “Maybe I just want to eat you for the sport of it. Dragons enjoy a good hunt.”

The imp bared her sharp little teeth and took flight from the tree and disappeared into the night.

I dropped down on the opposite end of the log, I was too tired to stand any longer. “Were you really going to eat her?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t like being spied upon.”

“She is a strange one. The kind of attention she is giving us isn’t like them.”

“She’s probably buttering us up for the kill. Her kind are fond of those poison fucking darts. She’s probably planning to murder us in our sleep.”

“Do you really have food in that bag?” I narrowed my eyes at his pack, changing the subject. I didn’t want to think about imps and whether they were planning to kill us. As if my stomach read my mind, it rumbled loudly.

“I did swipe some supplies from the palace kitchen before I left. But I can provide fresh, cooked meat if you prefer.”

“I’m too tired to wait. Give me twenty minutes and I’m going to be dead asleep. I don’t even care that I have to sleep on the ground or in a tree again. Although either would be infinitely more comfortable if you’d untie my hands.”

He stood still as if contemplating what he wanted to do before he pulled a cloth wrapped package out of his bag. I didn’t even know what it contained and already my mouth watered.

“You going to try and run?”

“Not tonight,” I answered honestly. “I don’t have the energy.”

He set the package down next to him and pulled me onto his lap. “I could just feed you.”

I wanted to argue against it, but I wanted the food more. “Fine. But you can’t keep me like this forever. I have to go to the bathroom at some point.”

“We’ll see, little beast. For now, you’ll eat from my hand because I wish it.” He picked up the package and unwrapped it to reveal a cut of cured meat, a wedge of hard cheese, and a large hunk of bread.

My protest instantly died on my lips at the sight of the food. “You’ve had this the whole time? Why didn’t you say something?”

“Why didn’t you? I don’t read minds. If you need something you have to let me know.”

“As if you’d give me whatever I wanted.”

“I told you I’d at least consider it.”

“I need you to untie me. My arms ache.”

He laughed and tore off a chunk of the bread. “Nice try, little beast. Here.” He nudged my lips and with no shame I opened my mouth and grabbed it with my teeth.

He followed that with a piece of meat and a portion of the cheese. I ate every bite with no more argument until my stomach protested and I couldn’t take any more. “I can’t,” I said, when he offered me more. He nodded and then fed himself.

I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to feel right now. But he’d taken care of me before himself, that seemed incongruent with someone being sent from the palace to hunt me down. Or a man anxious to hurt me. Exhausted and satiated, I rested my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes until he nudged my lips.

“You need some water.” I opened one eye to the sight of his water bladder in front of my mouth. Again, I obeyed without argument. But after a few swallows, I was done. I turned my head away, resting it back against his shoulder.

As my eyes fluttered closed and sleep began to overtake me, I felt the bindings around my wrists loosen and fall away. I groaned when my arms moved as the pain of them being in one position for so long shot through me.

I tried to stretch and he took over massaging my arms up and down until the pain faded into tingles and then pure pleasure as he kneaded my aching muscles.

“Thank you,” I whispered against his shoulder as I snuggled closer. While I appreciated the heat the fire provided against the cool night air, it didn’t compare to the warmth of his body where it pressed against mine.

It was enough to make me want to twist in his arms until my entire body was pressed against him.

“Go to sleep, Princess. If you keep wiggling against me, you’re going to find yourself underneath me with my cock buried between your thighs.”

I heard his words but I was too far gone to allow them to register properly. Instead my mind went dark, and for the first time in a very long time I drifted off to sleep without fear or sadness weighing against my heart...

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Isaac

She was squirming again and this time I wasn't stopping her. I allowed her bottom to rub against my groin until my cock grew fully hard and the idea of burying it into her pussy was all I could think about.

Pulling out my bedroll, and forcing her to sleep in my arms might not have been the most prudent thing to keep her close and safe. But the scent of rain-softened flowers in her hair filled my nose and my dreams all night long.

And based on the scented air surrounding us, I wasn't the only one who woke up aroused. The potential omega had her own problems going on and I could bet that terrified her.

"Be still," I urged, tightening my arms around her.

"I can't," she gasped. "I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin."

The hitch in her voice along with the feverish need that vibrated through her veins called to a dark and primal part of me. I'd struggled the day before to keep it at bay, and had kept her hands tied to ensure she didn't accidentally touch me and set something off she'd regret.

We were already walking a thin line.

And now it was so much worse. I could feel the obsession running through my veins alongside the word *mine* that kept racing through my mind. I wanted to push her away, make her

go as far away from me as she could get, all while knowing at the same time if she dared to run now, it would trigger a hunt, and the thought of chasing her, capturing her, taking her...

“It’s mating heat, little beast. I feel it too.”

“What does that mean?” she whispered against my arm. Though I believed she instinctually knew exactly what I meant.

“It means that the fates have aligned us. I believe you are an omega, a mate perfectly suited for an Alpha, and in the beginnings of mating heat, an Alpha can and will claim you if given half the chance.”

“Are you an Alpha? Is that why you are grinding against me as hard as I you?”

I froze at her assessment, realizing that she wasn’t wrong. My body had a mind of its own and right now it wanted her beyond measure. My resistance was melting a lot faster than I’d expected.

“Aye. I am an alpha dragon and your perfectly omega response to me is the kind of thing most shifters dream of. It is the beginning of the most everlasting bond possible. A fated mate,” I whispered the last, almost as if I could push it out of my mind if I tried hard enough.

“But you’re not from this realm, are you? I can sense the human in you. So how is it possible that fate would do this to us? You don’t belong here anymore than I would belong in your world.”

I rolled her onto her back and levered over her until her legs parted and I settled in the exact spot between her legs where I belonged. She gasped, but I covered her mouth with mine and took that sound inside me as I kissed her with a slow, drugging pace.

I didn’t need a reminder that a mating between us wouldn’t work. Trying to take her out of this realm could come with unforeseen consequences. My father had warned me that under no circumstances could I bring anyone back. Not to mention it would make her miserable in the process.

But as long as we remained here, in each other's presence, I had little hope of keeping my distance. She smelled like home. Not Scotland home. Before that. It was an odd combination of peaches, evergreen pines, and earthy red clay and it was downright intoxicating.

I placed my hand around her neck and squeezed. She was strong and beautiful, but also smaller than the women I'd known. She had a lot of curves, but she was still a lot smaller than me. And without her magic she was no match for me. I could snap her neck or bury my dragon teeth into that delicate skin and thus mark her as mine forever.

All without her being able to do a thing to stop me. That thought alone nearly killed me as I fought against it. It wasn't in my nature to fight against anything that I wanted.

So I'd take what I could and leave the rest behind.

But when I pushed my too-big cock inside her... I groaned at the idea of the sounds she would make then as she took every inch I had to give.

Omegas were made for their alphas. Even if her body seemed too small for a creature like me, the slick heat building rapidly between her thighs would ensure my entry and then the pleasure. Fuck... she'd be so impossibly tight when her body worked to accommodate me and when my knot swelled...my groin throbbed at the idea.

I was drunk with mating fever, that much was clear. Only the fact I was still able to recognize it, gave me hope it wasn't too late. Barely.

She on the other hand. I wasn't sure. She seemed ready and willing to take whatever I wanted to give. But to claim her now could change the course of both our fates and I wasn't sure I could predict what that meant with any reasonable accuracy.

The sex would be explosive, but would either of us recover from it?

With that thought finally ruling my thoughts, I released her neck and rolled off of her. Damn the fates. What were they

thinking?

I grasped my cock through my trousers and squeezed as hard as I could, willing the pain to subside. If I didn't get this under control we were both going to be lost. But her curves... That flare of her hips that had cushioned my hips when I went between them. I could still feel the warmth of her pressed against me. Sweat broke out across my entire body just thinking about it.

I growled low as I contemplated taking this further and stroking myself to completion to assuage some of this fever. I didn't know if it would actually help, but I didn't think it would hurt.

"Are you okay?" She popped into my vision as she leaned over and looked at me with worried eyes.

"About as good as you I'm afraid."

"And that's a bad thing?" she asked, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth. Now I could only think of those straight, little teeth scraping their way against my length before she pulled me into her mouth.

"I don't think either of us is ready for this kind of complication," I answered honestly, my hand still holding my cock in a vise like grip that was doing nothing to get this under control. The pain only seemed to enhance my need.

"Wanting me is a complication? That seems unkind."

I barked out a laugh that sounded more angry than surprised. "Wanting you is dangerous. For both of us. It wouldn't be hard to go too far." I also wasn't sure how much choice either of us had in this matter. While the bond could be rejected, it might also eat at one or both of us until it consumed us.

Or I consumed her.

"That doesn't sound fair," she said as she finally settled back down at my side. Although I could feel her eyes on me and my hands as I continued to squeeze my dick in its death grip. "Especially when it could be the answer to all my problems."

I nearly choked at those words. "Excuse me?"

“We both know there’s only one reason the King is so interested in me. I may not be the fastest fae, or the strongest, but I am smart. And I’ve had to hide from him more than once because my instincts screamed about how he had some sort of desire to be my first. However, if that were to change, then there would be a good chance he would lose interest.”

“Or kill me for taking it.”

“Are dragons easy to kill?”

She had a point. Albeit a wild and crazy one. What she was suggesting. It was madness.

“No. We are not easy to kill. But more to the point, we are territorial. We take what we want. Do what we want. And kill who we want.”

She went quiet and her breathing seemed to slow. I didn’t know whether she was thinking about what I’d said or if she’d already dismissed her crazy idea.

Until her small hand came up and wrapped around mine still holding on desperately to my cock. “Then take what you want. If you don’t, I think I’m going to burn alive anyways. If the King truly wants us dead, we won’t be in much worse of a position than we are now. I don’t know what he promised you to get you to bring me back to him. But I guarantee you, whatever it was, he was lying. He only ever takes and never ever gives anything. That’s the way of the fae. And he is the worst of us all.”

“And you would just give yourself to me?”

“Of course not. I’m taking what I want too.”

I could barely breathe from her words as they settled in my chest and wrapped around my lungs, pulling the breath from me. I’d never wanted a woman like this before.

“Those are bold words from a princess.”

“I’m not a princess, remember? I’m a little beast and right now she wants the big beast.” She rolled on top of me and my hand fell away as she settled her pussy over the spot my hand vacated. “But don’t take this for more than what it is. I’ll do

anything to keep from giving my stepfather what he wants. If that means I have to give my virginity to someone else, then that's what I'll do."

That little speech tore me in two. Part of me wanted to push her away and tell her to take her daddy games elsewhere. I wasn't in the business of helping others get what they wanted.

And then the other part, the side I knew was being influenced by mating heat wanted to take everything she had to give and then give her back so much pleasure her head would explode. What I wanted from her was too important to throw away after.

"Princess, I don't think you understand what you're asking for. If you give me an inch, I'm going to take a mile."

She rolled her eyes and I about turned her over my knee so I could spank some sense into her.

"It's just sex. People here have it all the time. Maybe if I hadn't spent so much time in the woods hiding, I wouldn't be in this position.

No. She'd probably be married to some useless bastard for his political power and popping out a kid or two by now. And the thought of that sickened me.

"Don't get me wrong. I'm all too happy to give you my cock. Watching you struggle to take it in as you were stretched to the breaking point would be thrilling indeed and then when I knotted you—fuck—feeling your tight pussy stretch and ripple around me already has precum dripping from my dick. But if you think this would be one and done between us then you're a goddamn fool."

I listened to her frantic breathing. Knowing that my words got to her almost as much as they got to me threatened to scramble my brain. But we were outside in the middle of the dark forest. I didn't want her first time to be on the dirty ground.

We should have found a village to stop in. There would have to be a place to stay somewhere with a nice warm bed. Although out here, far from prying eyes, no one would hear her scream the first time I took her.

I scrubbed my hand down my face. There seemed no hope of thinking straight.

“I know I should be upset with you for talking to me that way...”

“But you aren’t.”

She shook her head. What was I supposed to do? We were between a rock and a hard place. I could assuage her mating heat and give her some short-lived relief, but if she triggered the dragon...

At that thought, dark, shiny scales shimmered just underneath my skin. The dragon wanted freedom like she did. Keeping him caged this long had been a mistake. But the skies here were not dragon friendly. And I wasn’t sure she was ready to see me like that.

It was one thing to know I changed into a dragon, and another entirely to see the actual beast. He often had an attitude and cared less about doing the right thing than I did. Which wasn’t as often as it should be. I was a selfish bastard and some gifts were impossible to refuse.

She moaned, pulling me from my thoughts as I looked down to see I’d opened the fastenings of my trousers and palmed the bare skin of my cock, all while she watched. I closed my eyes against the image of her watching me and the fact I couldn’t control myself very well around her. It was too much to bear.

I gave my cock one last hard tug, pulled free from the confines of my pants, and refastened them. I could get through this without behaving like an animal. Just because I wasn’t used to denying myself didn’t mean I couldn’t. I was a fucking Ferguson. I could do whatever the hell I wanted.

I just happened to want the little beast more than I wanted to behave. Which considering I’d known her less than twenty-four hours didn’t say much about me. Finding that amulet was supposed to be my top priority.

“Does this mean...?” She looked stricken and I felt that disappointment more keenly than any before. The pain of it

spread through my chest like a wildfire and by the time I went to answer her, the dragon had made an appearance.

I knew because her eyes went wide with fear.

“Don’t be afraid, little beast.” I smirked. “He’s not in control. I am. But he does want to get a closer look. You up to that?”

CHAPTER
NINE

Kitra

I backed away a few steps. I'd never been up close and personal with a real life dragon before. Magnus was the only one I knew in person and he rarely shifted into dragon form. It agitated the King when he did, and whatever agitated the King everyone avoided at all costs. My stepfather had a wicked temper, and it was best not to trigger it.

Even Magnus. The nephew that he treated almost like a son. *Almost*. There was something off about the two of them and I couldn't quite pinpoint it.

As I stared at the golden glow of this man's eyes and the way his pupils had narrowed to slits, I half wanted to turn and run. But everyone knew that you don't run from any predator unless you know for certain you could make it to safety before they caught you.

A natural predator seemed to live for the chase.

In this case, I didn't have a chance without my magic and that damn little imp, who could have helped me here, had run off.

"You're going to change into your dragon form now?" I tried to keep the panic out of my voice, but failed.

He looked up at the dark sky and nodded. "Need to do it now before it gets light out. Dawn is coming and with it those weird little sprite creatures will be able to spot me in the sky. Their little fucking darts don't kill me, but they do make me

ill. Last time I encountered them it took an entire day to fully recover.”

“They will probably see you in the dark too.” Despite my warnings and the fear I felt, I also had a curious streak a mile wide and I wanted to see what he would look like as a dragon. Would he be green like Magnus? Did his teeth sharpen to dangerous points?

“We’ll see,” he said as he began removing his clothes. To my infernal shame the heat between my legs flared hot and needy all over again. If he was right about this mating heat then wouldn’t this only get worse until something was actually done about it? Would something as simple as sex make it go away? There were currently a lot of moving parts and questions to our situation and I was going back and forth on what to deal with first.

Dealing with this infernal need for him was a situation for later, when I wasn’t looking at the giant of a man, covered in bulky muscles as he revealed himself to me. I turned around to prevent seeing anymore but not before I got a good look at the thick, solid column of his legs that looked the size of some of the forest trees *and* what hung between them.

My face flamed hot as the blush from earlier encompassed my entire body. Despite the inappropriate timing, it was difficult to ignore the growing pressure inside me. It kind of felt like I would explode with it as it wound tighter and tighter.

“Why do you need to fly now? Where are you going?” I wouldn’t tell him where my questions and hesitations were coming from. It was humiliating to want a stranger this much.

But the idea that he would leave me here like this terrified me.

“Looking for a village where we can get proper food and water, not to mention a bath and a bed. I don’t know about you, Princess, but living like this is not exactly in my plan. But it seems your world is ages behind ours in its progression.”

“I wouldn’t say ages. But it’s definitely different. Mainly because time flows differently in our realm.”

“What does that mean?” He touched my arm and I looked briefly over my shoulder at him, making sure to maintain eye contact this time.

I shrugged. “I’m not a time turner, so I don’t have the skill that allows me to move through time, but I try and listen to what others say. To learn whatever I can, wherever I can. Not sure if anyone here truly understands the human realm though, since fae have been locked out for a very long time.”

He looked at me and then at the sky again, looking torn. “I have so many questions, but if I do not go now, it will be too light. I still need the cover of darkness. But I really want to hear more about this.”

“Go. We’ll have time to talk when we travel.” I paused before hesitantly trying out his name. “Isaac.”

He stared at me for what felt like an eternity, but was probably less than a minute. “You need to move much farther away. I need a lot of room. And remember what I said about running. If you do it again, you might not like the consequences.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. I hurried toward the opposite side of the clearing, catching a flash of his magic from the corner of my vision before I reached my destination. I whirled to see a giant black dragon appear in front of me, his enormous tail slamming against the ground and causing it to shake.

I gasped. He was so much larger than I’d expected. And I’d expected a lot. Despite that, I was drawn to every detail about him. The shiny black scales that shimmered and sparkled in the moonlight. Like this they almost appeared iridescent. The eyes I’d already seen, but the shape of his head and the horns...

Not to mention the sharp, dagger like claws currently pawing at the ground. Whether he realized I was studying or not, he suddenly blew out a tiny stream of fire as if to give me a warning, and then spread his wings before taking to the sky with just a few strong flaps.

I followed his path, unable to look away. His wingspan alone looked as big or bigger than the King’s entire castle. I couldn’t

imagine how large his home would have to be to contain him. If the King had any plans of putting this man in his dungeon, that was never going to work. He'd simply shift and tear the entire castle apart.

Now that I'd seen the dragon, I understood why he wanted the night sky. At some point, since taking off, he'd disappeared, blending into the inky darkness, making it impossible to see him. Hopefully, the imps wouldn't see him either. They were plenty of trouble on a good day, but if they thought there was a threat, their behavior would get much worse.

Hence, their reputation and the propensity for the fae to keep their distance from them whenever possible. They might seem small and kind of cute in their own gruesome little way, but they were dangerous and it wouldn't do to forget that.

I returned to the fire that had gone out and began gathering his clothing and the bedroll we'd lain out. I glanced at his pack and debated whether to rifle through it and see what else he carried that could give me clues. I wasn't sure about him, and any information I could gather might help.

I glanced to the sky, and while I saw no sign of him, I wasn't going to take the chance that he would catch me. I was too vulnerable without my magic or a weapon of any kind. A situation I had to rectify as soon as possible.

The last thing I needed was some giant fire breathing dragon pissed off at me. When Magnus got angry, the King kept him under control by using a short leash. But for one like him, not under the King's control, I was curious about the power and capability of the dragon. Did their magic give them more power than to simply transform their bodies? Did the King actually fear them?

They had to be strong. That was a given.

By the time I'd gathered our meager supplies, the ground shook as Isaac returned. I stared open mouthed at him, wanting to touch every inch and learn everything that I could. Were the scales of a dragon hard and rigid or soft, almost like leather? What would it feel like to soar through the skies?

What else made them different from other creatures?

Before I could voice any of my questions, the flash of blue light of magic engulfed him until only the man stood before me.

This time I kept my gaze and my thoughts focused on him. All of him. Modesty had gone out the window, and it didn't do much good to blush about it now.

He was larger than all but a few fae who might rival his size. The King for one and possibly Magnus. He certainly towered over me by nearly two feet.

The bulk of his muscles from his arms, to his torso, to his legs, were a true marvel. It would likely take nothing for him to crush someone my size. And without my magic I was vulnerable to his strength as well as every other fae creature in this damned forest.

However, looking at him wasn't all bad.

I'd been so focused on the heat threatening to burn me alive from the inside out earlier, I'd not been able to appreciate the size and weight of him as he'd leaned into me. I recalled the sensation and realized how much I liked it. There was something primal about a man like him that made me think of safety and satisfaction. And after having some time to think a little bit about it, I still thought my idea from earlier was our best option. Probably more mine, but whatever.

Losing my virginity would certainly dampen my appeal to the King. He seemed obsessed with what he called my "purity." I nearly gagged on the thought as bile rose in my throat.

And then there was Magnus. He offered me everything I thought I could want, but there was something about him that I always found off. When he smiled, it never really felt like a smile. Instead he unnerved me.

"Do you want to toss me my clothes, or do you prefer looking at me this way?"

I cleared my thoughts and smirked. "You certainly suffer no lack of ego. Of course, if I looked like you do I likely wouldn't

either.” I grabbed his trousers and tossed them across the clearing.

“What is that supposed to mean? You are fae. You practically glow with perfection and beauty.”

I twisted my mouth into a smirk. “You only say that because you are not fae and can see nothing beyond what the eye beholds.” Despite our characteristics of beauty, we were *not* all created equal. We aren’t only judged by our beauty, but our magic as well. And our tendencies toward being as cutthroat as possible made some of us as cautious as we are cunning.”

“So you think I’m shallow?” His lips curled into what could only be called a cruel smile.

“Beauty isn’t as special here as it might be in other cultures. It is taken for granted and the least judged of our attributes.”

“Then what makes a fae special here?” This time he looked genuinely curious and it made it easy for me to tell him more.

“Power. All fae crave it in one way or another. Some want to wield it over others and then some want it in order to live free.”

His brow furrowed. “You don’t strike me as power hungry.”

I smiled softly. “Don’t let the pleasing looks fool you into believing any fae are sweet and innocent. Not even me. We all hunger for more power. It’s in our nature.”

“And what do you want to do with this power you supposedly covet?”

My heart skipped a beat as he pressed dangerously close to one of my private hot buttons. I was used to hiding my wishes and dreams. There was danger in letting others know what you craved. If you weren’t careful, they would find ways to use it against you.

But in this, I could only be honest.

“I want my freedom. And considering I’m wanted by the ruler of this kingdom, I’m going to need all the power I can get to obtain it.”

“I don’t sense much magic in you,” The blank look on his face seemed so benign and not at all cruel, but I did not trust what I could see. Only what I knew. And I couldn’t tell from that expression what he was thinking. Either way, I wasn’t prepared to tell this creature all of my secrets.

“My power or lack thereof at the moment doesn’t matter. What did you find out from the skies? Are we far from the nearest village? I have to admit I’ve not been allowed to wander this far from the palace in years, and I’ve lost track of the distance between villages.”

He frowned again. “I’m liking this kind of yours less and less the more you say. How exactly does he restrict your movements?”

“It doesn’t really matter, but suffice it to say, he would prefer I never left the castle.”

He frowned but didn’t respond, and after a few minutes more he finished dressing and picked up his pack, slinging it across his back. “We aren’t too far at all. Just on the other side of the falls. We should have no trouble making it there before nightfall even on foot.”

“You could have gone on your own. Left me behind.”

He turned and glared at me, almost making me flinch. “Yeah, that’s not happening, Princess. You are the reason I’m out here in the first place. And don’t think you can run from me either. I can act like a nice enough guy when I need to, but if you anger me by trying to leave on your own, then all bets will be off and it won’t be the King you fear the most.”

I bristled against that threat, despite the prickling of my skin. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Anger coursed through my veins. My mouth was always the problem. No matter my good intentions, or how dangerous the situation, I couldn’t seem to keep it shut.

“Exactly what it sounds like. If you don’t want to cooperate, then I’ll happily take whatever I want.”

“Which is...?”

“The Vostuzan amulet. Which you’re going to help me find.”

My chest seized. “And why would I do that?”

“Because it’s either help me get what I want or I take my chances with the King and take you back to him as promised. Which would you prefer?”

CHAPTER TEN

Isaac

I smiled at her ramrod stiff back as she stomped towards the village.

It had been hours since I'd told her the truth of her situation and we'd left our makeshift camp in search of the village I'd scouted from above.

And I could still feel the anger she'd shot in my direction at my words.

I'd felt a minute pang of regret when I'd said them, and that annoyed me. Future kings could not afford to be indecisive or regretful. Hell, warriors on a mission couldn't either, and right now I was both. The words I'd spoken, however, were still my truth, but there was knowing what I had to do versus what I really wanted.

And want was a fickle beast who couldn't be trusted.

Did I want the amulet? Hell yeah I did, and I still planned to stop at nothing to get it. But there was a major part of me that wanted her too. And while I refused to be a slave to mating heat, I didn't see the desire for her going away anytime soon.

Her potential omega status, however, left me perplexed. First, the witch my parents had tried to marry me to had turned out to be an omega and had ended up mated to my twin. And now a fae Princess? What the hell was fate up to and was she trying to play some kind of sick joke on our family?

Ian had ended up separated from his mate, and if this little beast was supposed to be mine, then we were going to have a real problem when it came time to go back home.

A more unlikely omega I couldn't imagine.

She seemed too tiny to be a suitable mate for a dragon, let alone able to birth the many dragonlings it would take to carry on our family line.

I stared at her backside and my imagination took off at high speed. It was all but impossible not to think about how good and tight she would feel on my cock. I bit back a groan as the front of my trousers grew tight once again.

I had to stop thinking about her like that or we weren't going to make it to our destination without me pinning her to a tree and burying myself inside her.

I was so lost in thought, I didn't realize she'd stopped walking until I crashed into her back. She fell forward, and I had to lunge to catch her before she hit the forest floor face first.

I yanked her a little harder than I meant to and she cried out. "Fuck. I'm sorry. I didn't want you to fall," I said, righting her back onto her feet and rubbing her arm and shoulder that I had pulled a little too hard.

"I wouldn't fall if you'd watch where you're going and not try to plow over me."

"I was distracted."

"By what?" she demanded, glaring up at me once again. Apparently, this was going to be her new look for me. Sour and sassy were quite the combo when it came to this little beast of a fae.

I had half a mind to kiss her until she melted against me and forgot about my getting on her nerves. And no way in hell would I answer that loaded question. She did not need to know the dirty thoughts racing through my mind. Nor the many things I wanted to do to her. The time still wasn't right.

"Thinking we should have questioned that little sprite before she ran off. I heard what she said to you about finding the

amulet. If she knows something, that's where we should have started."

She made another sour face at me, pursing her lips. "Then maybe you shouldn't have thrown her in the fire."

I grumbled under my breath. "Maybe." And maybe I should have done a better job torturing her for information. The little pest.

"She'll probably come back." My little beast made a show of brushing the debris off of her skirt, which in turn made her little tits jiggle and draw my eye.

I couldn't wait to peel that leather bound dress off of her and... I forced my eyes back to her face and the conversation when her words finally sank in.

"What makes you say that?"

"She was way too curious about me and my situation. Call it a hunch, but something tells me she isn't done with me."

"Let's just hope her intentions don't cause us any trouble. We need to stay low and not let the King get word that I've captured you already."

She laughed and the melody of it went straight to my dick. I shook my head. If I didn't get this shit out of my system, we were going to have problems. And the last thing we needed was anyone sneaking up on us because I can't stop thinking about her sweet smelling pussy and how much I wanted to taste it.

"That's hilarious that you think you've captured me. And as for the missing imp, I think it's a guarantee that she'll be trouble. They always are. It's a matter of how careful you are in what you say or do with them as to how much trouble. So keep that in mind and with any luck she'll help us through and we won't get dead. But I'd advise not threatening her anymore. An angry little imp is the most dangerous kind."

"Well, if she gives us too much trouble, I could always barbecue her myself or eat her."

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, maybe you could refrain from either of those. Might want to keep that dragon put away too.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Yes, I’ll get right on that.”

Her eyes filled with alarm. “Are you saying you don’t have control?”

My laughter died and I snarled. “I’ve got control just fine. But the dragon is an intrinsic part of me. It’s not just something I turn off and on like magic. It’s not that simple. He can take the upper hand if necessary, as can I.”

“That sounds exhausting. I think I’ll take magic any day over an inner animal.”

“You’d say that until you experienced the exhilarating freedom that comes with flight. Or the sheer strength of a two-ton dragon in a fight. And no one can take the dragon away from me.”

She cringed. “It’s not gone. It’s just bound. Besides, I don’t need brute strength to get by. And it’s not nearly as important or effective as a magical power.”

Aha. “So you do have magic, then. Care to explain how it’s been bound?”

She sniffed, that sour expression on her face again. “I’ll explain nothing to the likes of you. You’re almost as bad as an imp with your tricks. Or a fae. At least now I know for sure I can’t ever trust you.”

“Trust is a fallacy. But knowledge is key, and at some point we are going to have to work together to find this amulet. Otherwise you might as well roll over and accept whatever the King wants from you.” Not that I would ever let the King touch her again. A fact I would keep to myself for now. “As for the other, we’ll see. Until then, how about we get some food, make a plan, and then get a good night’s sleep.”

We stepped through the copse of trees in front of us and emerged on the other side and directly into the small village I’d seen during my quick flight.

“I’m all for the creatures of comfort, but I’d prefer to keep moving. We are still technically in King Aegrond’s realm. If he or any of his foot soldiers are pursuing us, it wouldn’t take long for word to get back to him of our location.”

“Which is why you will keep out of sight while I talk to the proprietor of the inn and procure us somewhere a little more comfortable to sleep than the forest floor.”

“Your obsession with your comfort is a bit much. How are we going to get anything done from a room at the inn?”

“Do you have another suggestion? Our mission isn’t to get as far away from your father as we can, Princess. It’s to find that amulet. And to do that, we need a direction to search. So we’ll stay here until we either hear from your little sprite, or we find someone else who might help us. There must be someone here with the kind of magic we can use to locate a missing item.”

Her shoulders sagged as she nodded. “I’m not familiar with this village, but there aren’t many that don’t have at least one seer. Go do what you need to. I’ll have a look around.”

I grabbed her wrist and pulled her against my side. “Nice try, Princess. But I did not kid about keeping you close and at my side until the amulet is found.”

“I’m not going to run away.”

She spoke the words, and yet, I didn’t believe a single one of them. “Either way. We stick together.” To emphasize my words, I encircled her wrist with a tighter grip and pulled her closer. “Until this is resolved, we are in this together.”

Her demeanor seemed to relax, but I didn’t believe she accepted my decision. Every instinct told me she was simply biding her time. But I was done reminding her of her role here. I turned onto a busy street with her in tow. With a little more effort we would simply look like another newlywed couple. Another thought that gave me pause.

I leaned down and placed my lips by her ear. “How do fae mate?”

She reared back. “Excuse me?”

The horror that suddenly crossed her face made me smile. I was beginning to really enjoy knocking her off balance.

“Relax, Princess. I’m not talking about fucking you. I’m talking about something a little more official and hypothetically only. I’m not proposing marriage. But if I’m going to convince an inn keeper that the two of us are a real couple, I’d like to make sure I’m using the appropriate words.

“We have mates, but they are extremely rare. That magical, rare bond between fae is so unlikely hardly anyone ever even mentions it anymore. Instead we join for power. Without that bond, I would be your concubine. Not your mate.”

“Hmmm.” I contemplated her information. “I don’t believe the word concubine means the same thing here as it does in the human realm. But I can work with that.”

“You can’t go around and tell people I am your concubine. Word will get back to the King.”

“Isn’t that what you basically want? For him to think you’ve given yourself to another? And if you’ve rarely left the castle, will these people even recognize you?”

“I meant if and when the time came,” she hissed. “Not make an official announcement and lure him or his foot soldiers to our location. If he doesn’t catch us we never have to tell him anything.”

“Too many rules and too many what ifs. Let’s keep this simple and hopefully no one here will recognize you. We’re married and keep it at that.”

“Not married. Committed. Marriage is an old word here that hardly anyone uses anymore.”

“Fine. Committed. Now let’s go.”



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, we had our own room and a lead on a seer located across the village. I pushed the golden key into her hand and pressed my lips to her ear again before I

whispered. “Are you ready, little beast? You and me, all alone. How are you going to fight me off this time?”

Her breathing quickened. “I’m not the one who fought against you, remember?”

“Is that another offer, little beast? Because if so, I might just take you up on it this time. I’ve spent a fair amount of my time thinking about what it will be like when I finally fuck you.”

“Your crude words don’t frighten me if that’s what you’re hoping for. I’ve heard much worse.”

The red haze of rage filled my vision at the mention of anyone talking to her like this but me. She wasn’t their omega to test. “I’m not trying to scare you away, but I am going to take what’s freely offered. Shall we?” I touched my tongue to the shell of her ear and traced my way to her neck. Her breathing stopped and I smiled as I nipped at her fragile skin with the teeth of my dragon.

Her arousal flared and I breathed deep to take it in. The rich scent filled my lungs, making every muscle in my body ache with the need to wrap around her. Reluctantly, I pulled away from her.

“Up the stairs and to the right.”

She nodded, pivoted towards the stairs and quickly climbed them. I followed, doing my best not to watch her hips as they swung side to side. I failed, but at least it was fun. She glanced back at me once and based on the heated look in her eyes I got the impression her mind was on the exact same topic as mine.

I watched her smoothly put the key in the lock and turn the knob. I’d half expected her to fumble or struggle with nerves, but not my little beast. She was certainly affected by me, but not enough to make her unable to function.

That was something I’d have to work on later. By the time I got her naked and underneath me, there would be no doubt she would lose her mind.

I followed her into the room despite her having frozen just inside the door. I closed it behind us and then followed her line of sight to the large bed in the center of the room.

“Something not to your liking, Princess?”

“I just didn’t think about the fact there would only be one bed. One of us will have to take the floor.”

I laughed at her sudden attack of nerves. Now she was nervous and I was going to love every second of it.

“Neither one of us will be anywhere near that floor. That bed is plenty big enough for the both of us.” I dropped my pack at the foot of said bed and took a seat. I hadn’t slept all that much the last few nights and suddenly I felt the need for some serious rest.

“The size of the bed is not the issue.”

“Then what is?” I asked, stifling a yawn as I removed my boots. “I’m tired, as I am sure you are too. And I’m not planning to do anything you don’t ask me to. At least for now.” I added the last to throw her off balance and remind her that like it or not, she was actually still at my mercy.

She grabbed her hips. “And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Take it however you’d like. But if you dare to lie on that floor, I will not be responsible for what I do.”

She narrowed her eyes and I grinned back at her, ready for whatever pithy comeback she wanted to lob at me. “I need a bath. You too if I have to sleep next to you.”

“Is that an invitation?”

She curled her lip in disgust. “Certainly not. I’ll go first and then you can follow.” My bossy little fae poked her head behind the divider and sighed. Since a lot of life in the fae realm was driven by magic, I’d made sure that we’d have no problem with hot running water when we needed it.

While some areas of life in this realm seemed miles behind, there were other areas where it was as good as or better than mine. And the luxury of this little room rivaled some of the best of what we had to offer at Castle Ferguson. Including a semi private bathing area with all the creature comforts a princess could require.

Minutes later I could hear the water splashing as she dunked her body underneath it. I imagined her thick thighs spreading in the warm water as I sank between them so I could take care of her. My muscles tensed as the longing to be with her intensified. It pulled taut underneath my skin and nearly forced me to go to her. This all-encompassing desire disgusted me almost as much as the loss of control.

I never let anything or anyone set my destiny and she would be no exception. She was a means to an end and I needed to keep that clear in my head no matter what happened.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Kitra

I finished bathing and washing my clothes before slipping from behind the privacy screen. Only to find him nowhere to be seen. Since there wasn't anywhere in the room for him to hide, I surmised that he had to have slipped out the door without saying a word.

The nervous butterflies in my stomach calmed. I'd had no idea what to expect when it came to our sleeping arrangements other than I doubted I would deny him if he'd changed his mind about taking my virginity. Obviously he hadn't.

Without my magic, I was of little use. Even he had to understand that. I paced the room in my damp undergarments. Since I'd had to escape with little planning, there had been no time to pack a bag or think about how I would obtain whatever I needed. Escape had been the only thing on my mind. For now, at least my dress hung clean and damp and by tomorrow it would be presentable again.

I stopped and stared at the door. The logical choice would be to leave. This dragon seemed volatile and unpredictable. He could choose to turn me back over to my stepfather at any time. To stay with him came at great risk.

But there was so much keeping me here instead. And a lot of it I didn't fully understand. Although the words *mating heat* kept running over and over through my mind. Reminding me that

the unnatural craving for a stranger might be banked for now, but it was far from gone.

As evidenced from the twinge that occurred just from thinking of him. I half wanted to scream with frustration because of it.

But since he wasn't fae I didn't even understand how or if the mate bond thing between us was possible. I needed the advice of someone who understood.

My mother would have. She had been one of the most powerful fae in this realm and the next. It made sense that the King had coveted her and her abilities. And most of the time he'd even seemed to care for her. Although mother had been quick to point out that commitments with a King were rarely based on emotion.

She'd become his concubine with ease because of me. After my father's death, she'd tried to raise me alone, but her struggles were not easily overcome. Power was one thing, but it wasn't enough to compensate for—

“Why are you still hanging around waiting for that animal man to return?”

I whirled at the sound of the imp's voice, clutching at my chest. “How in hell did you get in here? Are you crazy? It's not safe for you here.”

She sniffed at me. “Because of that brute who tried to barbecue me? He caught me off guard once. It won't happen again.”

“Don't be so sure about that. He's more clever than he looks.”

She scoffed again. “He's loud and obnoxious and can be heard from a mile away. I think I'll be fine.”

I suspected she vastly underestimated him, but I shrugged my concern away. “It's your funeral.” I had to remember to keep it light with this creature. While she seemed like she was on my side, she was still a imp. Talk about clever and cunning. I could almost guarantee if she was here, then it was because she wanted something.

“Why are you staying with him? He’s wandering in the village, which is your perfect opportunity to escape.”

My stomach jolted. “He and I have the same goals,” I lied. Well, sort of. We both wanted the amulet, but for very different reasons. And I well knew the danger he represented. But what choice did I have? If I ran from him now before I had my magic back, how far would I get?

“He’s using you,” she hissed.

“I know that.” And I’d use him right back. “However, that doesn’t necessarily make him my enemy. He could be useful.”

“Then you’re a fool and deserve whatever he does to you.” She turned away as if to leave again.

“Wait. Don’t go. I need your help.” Those were rash words to present to an imp. To give her any power over me could unleash more trouble than even a dragon could cause.

The smile on her face when she turned back sent a shudder of repulsion down my spine. But what choice did I have? This little creature knew what I needed and for now, represented the only path I could find to getting it.

“You need me?” she asked, touching her chest and sounding like she couldn’t quite believe what she’d heard. “But I thought you wanted me to go away.”

I swallowed my pride and my instinct that this imp would end up more trouble than she was worth and delved on. “The amulet you mentioned to me. Can it really help my situation?”

She stepped forward and placed her hand on my arm. It took every ounce of my will not to recoil from her touch. My mother had warned me on multiple occasions to always keep my distance from their kind.

“The chains inside you are wound impossibly tight. No fae other than the one who created them will be able to break them. And maybe not even then. Your only hope is the power within that amulet. But it’s very dangerous. You would not be the only one looking for that kind of power.” I didn’t have to ask what she meant. I could sense the danger inside Isaac and the lengths he would go to.

“But what other choice do I have?” I asked.

The imp dropped her hand. “None. But the probability you will succeed is quite low. Only one person can wield the amulet.”

The words she spoke were true. If Isaac and I were after the same thing, I would ultimately have to fight him to use it. But again, what choice did I have? I would get absolutely nowhere in any realm without my magic. It was only a matter of time before another enslaved me. Including the dragon.

“I have to try.” I whispered the words, afraid anyone else might hear them.

“Then I will help you. But then you will owe me a great favor.”

My heart stopped beating for a second. I’d known this would be the price for her help. And I also knew that to owe a imp a favor would most likely lead to my death.

“Okay,” I agreed despite the fear and reluctance warning me not to go there. My mind wanted me to find another way, but the imp was right. There was no other way and even if there were, I didn’t have time to find it.

A heartbeat after I agreed, the door sprang open and Isaac loomed in the doorway like a harbinger of doom. Of course as I noticed he carried trays of food I had to admit my imagination had run away from me. Or the conversation with

I whirled back around to her to find her gone with no trace that she’d even been in the room. Had I imagined her? I shook my head. No. That sense of foreboding and impending doom still coating my skin was a clear indicator that yes, it had been real and I’d made a devil’s bargain with her.

“You’re done,” he said, stating the obvious while kicking the door shut behind him. His gaze seemed transfixed on my body, and despite knowing my undergarments were nearly as modest as my dress, I felt half naked nonetheless.

“I thought you might be as hungry as I am and be in need of some fresh clothes.” He set the tray down on the nearby table

and pulled his pack from his back. Something I'd failed to notice missing from the room in the first place. My powers of observation were definitely lacking. If I had any hope of getting through all of this, I needed to pay keen attention to all of my surroundings.

He withdrew a bundle of material from his bag and thrust them in my direction. "Here. Not sure if they are exactly to your taste, but they should work."

The rich red material slid sinuously against my palm and I closed my eyes against the luxurious feel. It had been quite some time since I'd had access to clothing like this. My stepfather had stripped me of most of my belongings when I'd refused his demand I marry him, and even the clothes on my back had been yanked away that first night in a dungeon cell.

The clothes had mattered little. It had been more the principle of the thing. But now, with the beautiful silk brushing against my skin, tears sprang to my eyes as the loss of what I'd been came rushing into my brain.

"I thought that red would go well with your dark hair, and it looks like I was right."

I blinked up at him. "Why would that matter?"

He shrugged, stepping closer. "It shouldn't," he said, lifting a lock of my still damp hair between his fingers and bringing it to his nose. "But I thought of it anyways."

My entire body stiffened as he inhaled deep. I knew his senses were strong, and he could pick up more than any other fae by scent alone so there was no hiding the effect he had on me. I didn't know what to say other than, "Thank you for the clothes."

"You should change into the silk underdress I brought you. It will be far more comfortable for sleeping than this thing." He'd dropped my strand of hair and was now tracing his fingers along my shoulders and the material he seemed to find offensive.

I had to admit that the fine materials in my hands would feel much better against my chafed skin. Sleeping in a tree and

then on the forest floor had been awkward but sufficient. Even if my comfort seemed of little importance at this point. But he was already pulling at the strings that would loosen the garment in the back and I had to admit I was looking forward to a comfortable bed for one night.

“What the fuck?” His rough graveled growl yanked me from my languid thoughts. I jerked away from him, but his strong fingers grabbed my wrist before I could get away. “Who did that to you?”

In all my thoughts of escape and meeting him and trying to get my power back, I’d completely forgotten about...

“It’s nothing,” I cried, trying to jerk free from his grasp.

“It’s NOT nothing, and I want an explanation immediately because I’m going to kill whoever did that to you.”

Crap. How could I have forgotten already? The punishment that had been delivered at the insistence of the King in the dungeon... The humiliation of him having me whipped. It burned through whatever barrier I’d put in my mind to make me forget.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” I snapped back at him. “Not unless you are planning to take me back.”

“The King did this?” The question came out so deep and guttural I almost didn’t recognize the words. His eyes had changed to the slits of the dragon and I could see the sharpened teeth poking at his lips. He was on the verge of something bad, and we were in a tiny inn that could in no way handle anything from the dragon.

When I didn’t answer fast enough, he pulled me against him and growled again. “Tell me.”

“Not directly,” my voice shook with fear. Not for me, but for what might happen if he lost control of his dragon.

“What the hell does that mean?”

His sharp words made my spine snap back into place. “Unhand me and get yourself under control before you ruin

everything.” I didn’t seem to care if I angered him any further. I’d had enough male pissing to last a lifetime.

He dropped my hand so suddenly it bounced against my hip. “Then answer me. Who. Did This. To. You?”

I took a deep calming breath because I knew that my answer wasn’t going to make him feel any better. But if he was angry with the King, did that mean I had more of a chance at getting away? Ultimately, it wouldn’t matter when it came down to him getting what he wanted. But as the floor began to shake underneath us, I could see no other choice but to tell him the truth.

“The King ordered it, and Magnus was forced to carry it out. He said it was a lesson for us both in obedience.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Isaac

As my blood chilled at her words, I fought against the internal heat of the dragon threatening to consume me. I had no true claim over this woman yet, but the very real need to take to the skies and burn this realm to the ground warred with the whole reason I was here in the first place.

The amulet.

My father had sacrificed his life so that I could come here and do the right thing for our family. A foolhardy plan if you asked me considering I wasn't prone to doing what was best for others. But I could still feel my twin's pain and how it had twisted me into painful knots after he lost his mate in our banishment.

And there was our mother.

She was alone in America without our protection. And while I'd given her hell most of my life thus far, she was still my mother. She had counted on her King for safety and protection and now that duty fell to me. Those thoughts alone were enough to pull me back from the brink. But the look of horror on my little beast's face and the red welts that crisscrossed her entire upper back were not going to be forgotten.

I couldn't claim her, but that didn't seem to make her less mine. At least for now.

"I will make him pay for hurting you. But for now..."

I grabbed her and pulled her into my arms. Gently this time now that I knew more about her ordeal. I pressed a kiss to the first visible welt, infusing my touch with the essence of my magic that would help heal her skin.

“Isaac,” she breathed in protest.

“I have to do this. It’s the only way I can stop myself from going crazy this instant.” She didn’t relax in my arms, but she did nod her head in assent. And that was all the permission I needed to continue.

I returned my mouth to her feverish skin and kissed along the full length of that first mark. Had I known of her injuries sooner, I would have taken care of this right away. I wasn’t above inflicting pain on women when I knew it would enhance pleasure, but this wasn’t that.

These marks came from insecurity and cruelty and I found that insufferable and unacceptable. The man who’d ordered this done suffered from a weakness there was no cure from. Short of death.

My lips twisted momentarily in grim satisfaction in the knowledge that when the time was right that was exactly what would happen, and at my hand. He would pay for hurting her and I planned to count the minutes until I took my vengeance.

The next welt I licked from one end to the other and she gasped in shock. I bit back a satisfied smile as the heat of my magic flowed from me to her, and a small moan slid from her lips.

Despite everything, I still reveled in keeping her off balance when it came to this thing between us. And now more than ever I wanted to tease her closer as I wiped the memory of pain and replaced it with something far more pleasurable.

“How are you able to do that?” she sighed, her head lolling to the side.

I licked another, holding my answer until a shudder worked its way up her spine. “My mother has many gifts and healing is one that passed from her to both me and my twin.”

“Oh my goddess. There are two like you? How unfortunate for your mother and the world.”

I smiled against her skin. “No, little beast. There is only one like me. Unfortunately for you, Ian is the nice one. He and I may look the same, but that is where the similarities end.”

“So then why are you being so nice to me?”

“Maybe it’s not you who gets the most benefit from all of this. The taste of your skin is both bitter and sweet. And watching you accept my touch...”

“But—”

“Enough talk. I need to focus my magic to get this done. But first, I want you to lift up your garments and expose yourself to me.”

“What?!” she shrieked. “Why would I do such a thing?”

A dark chuckle rumbled through my chest. The words had come out offended and surprised, but her body still stood languidly against mine. She had not pulled away in outrage. And I could smell the sweet scent of her cunt as her arousal built higher and higher in my presence.

While I enjoyed watching her fight it, I would enjoy watching her fall apart even more.

“There is no point in questioning my demand. We both know that the insistent throbbing between your legs isn’t going away unless we do something about it.”

“But I thought you said...”

Instead of answering her, I licked another of her welts and another and another until the heady perfume of her need filled both of our heads and the entire room. But it wasn’t until she lifted that garment to show me she had nothing on underneath it that I finally let up on my sensual assault.

“Such a good girl,” I purred.

“You’re driving me crazy on purpose. This connection between us is unbearable. The heat is too much.”

I had to agree. My cock had gone from hard enough to so hard it fucking hurt. At this point I was half a second away from bending her over the end of the bed and plowing into her from behind.

I suspected, however, that with her, a time would come when I would go too far and there would be no way to back away from a bond. My dick in her tight pussy would be a reckoning I didn't think either of us was prepared for. I would knot her, that was a given, and when my cock-swell stretched her to her limits, she would fucking love it.

The real concern came from the barb. It normally laid dormant underneath the ridge at the end of my cock, but it wasn't dormant now. I could feel the slight vibration of its awakening, and it threatened to drive me mad.

First things first.

“Touch yourself for me, little beast. Take all that slick heat between your thighs and use it to fuck yourself.”

That time her body jerked in my arms, and I braced for her attempt to get away or refuse my demand.

“If you're trying to scare me with your foul mouth, I told you it isn't going to work.”

I snorted. “I don't care whether you're scared or not, as long as you do as you're told.” I could sense the war inside her to fight me, but if I was right about her status as an omega, she also had a submissive nature. Maybe it was deeply hidden inside, but I was willing to take that on as a challenge.

“I don't just do as I'm told. If you want me to follow orders, then you have to request something that I want too.”

Damn. My right eyebrow raised as I considered her words until a slow rumble formed in my chest and rolled through my body. I trailed my mouth up her spine and along her neck until stopping next to her ear. “That sounds fair enough, little beast. But does that mean you don't like to touch yourself?”

Her breathing quickened. “Why would I want to do it myself when you're right here?”

“Fuck me,” I whispered, shocked by her boldness. She wasn’t as meek as I’d first thought and god damn if that didn’t make my cock swell harder. At this rate my cum would spill to the floor long before I got anywhere near her sweet pussy.

“I made that offer and you turned me down, remember?”

Suddenly, the rough and tumble too-fragile princess I’d found in the forest had transformed into a confident, sultry woman with no fear. It was clear she was under the influence of mating heat, but she was still the same woman, I’d just misread who and what she was.

And that error in judgement just might be the death of the little sanity I had left.

“Turn around,” I commanded and this time she immediately complied.

I fed my fingers into her hair until I could grab a handful and tug. “I like that you want to be both sweet and spicy at the same time. But you should know, I don’t take orders well. Especially not in the bedroom.”

She gazed up at me. “There’s a first time for everything, Isaac.”

My name on her lips made my stomach jolt. The power in her voice didn’t come from magic, but it had all the heat in the world to make me stand up and take notice. But this stance, my hold on her hair, it was not enough. I released my fingers and slid them down until I had a firm grip on each side of her hips.

I then lowered myself to my knees in front of her. “Is this what you want?” I didn’t wait for an answer before I leaned forward to graze the tender skin of her thighs at the juncture of her cunt. I inhaled deeply, allowing the sweet perfume of her arousal to fill my senses and wash over me. I wanted nothing more than to lap up every drop of the slick heat between her pillowy thighs.

She trembled in response and it’s all I needed to keep going. “When I finally fuck this pussy, it will belong to me. Do you understand me?”

She moaned and I smiled, taking that as a yes. With my eyes on her face, I leaned forward and rasped my tongue against her tender clit and watched her reaction. I was rewarded with a slight parting of her lips and a keening moan.

My fingers dug into her hips, knowing they would leave fresh marks on her porcelain skin. My marks. From the pleasure. In fact, the idea that she would wake in the morning to find them filled me with enormous pleasure. It had been a very long time since I'd spent time with a woman, and I'd never wanted to claim one like this.

It took all of my willpower not to pick her up and throw her on the bed. But neither of us were ready for that. Especially her. She was a virgin fae with a bounty on her head and at least one man who would kill to claim her.

I growled against her heat. Make that two.

Her legs quivered against me, and either for purchase or for more friction, she grabbed my head and ground herself against me. Instinct had her in its thrall and she was spiraling quickly.

“Does my pretty princess want to come in my mouth?” She cried out at my dirty question, and I doubled down on the attention I gave her with my tongue. Her hands were tight on my hair and I felt surrounded by an inexplicable cloud of heat and need. “Answer me,” I demanded, slowing my attentions until she complied.

“Yes, please,” she whispered, harshly as if it was difficult to breathe, let alone speak.

Pleased with her easy response, I moved harder against her swollen clit until her cries were one right after the other. She was on the verge and I'm eagerly anticipated the explosion. I was so turned on by her that I could feel the cum leaking from my cock.

Without releasing her clit, I reached down and swiped the fluid from my tip, brought it to her lips, and fed it into her mouth. The eagerness in which she licked my finger clean was almost enough to make me explode. But the moan that vibrated around my skin was what finally did me in.

Done playing, I sucked her clit between my teeth and clamp down with just enough pressure to end this torment. The resulting explosion rocked her sweet cunt against my mouth and I lapped every drop she had to give and then some. It wasn't until she started begging me to stop that I finally relented, knowing that she'd hit her threshold of pain.

I stood and took her mouth in a wet kiss that mixed the flavor of both of us into an elixir of pure pleasure and decadence that I never wanted to end. I groaned as the pressure in my dick reached the crest.

“Suck me off. Now,” I growled as I squeezed my cock with enough pressure to cut off my circulation. “Please, little beast, before I completely lose it.”

“Are you sure you don't want more?” That question taunted me in more ways than one as the image of sinking into her floods my mind. Thankfully, I still had some presence of sanity, even if it was only a small thread about to snap at any moment.

“Now, little beast,” I barked.

With a sly grin and a positively wild look in her eyes, she dropped to her knees and wrapped her eager lips around my aching cock. The moan I released rattled all four walls surrounding us and I didn't doubt that anyone within a mile radius would hear me.

However, she seemed to be on a mission, and it was like nothing would stop her now as she worked my shaft as best she could. Her mouth surrounded the tip, her hands worked the shaft, and her tongue provided the perfect amount of pressure against the sensitive underside.

I wanted to show her how to relax her throat and take more of me in, but there wasn't time. I was careening towards a violent explosion that would detonate any second. Sweat dripped down my face as I gazed down at her beautiful mouth on me and how hard she was working to make me come.

It was more than I could bear. I squeezed my eyes closed.

One more hard flick of her tongue and I soared into the skies as I pumped copious amounts of cum into her eager little mouth. She didn't stop, she took as much as she could and used the rest to continue pumping me until I was completely spent.

When I finally opened my eyes and she pulled her luscious mouth off of my cock, I dropped down onto my knees.

I took in every detail of her beautiful face as she stared up at me, including the glazed look of satiation in her eyes.

She's so fucking perfect, and every bit as much trouble as I knew she'd be.

Fuck. *I am so screwed.*

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Kitra

Waking up the next morning, I tried to stretch and found myself locked in his arms. I attempted to ease free, but he grumbled against the back of my neck and squeezed me tighter against the front of his body.

Much more and I wasn't going to be able to breathe. It was then I remembered the way he looked at me after I'd made him erupt. The man was like a volcano, hot and salty with enough lava to... I pressed the sheet to my face and tried to hide my giggle.

I didn't care that I felt silly for thinking that. I could take one more minute to revel in the cloud of happiness that had surrounded me last night. Besides, I had the rest of the day, and the rest of my life to deal with everything else.

Honestly, I'd had no idea what I was doing, but it had worked, and I'd felt his possessiveness down to my bones afterward.

“Stop squirming. I'm trying to sleep.”

“The sun's up. We should probably get moving.” Not that I wanted to hurry. Being naked in bed with a man I hardly knew was about the most scandalous thing I could do on top of running away from the King, so why not enjoy it for a few minutes more before the illusion of safety came crashing down on my head?

“And where are you planning to go this morning?”

“I thought we were going to find a seer to help us? We can’t stay in one place long or word will definitely get back to the palace.”

“Let them come. I doubt they are prepared to deal with my dragon.”

I turned to face him, despite the struggle. “You don’t know? How is that possible?”

“Know what?” He opened his eyes and loosened his arms, but didn’t let go completely.

“Magnus is the King’s pet dragon. I mean I’ve never seen him fully shifted like you, but I’ve heard him in the forest and I’ve certainly heard stories told about him in the kingdom. Everyone fears him.”

Isaac grunted. “I believed as much. But I could also tell that he is not my equal.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because the Ferguson dragons are the originals. We were the first. And while many more have been born since, none can rival our abilities.”

“That’s an arrogant assumption. This is a completely different realm than yours. There are dragons here too, and to underestimate the fae would be foolhardy.”

He shrugged and rolled onto his back, placing his arm under his head. “Then I shall deal with him when the time comes. Until then, I don’t plan on borrowing trouble.”

I sat up and rooted around on the floor in search of my undergarments. They weren’t as fresh and clean as the dress I’d washed the night before, but they’d work.

“Wear the clothes I brought you.”

I stopped with my undergarments halfway over my head. “I couldn’t. They are far too nice for what we have to do.”

“That’s ridiculous. I purposely picked that dress because I knew it would be perfect for you. I’d like to see how it looks on you.”

I bristled against his bossiness, and the words to tell him where he could stick his commands sat on the tip of my tongue. But I remembered well how luxurious the fabrics had been in my hands. They would be soft and comfortable to wear.

“Fine.” I made a show of pretending I didn’t want to wear them by making it an ordeal to put them on. But I’d been right. The moment that fabric brushed against my skin, I took a deep breath of relief. I may not need fancy clothes to get by day to day, but a quality material transformed my comfort in a way nothing else did.

By the time I had the lacings halfway done, he was out of bed and dressed for the day as well. I’d missed the entire thing with my back turned to him and I had to admit I’d been looking forward to seeing him naked in the bright light of the day. The muscle that covered his body was impressive and I wanted to study him. He stopped and stared after putting on his boots.

“You look beautiful. I was right about that color.”

I could feel the heat of a blush crawling up my neck, but I ignored it. I wasn’t going to swoon like a simp over a basic nicety. Although it did warm me from the inside out knowing that he enjoyed the way I looked in the dress he’d picked out.

“You never did say where you got this. Wasn’t it expensive?”

He shrugged as if it wasn’t important. “The innkeeper pointed me to a small clothing shop next door. I needed some items for myself and it was easy enough to grab something for you too.”

I stared blankly. He’d done more than simply grab the first dress he saw. This one not only complimented me in color and style, but it had to have come at a high cost. That fact left me with more questions than answers.

“Thank you. I will need more clothes eventually, but for now I need to travel light. I don’t know how long it will be before I can settle somewhere.”

He approached me slowly, his eyes narrowing as he got close. “And where exactly are you planning to go?”

“Another realm eventually. Once I have my magic back, I can seek asylum in another realm.”

“And if you can’t get your magic back?”

“I can’t even consider that. Fae with no magic are—“

“You two need to stop talking and get out of here.”

We both whirled at the voice to find the imp standing in our now open window.

“What are you doing here?” I tried to keep my alarm under control as to not alert the dragon, but his sharp eyes were glaring at the female who wouldn’t seem to go away.

“There’s no time to talk. The King’s guard is here and they are searching the village for you.”

“Oh no.” I whirled back around. “I knew the village was a bad idea. My stepfather has eyes everywhere.” I grabbed my clean dress from where I’d left it hanging and dove for my leather boots. They were the only item of clothing the King had allowed me to keep in his dungeon.

“I thought no one would recognize you? And how do you know she’s not lying? These sprite creatures aren’t exactly trustworthy.”

I glared back at him. “I told you this one is different and for someone who claims we need her help, you should learn to employ a little kindness before she leaves us high and dry again.”

“Too late.”

No. I twisted backwards and sure enough, the open window where she originally stood, is now empty. “This is your fault. You keep chasing her off.”

He growled, the only warning I got that he didn’t care for my tone. “I highly doubt she is that sensitive. She’s probably playing fucking games with us. To see how high we’ll jump based on whatever information she gives.”

A shudder worked down my spine, but I didn’t know if it’s because I thought he was right or wrong. “Well, the hair on the

back of my neck says something is wrong. Can't you use your special hearing to find out anything? I thought shifters could hear for miles."

"We can. When females aren't yapping in our ears nonstop," he grumbled, the look on his face one of pure irritation.

I bit my cheek to keep from lashing out and looked towards the bed. Whatever moment we'd had in the last twelve hours had just ended. This man in front of me was not the same one who spent hours pleasuring me the night before. He couldn't be.

My throat grew dry just thinking about it.

In the cold, light of day, my situation was as precarious as the day before. Maybe more so now that I'd let him expose my vulnerability. What exactly had I been thinking again?

Oh that's right. I wasn't. At least not with my brain.

"They are here, and they are close. We need to leave now."

The need to gloat hit me strong, but there wasn't time to enjoy it. Not with the sour taste of fear and panic settling in. I'd worked too hard to get free from the Aegronid dungeon, and I had no intention of going back.

"Here."

I looked up to see him holding a leather satchel in my direction. "What?" I asked, feeling confused.

"For you to carry your belongings."

I stared at him, truly dumbfounded. None of his behavior made sense. One minute he was behaving like an arrogant asshole and the next he was buying me dresses and bags. I couldn't figure him out if he kept changing how he operated.

With no words, I took the satchel and shoved my clean dress and my dirty undergarments into it to deal with later.

"How far away are they?" I asked as I finished lacing my boots.

"Next building over, so we need to go now." He grabbed his pack and my hand and dragged me over to the door. He

wrenched it open and popped out without double checking first.

“You are insane,” I screech whispered as he dragged me into the hallway. “You’re going to get us captured if you don’t look before you leap.”

He snorted. “My hearing alone is more than adequate to tell me the inn is clear. You are going to have to learn that while my sanity is always in question, my intelligence is not. Now let’s go, Princess, before we lose what little head start your little sprite gave us.”

Once again I’m biting my tongue while running down the stairs, getting the sense that I was destined to repeat these kind of escapes over and over until I have my magic back.

At the bottom of the stairs, I saw a woman sitting in the reception room with a cup of tea in her hand and a sly smile across her face, and I had an idea who gave us up to the Palace.

“Keep going, Princess.”

“But—”

“We don’t have time to deal with spies. Like you said, they are going to be everywhere.”

My heart burned with vengeance, and I wanted to make every traitor burn with regret. The woman lifted her cup to her lips, a clear look of understanding in her eyes a moment before Isaac grabbed my hand and pulled me into the street.

“This way,” he said, turning towards the alley that ran alongside the inn and led away from the main area of the village.

Together, we ran behind the buildings that skirted the entire village, while the King’s guard searched the building. Isaac stopped when he wasn’t sure and pushed me to my limits when he was. By the time we reached the edge of the forest I was a sweaty mess and could barely breathe.

“Where are we going? The edge of the realm is the other direction. It’s our only escape.”

“We aren’t leaving the realm.”

My heart lurched. “Then where exactly are we going?”

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Ian

Scotland

“**I**an! Ian! Wake up.”

I jumped from my bed at the urgent whisper of my mother on the other side of the door. I turned to Cordelia, who'd barely cracked a sleepy eye.

“Go see what she wants before she wakes up the babe. I need more sleep.”

I smiled back at her. The swell of love I had for her ached in my chest. No matter how much time passed, it never dimmed. Not even a little.

“Go back to sleep my little omega. I will see what's going on and take care of it,” I whispered back.

“Good,” she mumbled, turning to her opposite side and practically shoving her backside in my direction. Good Goddess, but those curves of hers tempted me. It was enough to cause a rumble to roll through my chest “Don't even think about it. I need sleep.”

I bit back a laugh and reached for my trousers. We both knew that it would take little encouragement to get her onboard. A little growl here, a purr there and my mate would be panting for me. The intensity of desire I had for her went both ways.

However, I'd seen the shadows under her eyes the night before and agreed that she did need more rest. Besides, the frantic pleas of my mother at our door had to be addressed.

By the time I slipped into the hall, my mother had begun a frantic pace back and forth in front of my door.

"What is it?" I asked, feeling the dragon surge to life as I opened my senses to the rest of the house. He sensed danger and his automatic response was to go into protective mode.

"It's Isaac," she gasped, clutching at the neckline of her gown. "Your twin is in trouble."

I groaned, shaking my head. Not this again.

"Mother." I growled, letting some of the irritation I felt slip into my voice.

"Don't try and use that tone on me. I am still your mother and as such I will not be heeled like some errant dog." Her eyes flashed with anger, and I checked my emotions. She was right. And tired of this conversation or not, I owed it to her to listen.

"Then tell me what has happened this time."

"I had a dream."

"Which we both know doesn't necessarily mean anything. We're all tired from the new babe. It makes us susceptible."

"To what?" she demanded. "Stop being so stubborn about your brother and listen for once."

I crossed my arms and shut my mouth. She was right. The least I could do was listen. Like it or not, she could be right. Her gift of sight wasn't to be easily discounted. Without it, the course of our lives might have been very different.

Of course, taking her dreams seriously might mean that I'd have to take mine that way as well. Isaac had been on my mind more than ever lately, and I hadn't quite figured out what to make of it.

Under my mother's constant barrage, my conviction of Isaac as our father's murderer had begun to soften.

“There is a great deal of dark magic surrounding your brother right now. I don’t know how to explain it, but its deadly.”

“Where? Because he’s been nowhere to be found since I watched him fall from that cliff. Believe me, I looked. For a very long time.”

“And yet, you never found his body.”

I squeezed my eyes closed and huffed out a breath. I hated the lack of closure as much, if not more than she did. “You think I don’t want to know what happened to my own twin?”

Her eyes softened as she stepped towards me. “You’re an honorable man, and a great King. But there is more to this world than what you can see. And if your father died by the hand of his son, I guarantee you there was a reason.”

“What on this earth could possibly justify such a thing?”

She brushed her fingers against my cheek with sadness soaked in her eyes. “A parent will do anything for their children. Sacrifices are made all of the time. Some just happen to be more severe than others.”

I grabbed her wrist and still her hand. “You think he sacrificed his life for his children? That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Doesn’t it?” She narrowed her eyes. “If your children were in pain and suffering, what wouldn’t you do to make them happy again?” Or if your mate was separated from her babies, how far would you go to see them reunited?”

“What you’re suggesting is insane.”

She shrugged. “You said yourself that your father and Isaac were obsessed with finding a way back to me. Even you, my most level-headed child, was on the brink of insanity from the loss of your omega.”

“If he sacrificed his life to break that curse, then he failed. We are still blocked. Nothing even remotely dragon-related gets through.”

“Perhaps the sacrifice was only the beginning, and we are simply waiting for your brother to finish what your father started and return to us.”

“Impossible.”

She shook her head. “Nothing is impossible. You of all people should know that.” With that, she turned and walked away, leaving me unsettled and unsure of what I was supposed to do next.

Had father found some way to break the curse? And what about the visions and dreams that seemed to plague me and mother? There was only one way to find out for sure...

I needed more magic.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Isaac

Watching the emotions morph across her face made the tic in my jaw increase. The arrival of that damned little sprite and her subsequent convenient disappearance pissed me off, and now there was no time to explain to the spoiled Princess why we weren't leaving.

But I could see by her stance she would dig in her heels and refuse to budge unless I gave her something. "The seer should be just ahead after we circle back."

"We're going back? You are insane. And you don't realize how much danger we're in."

My eyebrow lifted and I shot her a dark look. "Hysterics aren't necessary. I'm well aware of our surroundings and whether we are safe or not."

She shook her head. "You aren't factoring in Magnus and his skills. Unless you are so arrogant that you still don't think another dragon can best you."

"I'm getting tired of hearing about Magnus. He's a dragon, not a god. Why do you revere someone who cares so little for life that he blindly carries out vicious orders from his king?"

She blinked at me a moment before she exploded. "What about *your* king? Do you not follow him and his rules? And as for Magnus, you should not underestimate him. Since he is

treated as the heir to the King, he has received the finest training and education. He's not a fool nor is he stupid."

"So he's just a sadistic asshole? Or have you forgotten already what he did to your back?" She winced and I turned away from it. It was past time to put some space between us. When it came to the physical and emotional turmoil we were embroiled in, it would be too easy to spiral out of control again.

"Trust me, at any other hand, the damage would have been far worse. Magnus held back."

My eyes narrowed as I struggled to believe that to be true. I was sick of hearing about another dragon. I had to remember why I was here and what I had to get done.

"Look, when it comes to Magnus, we will deal with it when the time comes. But for now, this seer is all we have to find out anything. This whole mission is going to be dangerous, so you might as well embrace it."

"What if we get captured by the King again? What then?"

I stepped back to her and placed both of my hands on the sides of her face and tilted her head until our gazes met. "Come on, Princess. You know you can do this. And IF we get captured, then we'll find our way free. You did it once before, you can do it again, right?"

She nodded, but I could see and feel the hesitation. But this was going to have to be good enough for now. Instead of more talk, I simply grabbed her hand and led her deeper into the forest, well off the beaten path. She was right in that we were going to have to be clever about this.

I could still hear the guards going door to door in the village, but I'd gotten no sign of Magnus or a dragon. But the knot in my gut told me he was out there, and it wouldn't be long before I'd have to deal with him.

"We have to hurry," I said, practically pulling her into an all-out run to keep up with me. I could feel her glare at my back, but we didn't have time to stop and rest. To her credit there were no more complaints as we traveled.

However, my mind did wander to the night before and how beautiful she looked standing in front of me with her night garment raised above her waist. The image of her rounded curves, and the soft dark hair between her thighs were going to be burned into my memory for all eternity. Probably so I could be tortured by them on a daily basis.

Silence stretched between us, until all I heard were the heavy pants as she sucked up oxygen like she's starved for it. I pushed prickly branches and small bushes out of our way, doing my best to make a path she could follow. But it was still slow going and by the time we made it to the ridge just below the seer's home, I heard the unmistakable flap of wings.

Big ones.

"Fuck."

"What's wrong?" She nearly crashed into my back as I suddenly came to a stop.

"Shhh." I was sharp, but I needed her as quiet as possible. Whatever I could hear, he could, in return. Dragon hearing was keen and capable of picking up some sounds as far as miles away.

"We aren't going to make it," I whispered.

"What do you mean? Is it far? I feel like we've been running in circles."

I smiled at her clever perception. "We have, and no, we are very close. Her home is just over the next ridge."

"Then what's the problem? We should hurry."

I shook my head. "He's already here. Just above us. I'm going to have to distract him."

"And what the heck am I going to do? Hide?"

I smirked. "There would be nowhere here you could hide from us, Princess. I'm already attuned to your heartbeat, and I can hear it crashing against your chest with every beat. He probably can too."

Her hand flew to her chest as if shielding it would make it better. “Then what are we going to do?”

“Be the fierce little beast I know you can be and finish the mission. I’m going to have to confront him and do whatever it takes to distract him while you visit our seer on your own.”

“What about the other guards?”

“They’ve already been through here. I doubt they’ll circle back unless they get warned. Which means I needed to get a move on before it’s too late. You too.” I quickly removed my clothing and shoved it into the pack I kept fastened loosely around my neck.

As the magic began to move over my body, I quickly looked back at her before the dragon took over and said, “Don’t try to run from me, Princess. You won’t like what happens if I have to chase you again.”

Of course, since we were in the deep woods of the forest instead of a nice, convenient clearing, I took out several trees with my transformation and basically announced my location. A rumble in the sky indicated my foe had heard and would soon arrive.

“Go!” The word came out like more of a vicious snarl than an actual word, but she must have gotten the message because she turned on her heel and ran towards the ridge as I’d instructed. As I lifted from the ground, I followed her progress over the downed trees and under the brush until she disappeared from sight.

I didn’t like leaving her, but there was no other choice. I had to keep her from Magnus at any cost. But the question remained as to whether I could trust her not to run. I could find her again, but that would waste more precious time we couldn’t afford. Or maybe I could let her go and find the amulet on my own...

I didn’t get to think about that any longer as Magnus swooped from the trees and headed straight for me. In answer, I gave the dragon more control and let that feral feeling I barely kept suppressed go. Not that I needed anything extra. I was already

out for his blood because I would never forget finding those marks on her back.

I roared through the sky, leaving a trail of fire to color the sky in violent hues of red, orange, yellow and black. At the sight of Magnus' giant green dragon, I flapped my wings harder to meet him. I flew as quickly as I could, my intent to hit him with the full force of my bodyweight, multiplied by my speed.

He looked to be doing the same and we were seconds from a mid-air collision. Whatever happened next, I hoped it gave my little beast enough time to get the information we needed from the seer. When I was done with this asshole, we were going to find that amulet, and get it done today.

As the wind beat against my scales and smoke blew from my nose, I could see his dragon face and the yellow slits of his eyes. This was going to hurt, but it would be worth it. Kitra deserved whatever damage I could rain down on this bastard.

Suddenly a sharp pain penetrated my side and caused me to jerk off my trajectory. What the—?

I turned to find a fucking dart sticking out of my right flank. I whirled to face my opponent before he crashed into me and he too had jerked to a near stop with a tell-tale dart sticking out of his side as well.

I'd been so focused on getting Magnus, I'd forgotten about the fucking sprites. And as before their poison moved swift and true through my blood. I could already feel my movements becoming sluggish and if I didn't get to the ground...

I flapped my wings and turned, diving for the forest and from the corner of my eye, saw Magnus do the same. Neither of us had much time before those evil darts rendered us unable to move. Moments later I landed on the ground much harder than usual. I roared with pain but shifted back to human before it was too late.

The ground around me shook violently as Magnus landed nearby. I grabbed the end of the dart and jerked it free as I ran to find him. "You sons of bitches," I roared, as I fell to my knees.

I only hoped that if I went down, so did he. Otherwise, Kitra was in trouble.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Kitra

Isaac and Magnus were both crazy. I could hear their dragons' roars nearby, and each one made my adrenalin spike as the flood of fear threatened to drown me.

However, instead of waiting to see what happened, I did as Isaac commanded, and I ran toward the ridge. If there was a chance I could get information from the seer, I had to take it. There was nothing more important than getting my magic back.

Unlike Isaac though, I did not underestimate Magnus's power. Even if they were equally matched, Magnus had the advantage of living in this realm his entire life. He knew the nooks and crannies better than the average fae. It gave him an edge Isaac clearly didn't understand.

I only hoped that he didn't pay dearly for that lack of knowledge.

As I ran deeper into the forest, the light dimmed and the trees seemed to grow into shadowy figures trying to block my path. Thankful that I'd had the mind to put my own worn in boots back on, I ran over fallen stumps and under anything that blocked my way. However, I had to focus on where I put each foot instead of the two dragons in the sky.

One wrong step and I might not make it out of this forest. Those guards might have been on the other side of the village

when we'd left the inn, but they would hear the dragons and it would draw them in this direction. And I didn't exactly run quietly. Twigs cracked and snapped with every step, and I was breathing so hard I could hear nothing over my own roaring heartbeat rushing in my ears.

I hesitated, wondering if I should hide instead. *Go*. It was almost as if I could hear Isaac in my head reminding me of my purpose and he would be right. The ridge was getting closer, and I didn't have far to go. I should see something just over the next rise.

Pushing myself harder, I climbed up the steep embankment, slipping just before I reached the top. Using my fingers to give me purchase in the dirt and brush, I righted myself and kept going. My chest ached from the exertion, and sweat dripped into my eyes, but I refused to stop again.

I couldn't risk any extra time resting or hiding.

Finally, after what felt like hours but was probably more like fifteen minutes, I broke free from the depths of the forest and into a clearing with a modest house sitting in the middle. It actually looked more like a hut, and something that might have sat here for a hundred years or more.

Fitting, I thought.

Bending over to catch my breath, I grasped my knees and hauled in air into my aching lungs. I'd had to run for my life entirely too much lately. I couldn't have imagined this as my life. Not even in my wildest dreams.

As I stood, straightening my spine, my blood burned with the need for retribution. King or not, he had no right to treat me like this. And with my magic, he wouldn't have dared.

I tromped through the high weeds and brush that surrounded the seer's home and finally noticed that I didn't hear any dragon roars.

I turned back with my eyes to the sky and squinted against the sun. Out here in the open was a far cry from the depths of the forest. And despite the density of the trees that surrounded this

clearing, I couldn't shake the sense of vulnerability, being out in the open like this.

And where the hell were the dragons? My stomach pitched at the thought of something happening to Isaac. However, he had urged me to do this, and I felt compelled to comply. I had to trust that Isaac would find his way out of these woods safely on his own.

I gathered my skirt and turned towards my destination. I had a bad feeling that there was no time to waste. I rapped on the thick wooden door as solidly as I could and then pushed my hair out of my face in an attempt to put myself back together.

There had been no time to braid my hair before we'd gotten our warning from the imp, and I could only imagine what the wild curls looked like after my frantic race through the forest.

The door cracked open and I got a partial view of a young woman's face. I couldn't tell for sure, but I would guess she was not much older than I was. If at all.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I've come to talk to the seer."

"You've come to the wrong place," she said, closing the door. Before she could slam the door in my face, I shoved my booted foot between the door and wall preventing her from shutting me out.

"Please hear me out. I don't have much time so I can make this quick."

The young woman glared at me with a skeptical expression. "You've wasted your time coming here. I don't help fae."

I scrunched up my face in complete confusion. "You aren't fae? How is that—uhh—I mean—"

"Not everything is as it seems, child." She narrowed her eyes further, but she'd eased up on the door and I could now see more of her and her home.

I laughed. "I'm not a child. Although if I could go back in time to my childhood, I would. Life was certainly less complicated then. Ever since my mother died, life has gone to hell and

back, and I just need the chaos to stop. But first, I need my freedom before my stepfather forces me to do something I can't come back from."

Her eyes widened and her face softened. I hadn't meant to go on a tirade about my life story, but between stress and the adrenalin still coursing through my veins, I'd lost my sense of balance. Months in a ten by ten room with a dirt floor and the smell of fae feces and countless other things I refused to identify, had messed with my head and left me with the inability to cope the same way about anything as before. It also made trust a severe issue.

"I can give you five minutes," she said, backing away from the door and opening it wide enough for me to enter. "But not a minute more, is that clear? And don't get your hopes up. Whatever it is you hope to find out from me probably won't happen."

I stepped inside and looked around. While the outside of the house looked like a centuries old hovel, the inside told a completely different story. It was dark in here, but the walls were covered in colorful tapestries that brought the room to life.

Dark cabinetry lined the walls and all of the furniture looked surprisingly plush and comfortable. The space had a wholly feminine vibe, but with the paintings on the wall of different locations within the realm, it spoke of adventure and freedom.

"You live here alone?" I asked, still exploring the space with awe.

"Don't worry about me, child. You have bigger issues to be concerned with."

"What does that mean?" I asked, turning back to face the girl. "And why are you calling me a child when you look even younger than me."

"As I said before, looks can be deceiving and you shouldn't trust anything simply based on what you can observe with your eyes."

"But what about—"

“Enough,” she interrupted. “Save the questions for another time and state your business. You don’t have much time.”

The foreboding in her voice set the hairs on my neck on end. There was definitely something happening that she wasn’t telling me. But maybe she was right. She’d said only five minutes...

“My magic has been bound by a dark fae. I need to break the binding.” She was nodding her head as if she knew this information already.

“I can sense the binding threads inside you.” She grabbed my hand and closed her eyes. “They are powerful. Why would someone do this to you?”

“It doesn’t matter why. I just need it undone.”

She shook her head. “I do not have the kind of power that could come close to helping you. Only the dark fae who cast this magic can break it. Go back to him.”

“I cannot. So I must seek another way.”

She studied me without saying anything more and I couldn’t decide whether she simply sympathized with my dilemma or if she was actually trying to come up with something that could help. Finally, after several long minutes and the silence stretched taut, she turned away and crossed the room.

“There is no other way.”

“You and I both know there is.”

She froze mid-step but did not turn back. I could see the sudden tension in her stiffened posture and knew I’d hit on the truth. I couldn’t do much without my magic, but I still had instincts and right now they were telling me she knew exactly what I’d meant.

“You seek the Vostuzan amulet.”

“You’re familiar with it?” I eyed her closely as she seemed to think about my question before she answered me.

“Familiar is too strong of a word, but I have heard of the legend of it.”

“Legend?” I didn’t like the sound of that. I wasn’t interested in legends. I needed facts.

“I’ve heard of the amulet since I was a small girl. But no one I know of has ever laid their eyes or hands on it.”

“Where is it?”

“My guess would be as good as yours. Although IF it exists, I believe it may be in this kingdom and somewhere in the dark forest. You aren’t the only one looking for it, you know.”

I nodded. “I know. There’s a dragon shifter from the human realm who’s traveled here searching for it. He’s been stuck to my side like glue.”

“He’s not the only one either. Word in the village is that the King and his dragon are searching for it as well. There’s a lot of interest in an amulet that may not be as powerful as you think.”

“What do you mean?” I was counting on using it to release my bindings. Without it I had no other way...

“It’s said that the amulet only has enough power for one time use. Which is one of the reasons it’s been hidden away. The wizard that created it over a century ago feared that our realm would one day be invaded by outsiders. He’d grown obsessed with the notion, and thus, before he died he channeled every ounce of his power into a single artifact. But the legend says that once it is used, the last of his power is gone forever. So it must be used wisely and thus kept hidden.”

“Someone must know where it is. What’s the point of having something that powerful if it can never be found?”

“It is also said that the one who finds it is the one who needs it the most.”

“I hate stupid riddles. If I didn’t make it clear enough, I don’t have time to stand around solving puzzles.”

The girl shrugged. “I can only tell you what I know. Your lack of patience is a flaw of the fae and is not my problem.”

Her biting words scraped down my spine as I frowned. It was clear she’d given all the help she intended to, despite it not

being much.

“What other reason has it been hidden? You said there was more than one reason.”

Her eyes shuttered for a moment. When she opened them, their previous blue hue had turned black. Startled, I took a step back. I wasn't supposed to show fear, but she'd certainly caught me off guard.

“The amulet is more dangerous than you can imagine. It can be used with light or dark magic. And used in the wrong way it could throw the balance too far one way or the other. And while someone with good intentions might think eradicating the dark would be a good thing, you can't have light without dark or dark without light. The amulet in the wrong hands could break the magic of this realm forever.”

Kitra. Run.

I heard the startled words in my head, causing me to stumble backwards. I quickly looked around to see if someone else had entered the room, and saw no one.

And when I turned back, she was gone too. The seer had disappeared into thin air. What the hell was happening? I could still hear those two words scratching at the inside of my head, a dire warning that I had to heed. Panic rose swift and hard.

But who?

I searched frantically around the room for the seer and her guidance, but she truly had disappeared. And whoever had sent the warning had infused it with enough power I was going to pass out if I didn't heed it.

“Okay. Okay,” I whispered aloud as I stumbled towards the front door. I wrenched it open and my stomach pitched.

“Hello, Darling.”

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Kitra

No! It couldn't be.

Not after everything I'd done and been through to get free. "How?" I mumbled.

"Aren't you going to greet your King properly?" he asked from beneath the black hooded cloak that did little to hide his identity. But it did make him look like the monster I knew him to be.

My heart was beating so hard, it felt like it was going to come right out of my chest. "Will it make a difference if I do?" I finally ask, despite the constriction of air in my lungs. It was damned hard to breathe when your worst nightmare was standing in front of you, threatening you, with merely a scathing look.

And since he was blocking the only exit I saw, there was nowhere for me to escape or run to.

"Treating your King with respect instead of disdain always gives you a chance." He lowered his hood and stepped into the seer's home. The seer who had conveniently disappeared at his exact arrival. She'd betrayed me. I didn't know how or when, but every instinct I possessed screamed with it.

"A chance at freedom?"

A dark laugh erupted from him. "For you? No. But your future still depends on my kindness and we can either do this the

hard way or the easy way.”

I doubted there was anything easy about his intentions for me. “If by easy you mean I willingly let you fuck me until I’m pregnant with an heir, the answer is still no.”

His expression darkened and I realized my mistake immediately. In this position I was a caged animal that he could do with what he pleased. Antagonizing him wouldn’t change the outcome, but it could make the process worse.

“You should watch that ugly little mouth of yours, Kitra, before I am forced to do something about it.”

A blast of fear shot down my spine and I swore I felt the pain at my back all over again.

“And you should take a woman to your bed who doesn’t hate your guts.”

A loud crack sounded through the room and my head was thrown to the side before I even realized what happened. But the immediate bloom of pain to the entire left side of my face registered just fine and tears filled my eyes as I clutched my cheek.

“Why would I care about your feelings towards me? Or whether you come to my bed willingly? I’m done waiting for you to behave with respect and proper decorum. If you want to be treated like a lowly-born daughter of a whore, then that is what I shall do.”

“My mother was not a whore. How dare you speak of her like that!” I lunged forward to strike back at him, and one of the guards behind him that I’d failed to notice moved in a blur, blocking me from the King and swatting away my hands as if they were nothing more than tiny gnats.

“That is the privilege of being the King. I can say and do anything I please and there is no one to stop me.” The sick, twisted arrogant smile on his face made me burn with hatred. I’d thought what he’d done before had broken the old me, but I was wrong.

It was this moment, right here. When he’d insulted my mother and made it clear that he’d never cared for anyone other than

himself. And his precious desire for a true heir, because it was clear that Magnus was never going to be good enough.

“I’m not a virgin anymore,” I blurted out the lie so automatically and with such vehemence, I almost believed it myself.

If I thought he looked like a monster before, it was nothing compared to the twist of his expression into the ugly, hate filled man who truly would stop at nothing, including taking what he wanted from me and then discarding me when it was done.

“Well, then I guess we will have to find something else for you to do until you bleed again. Because you won’t be passing off some whore spawn as mine. And then when we are certain you are without child,” he stepped closer and wrapped his hand around my neck and squeezed until my air was cut off. “I will fuck you like a true king should.”

I grabbed at his hands and tried to pry them from my throat. As my lungs strained for air, despair seized me and my thoughts went wild with visions of my death here in this strange house in a village of strangers who couldn’t care less what happened to me.

Dots filled my vision and I was about to pass out. By the time I woke again, if I did, I would be right back where I started. In a filthy cell inside the King’s castle, destined to die.

“Get her out of here.” My stepfather abruptly released my neck and I was too disoriented and exhausted to catch myself before I crumpled to the ground.

“It’s a good thing her magic is still bound,” someone said from a distance, but I didn’t have the energy to investigate. Nor did I fight when I was lifted roughly from the ground.

“I’m hardly worried about her capabilities. The wizard who wielded that dark magic assured me that nothing or no one could unbind it except for him. And now that he’s dead...”

Several men chuckled as I tried to piece together the meaning of his words through my oxygen deprived mind. Rough hands jostled me up and carried me from the seer’s home as I

dangled between them. I attempted to pull away, but the hands holding me prisoner were as strong as the shackles that awaited me.

As if my thoughts conjured them, the clang of chains rubbing together sounded in my ears and I felt the cool metal wrap around both of my wrists.

“That will keep her under control.” The King chuckled as he raised the cloak over his head and we emerged into the blazing rays of the sun.

At the end of the path in front of the seer’s home, the King’s carriage awaited, as well as a small army of his guardsman on horseback.

They’d easily set a trap for me, somehow knowing I would be at this place at this time. I was jerked forward, and it pulled me off balance. I clumsily stepped on the edge of my dress at the same time I twisted in the opposite direction, causing my dress to rip and expose my breasts.

The guards roughly pulled me back to my feet. “Stand and walk or this is going to get a whole lot worse.”

Since I had no desire to figure out what could be worse than my current predicament, I straightened my body and moved forward.

We didn’t get ten steps and an anger filled roar sounded from above. We all stopped and stared at the black as night dragon streaking towards us with a plume of dark smoke trailing behind him.

Isaac.

I nearly sagged in relief.

“I thought BOTH of the dragons were neutralized?” The king yelled as he rushed for the cover of trees. He could easily wield his magic against Isaac, but if he wasn’t quick enough then he’d be left out in the open as a target for Isaac’s anger.

“They were, your grace. I don’t know how this one escaped the poison.”

Poison? My face twisted towards the guard as he tried to drag me away. With one last burst of energy I dug in my heels and twisted in their arms in an attempt to get free. They held fast, but at the same time the dragon let loose with a burst of fire that didn't quite reach us, but we all felt the blistering heat from it.

I gasped from the sudden bite of pain as flames erupted around us. One guard caught fire and dropped my arm and the other jerked too hard and forced me to the ground before letting go of my chains. My crash to the ground forced the air out of my lungs, but I had the foresight to roll away from the guard.

He looked at me with certain fear in his eyes and then to the sky with his hands over his head as if that would protect him.

One second the guard stood mere feet from me and the next he was engulfed in flames. A rush of heat billowed over me as the air from Isaac's frantically beating wings caused the entire area to catch fire. Smoke filled my vision and I could barely make out...

My eyes widened as giant claws descended just above me. I didn't grasp what was happening until they wrapped around me and I was lifted into the air.

"What are you doing?" I screamed, but there was no way my tiny voice was heard over the roar of flames, the wind, and all of the king's men shouting in our direction.

As we raised into the sky, I was more frightened than I'd ever been in my life. Maybe Isaac had complete control and knew exactly what he was doing, but all I could see is my death as I plunged back to the earth in a free fall.

I tried to reach for something to hold onto, but the shackles on my arms and the chains holding them together still wrapped awkwardly around my body. All I could do was pray.

I squeezed my eyes closed as the wind raced over me.

It's okay, Kitra. He promised he won't drop you.

I heard the voice in my head again, and this time I recognized it. The imp demon, she was in my head somehow. I opened my

eyes and as much as I wanted to look for her, I was afraid to move a muscle.

I could however, see the movement of his wings as he flapped them up and down and the bottom of his body. It looked different this close than it did when we were on the ground. I barely had time to examine his under belly when he took a sharp turn and dove toward the ground.

I screamed, but the sound was lost in the wind. That whole death plunging to the ground thing suddenly felt all too real as we plummeted into a death spiral.

I had expected one day I would reunite with my mother, I just didn't think it would be this soon or that I would do so still a virgin...

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

Isaac

I landed as gently as I could, but it was still rough. The rage of seeing her shackled and thrown to the ground was more than I or the dragon could bear, and we'd left what little sanity we had behind.

I did, however, manage to get my claws free from her without creating any more damage. Before my dragon could force me to fly off on a rampage and kill every fae in sight, I called my magic forth and forced my shift back to human.

Rushing back to her side, I broke the cuffs binding her and freed her from the chains that wrapped around her body. But it was the sight of her torn dress and her exposed breasts that truly threatened my sanity.

"I'm going to kill them."

"You'll have to get in line behind me," she heaved, trying to sit up.

"Don't get up. You're hurt and disoriented. Let me help before you—"

"I don't need help. I'm fine. She shot to a standing position and for a second I thought she would actually be fine, until her legs wobbled and she bent over and threw up.

I grabbed her hair and moved it out of the way so she could do what she needed without worry. But that was a huge mistake because it was then I saw the bruises around her neck. Bruises

that looked like marks left by fingers. Fingers I was going to break one at a time while he howled in pain and begged for me to stop.

I don't have to ask who did this to her. I saw his black cloaked figure run into the dark forest and felt his magic surge against the shield the sprite held against him. A few seconds more and we both might have died.

"I'm fine now," she whispered, taking a few steps away from me, putting some space between us.

"You're not fine. But you will be." I stalked towards her, trying to stay calm enough to help her. "Let me heal you."

"No," she said. "Please don't touch me right now. I need a minute."

I bristled against her rejection, trying not to take it personally. "I can't look at you in pain," I admitted.

"Then don't look at me. I can't handle anyone else touching me right now."

"For fuck's sake. I'm not going to hurt you. I just rescued you."

"And I'm grateful for that. But I still need a fucking minute," she yelled as she took several steps away from me.

My gut twisted. If I was rational I might understand the space she needed, but I wasn't and I wouldn't be as long as I had to look at the marks around her neck and the bruise already forming on her face.

"I have to do something. I can't just let this go."

"We aren't going to let anything go. But we have to be smart about going after the King. He has a lot of support in his kingdom and the others."

"How did he find you?"

"The seer. She must have seen I would come to her, and used it to gain some favor from her King."

"Then I'll kill her." My dragon perked up and stretched, ready for another hunt.

“You can’t go around killing everyone in the kingdom. He is their King and they know of no reason to not follow him. Besides, she couldn’t help us anyways. She doesn’t know where the amulet is. Although she did profess to know of it, and that it must be close.”

I snorted. “That’s assuming we can trust anything she said. She probably lied for her King too.”

My Princess shook her head. “I don’t think so. When I first arrived she wouldn’t even talk to me. But when I told her some of my story, something changed in her. She allowed me in and I think told me what little she truly knew.”

I stomped my feet as I paced back and forth without getting any closer to her. I wasn’t sure I could put my faith in someone who blindly followed her King and held at least some of the responsibility for what had happened and what would have happened if I’d not made it there.

“So we are no closer to finding the amulet.” It wasn’t really a question and I wasn’t expecting an answer.

“I can help you with that.” I whirled around to find the sprite had come up behind us without any sound or scent.

“I really don’t like that you can sneak up on me.” I glared at her, but with a lot less menace than I’d felt for her before.

“That’s your problem, dragon, not mine.” She stomped her tiny body towards Kitra and I waited for her to get pushed away too. “Ungrateful,” she mumbled as she passed by me.

My shoulders sagged. “Thank you for helping me.” Both she and Kitra stared at me, shock on both their faces. “Don’t look at me like that. I am thankful. But those fucking poison darts are evil. Your fellow sprites are going to bring down my wrath if they come near me again.”

“You got shot? Are you okay?” My little beast took a few steps in my direction before she stopped herself, a small reminder that there was still something between us. “And Magnus?”

I growled and then nodded. “Him too. He’s probably still out there in the forest. Hopefully getting his ass eaten by all the

wild creatures in this realm.”

The sprite shook her head. “The king’s guard gathered him and took him away.”

“That’s convenient. Almost as if they’d planned this all along.”

“You think the Imps are working with the King?” Kitra asked, her expression more shocked than surprised.

“It’s incredibly coincidental and I don’t believe in coincidences. I’m sure if the sprite hadn’t come along when she did, I’d be in a pit somewhere by now.”

“Ensley. And I’m not a sprite.”

Kitra gasped at the female. “That’s your real name? I can’t believe you said it.”

The little sprite shrugged, but I remembered how Kitra had mentioned that there was power in knowing a fae’s true name.

“I like sprite better.”

The little creature glared at me when I said it and I made a mental note to continue calling her that every chance I got. She hissed at me, but without any true menace. It was almost enough to make me laugh.

“We underestimated the lengths they would go to get to me, and now we know they’re after the amulet too. The seer told me.”

Another growl rumbled through my chest. “I assumed the old bastard had lied to me about having it, but knowing it takes that to an entirely different level.”

“So what do we do to be the ones to find it first?” We both turned back to the sprite and waited for an answer.

She paced a few steps away and then back again, taking forever to answer the question. By the time she looked up we were both waiting with bated breath.

“The answers lie beyond the falls.”

Kitra shook her head in denial. “But beyond the falls is outside of the kingdom. The seer seemed certain the amulet was here

and close.”

The sprite heaved an exasperated sigh. “You aren’t listening. I didn’t say the amulet was beyond the falls. The answers are. It’s definitely not the same thing.”

“I hate riddles,” Kitra moaned. “Why can’t someone just spell it out with words like: find the map to the amulet on the back of the skull rock at the back of the falls?”

“Is that where it is?” A frisson of worry pierced through me. Was she holding out information she’d gotten from the seer?

She laughed. “No. I just made that up. I just want this to be easy.”

“If it were easy, then there would be no amulet to find.” As usual the sprite’s words were solemn and reasonable, and did nothing to make anyone feel better.

“Can I heal you now?” I asked. I was still picking up on her vibrations of pain and it was wearing on my patience.

“No, Isaac. I do not want to be healed. I want to feel every ache and pain until it’s ingrained in my mind that my stepfather, the King, did this to me. I need to be angry and feeling like this makes me angry.”

“It makes me angry too, and an angry dragon is a dangerous thing.”

“Well, then you’re just going to have to figure what else you can do with that anger. Control it. You’re not a child.”

Her insults didn’t hurt me, but the frustration behind them did. It crawled underneath my skin as a constant reminder of who and what she was.

A princess.

A little beast.

A dragon’s mate.

An omega...

And the more I thought about it the more I went out of my mind.

I definitely needed to kill something.

I turned away and let the dragon come forward on a roar. My body ripped apart and reformed into the dragon in the face of my rage. If I couldn't help her, then I would hunt down those who'd done this.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Kitra

“**Y**ou aren’t making this easy on him,” Ensley said as she slowly approached me after we both watched Isaac fly off in an angry snit.

“It’s not my job to make anything easy for him.” Besides, I had enough to worry about. I needed my magic back before I ended up dead without it, but apparently everyone in this cursed kingdom wanted the amulet, and it was going to be a fight to find it first and then use it before anyone else.

The seer’s warning sounded from the back of my mind, reminding me that the amulet was an important artifact to the fae realm. I pushed that thought as far down as I could get it. First, we had to find it.

“Isn’t it your job, though?” she asked.

I turned to her sharply. “What is that supposed to mean? And don’t give me another stupid riddle. My head already aches from everything that has happened today.”

She approached me quietly and laid her hand on my head. “I won’t take away the marks made by the King, but I can take away the headache and nausea. It’s one thing to carry a reminder its another to suffer needlessly.”

I started to tell her no, but changed my mind and gave in. I’d probably been too harsh with Isaac about it too. “How do you know I’m nauseous?”

“The color of your skin. It’s a little grey. And just watching him swoop down with you lying helplessly in his claws made my stomach turn a time or two as well.”

There was something about the way she said those words that made me turn and lay my hand over hers. “Why are you so invested in what happens to me? Do you know me?”

A tight smile crossed her face. “Yes and no. I know you as well as one does from watching you from afar.”

The tension in my head eased from her healing magic and I sighed with relief. “Thank you for that. I didn’t realize how bad it was until it was gone. And how long have you been watching me?”

The sprite moved away and took a seat on one of the logs that lined the clearing we currently occupied. Since she chose a shaded spot, I opted to follow her and took a nearby seat.

Of course, now that some of the pain and the nausea were gone, my stomach rumbled. There’d been no time to grab any food on our way out of the village and now that more than half the day had passed, hunger was setting in.

“You’re hungry.” She got up and started to walk away. “I’ll bring you something.”

“I’d rather you talk to me than worry about food. I can wait.”

“Nonsense. It’s berry season, and the forest is ripe with them. I can smell them from here so they won’t take long to gather.”

Even with the little experience I’d had with Ensley thus far, I knew I wouldn’t deter her from her current course. She did what she wanted on her own timeline and nothing else. Since I had some privacy maybe now would be a good time to change.

The pretty red dress that Isaac had given me was looking a little worse for wear. And I desperately wanted to take off my shoes and wriggle my toes in the sunshine. Not to mention do something with the hair billowing around my head. Ugh.

Fortunately, the satchel I’d placed across my back this morning had stayed intact and the dress I’d washed the night

before was at my disposal.

I unlaced my boots and removed them, quickly followed by the sweaty stockings. Maybe I could find a nearby stream and see what I could do.

I stood to take off my dress when the imp reappeared in the clearing with a basket of ripe red berries. My mouth watered at the sight of them and I lost interest in the dress.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I need to change. It turns out running for your life is hard work and hard on your clothes.”

She placed the berries in my hands and frowned. “You know I can help you with that too.”

“I don’t want to keep asking for help. I may have to learn to live without magic and I guess, there’s no time like the present to get started.”

“Then you’ll worry about that when the time comes. That dress is too pretty to let it stay like that.”

I looked down at myself as I popped several berries in my mouth. “It is a lovely color. I like it a lot.”

“Then we’ll fix it and tomorrow you can worry about what to do without magic, okay?”

I nodded, unsure of how I was supposed to feel right now. Imps were not known for kindness, and this one seemed to run hot and cold depending on the circumstances. She also seemed to avoid my questions.

“I appreciate your help, but I’d like to hear more about how you’ve come to take an interest in my situation. Why would you want to help me find this amulet?”

As usual, she didn’t answer right away. Instead she placed her hand on my dress and the soft glow of her magic emerged from her and the dirt, grime and blood disappeared from the dress. She then passed her hands from my neck to my ankles and the tears mended and by the time she finished it looked good as new.

“There. All better.”

I smiled at her. “Thank you. Now will you tell me more about you?” If she wouldn’t answer my questions directly, then hopefully I could get some details in a roundabout way.

“I’m not sure you’d find me all that interesting. We imps are a fairly simple race. Other than the extreme protectiveness we have for our way of life, which other fae see as troublemaking. Our defensive methods are a little unorthodox but they tend to work.

“Like poison darts to dragons?” I asked, my brow raised.

She laughed. “Yes! Dragons are extremely dangerous to all of us but especially to an imp. So we do whatever we can to keep them away from us. We don’t want them finding us from the skies. I understand the world looks very differently from up there and it makes it a lot easier to find something that may be missing.”

“Hmm. Like an amulet?”

“Maybe.” The hesitance in her voice told me she knew more than she was saying.

I gave her a few minutes to think while I finished off the berries. But as I began braiding my hair into its usual style, I decided it was time to push for answers.

“What do you know about the amulet?” I watched her carefully as she contemplated her words before she spoke.

“Probably about as much as you do. It’s magical and powerful and has lots of applications.”

I shifted my eyes and quirked my lips. That was about the worst non answer answer I’d ever heard. “And?” I was going to draw out some answers from her if it killed me. I’d already failed getting much from the seer and I wasn’t going to fail again.

“And why are you asking me so many questions?”

I finished off the braid and tied it off with a strip of leather from my satchel. I then turned and faced her down. Since I

towered over her by at least three feet, it felt like overkill, but I was getting tired of the runaround from everyone.

“Look. You’ve been following me for days. And while I’m grateful for the help you’ve given, I think it’s time you were straight with me. I’m not putting my faith in anyone else who can’t be honest with me.”

She sighed, her shoulders sagging in defeat. “You are more and more like her every day.”

“What? Who?”

A small smile ghosted across her lips. “Your mother, dear. She’s the reason we’re all here.”

I reared back, stumbling until I landed on my bottom in the grass. “Fuck!”

The little demon shook her head. “I doubt your mother would approve of that language, and I have to admit I don’t love it either.”

I glared at her, not feeling an ounce of guilt for my choice of words. “How does my mother have anything to do with this? She’s dead. The sickness took her almost a year ago.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I couldn’t approach you until you were off the castle grounds. They are warded against Imps.”

Well, that explained why I never saw them around unless I ventured farther than I was supposed to ever go. I pulled my knees in to my chest and wrapped my arms around my legs. Even talking about my mother was hard, but the idea that Ensley knew her seemed to make it that much harder.

“You knew her?” I finally voiced the question I couldn’t get out of my head.

She came and took a seat on the ground next to me, but kept several inches between us. A buffer I definitely needed at the moment. The last thing I could tolerate right now would be anyone’s touch.

“Aye, I did,” she said, letting some of the old fae accent come forth in her voice. It was a lyrical tone that not many used

anymore. “She was a bright and beautiful soul. Also, one of the most powerful fae I’ve ever encountered.”

My eyes widened. “My mother?”

“Yes,” she said on a laugh. “Although she did her best to downplay her abilities. Her husband, the King, was quite jealous over it. But he tolerated it because he hoped she’d bear him a powerful son.”

I sat stunned by these revelations. I’d known how resentful the King was that my mother had never bore him a son, but I didn’t know that my mother possessed unusual power.

“How do you know all this? I don’t remember ever seeing you with her.”

“Your mother was very discreet. She couldn’t let the King know that she was making arrangements for her daughter’s safekeeping after her death. She stopped trusting him a long time ago.”

Tears welled in my eyes as the repercussions of that set in. If she risked going against her King to work with the Imps then he must have put her through her own personal hell.

I stood to my feet and paced into the trees. “What did he do to her?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that.”

I whirled on the woman, the rage no longer hidden inside me. “Why not? I deserve to know. That man has treated me no better than an animal since her death, and if he gets his way I will become his personal breeder.”

Her face dropped and she stared at her feet. “If I could tell you I would. Alas, your mother did not share her personal pain with me. I could only feel the depths of it in her soul where it burned.”

I could feel the wet tears tracking down my face, but as I swiped them away I could hardly believe they were there. Where were they when I needed them the most? The day my mother died. Or the day she was buried in the ground in a circus of an affair. Or even the first night I spent alone in a

dungeon cell after being beaten by the King's guard for the first time?

“What else can you tell me about—?”

I didn't get to finish because a large dragon appeared out of nowhere, crashed to the ground, and shook the earth beneath us.

The imp screamed and ran as I turned to face Isaac as he shifted back to man, a grim expression across his face, his body glistening with sweat amidst dirt and what looked like blood streaked across his muscles.

“What did I miss?” he asked.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Isaac

“That doesn’t even make sense.” Listening to Kitra recount what the sprite had told her while I dressed had pushed every hot button I had. And since they’d already been pushed once today, my sanity felt stretched thinner than ever. “If your mother made some kind of deal with the Imps then why are they working with the King?”

She shrugged. “You’d have to ask Ensley. If you’d stop scaring her off with your angry dragon breath maybe she would answer more of our questions.”

A sound resembling a chuckle escaped me before I could stop it. While this was no time for laughing, Kitra had managed to pull one from me anyways. “She should grow a spine. It’s not as if I’ve tried all that hard to really hurt her.”

“You threw her in a fire. Have you already forgotten?”

I rolled my eyes. “One she could easily get out of. And besides, she was annoying me and thus had it coming.”

“What the hell is wrong with you? Why are you acting like such a brute all of a sudden? Am I finally seeing the real you?”

Her question stung, because yes, sometimes I copped an attitude, and said things I sometimes regretted. And I wasn’t always one hundred percent rational. But generally only when provoked. In the past I had the luxury of disappearing for a few days to pull my head together, but here, there was no such

thing. Time seemed to be of the essence and finding the amulet couldn't wait.

"There's nothing sudden about my behavior. You just haven't been paying enough attention. You've been seeing me through mating heat colored glasses, and it's warped your perception."

She opened her mouth to deny it, but we both knew it would be a lie. After last night, her predicament and mine were clear. And chasing down a few King's guards who enjoyed terrorizing people so I could burn them to a pile of ash and bones had done nothing to ease the burn of rage inside me.

Or the need to claim her. It was starting to consume me.

"I get that there's something unexplainable pulling us together, but I'm not ready to concede to the idea of mating heat or anything else you've suggested."

I shrugged, refusing to argue with her over this. Time would tell and she would see for herself.

"We should get going before the King's guard pulls themselves back together and make another run at us. There is no telling what his pet dragon will do when he recovers from the poison."

"Are we going to follow Ensley? Do you even trust her?"

I shrugged again. "Not really, but what choice do I have? Besides, we'll know soon enough. If we fly when it gets dark, we can be there in no time. Unless you prefer walking the entire way."

I watched the shudder work down her body, and while I wasn't sure if it came from the idea of walking or flying with me again, I got the impression she would still do whatever I asked. Not because I'd compelled her, but because her stubborn willfulness would prevent her from backing down from a challenge.

"What will we do until then?" she asked.

"That's a loaded question, my little beast. I do have some ideas though, if you'd like to hear them." I stepped forward and

cupped her chin and lifted it until our gazes met. “But first, how are you feeling?”

Her eyes darkened before my eyes and her heart rate accelerated, making it impossible for me to resist pressing my hand to her chest above her heart so that I could feel it beat under my finger tips as it pounded in my ears.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I was falling into the depths of her gaze and the emotions being shared there. It didn't take words for me to know how confused, aroused, annoyed, and hurt she was.

It was all right there for me to see.

“I'm fine,” she whispered on a shaky breath, making me smile.

I pressed my face closer to hers until our lips were only an inch apart. Her panting breaths washed over me, going straight to my cock. At this point I didn't know why I continued to delay the inevitable. I was an Alpha and she an omega.

There was no way I would give her up to another. Omegas were too special and rare. Although I still had trouble wrapping my head around a fae omega and what that meant logistically. It wouldn't be long before I would have to return home and leave her behind.

But I also wasn't going to take her like this. Not the first time. That would be a memory to build a lifetime on. And for what felt like the first time in my life, or at least a very long time, I kind of cared about someone other than myself.

Whether it was her omega status influencing me or the fact she was a fierce woman prepared to endure whatever life threw at her just to survive, she'd gotten under my skin a lot faster than should have been possible.

“Little beast,” I whispered back in a barely audible tone infused with my alpha essence that brushed across her face.

She closed her eyes and her body shifted in my direction. Yeah, she was fine all right. And unfortunately, I was the man who would likely destroy her when I took the amulet she so desperately wanted and returned to my realm.

“So are we going or what?”

I dropped my forehead against hers at the sound of the damned sprite’s voice behind us. “You have the worst timing in the history of timing in all the realms.”

Kitra giggled, and I swallowed down the sound like the greedy fucker I was. Holy hell. That sound grabbed me by the balls and squeezed my cock so hard I half expected to spill my cum right where I stood. I was going to have to make it a mission to hear that sound again before I left. Particularly when I could act on it.

Groaning, I stepped away from her and released her face. The pang of her disappointment as pungent as my own loss searing through my chest.

“I’m not taking the chance in the air with passengers until nightfall,” I announced.

When I looked at the little Sprite she had her face scrunched in disgust. “There is no way you are taking me anywhere near that sky on your weird dragon body. But I do agree you shouldn’t attempt it right now. The Imps working for the King are still out here somewhere and they are sneaky little creatures.”

“They’re not the only ones,” I said under my breath.

That got me a glare from both Kitra and the Sprite. I shook my head, amazed that they expected anything else.

“Enough with the insults,” Kitra harsh whispered in my direction. “We need her help and if that means that you have to be nice to her for us to get it, then you *need* to be nice!”

“Fine,” I grumbled. “But if her information doesn’t pan out, then I get to eat her.”

The sprite squeaked and Kitra closed her eyes and shook her head before turning to the small woman. “Don’t worry, he’s not going to eat you. He’s just trying to get a rise out of you. However, please don’t toy with us over this amulet business. You’ve brought my mother into this, and that means something. But anyone who tries to use her against me *will* suffer the consequences.”

The pain in my little beast's voice pulled at my ice-cold heart. And the conviction in her words may have created a tiny fissure in that ice.

In return, the sprite shook her head and walked away.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"You can't fly and we can't stand here until dark and take the chance of getting caught," she threw over her shoulder. "So we might as well keep moving in the direction of the falls."

Kitra shook her head once and then on a deep sigh started after the annoying creature, which left me no choice but to follow.

"How far are the falls from here?" Kitra asked.

"For you? About a day's journey..."

I tuned out whatever else Sprite rambled on about. I had a lot of thoughts and I needed a moment to process them. I didn't yet know how I was going to do it, but I needed to find a way to distance myself from this constant pull towards my princess.

And maybe start by stopping referring to her as mine. She wasn't and couldn't be.

Mine. The dragon taunted.

Thanks, fucker.

This back and forth between me and the dragon inside me continued for the remainder of the afternoon, and by the time the sun began to set, I was more on edge than ever before.

I was also hot, thirsty and hungry. Which probably meant that she was too.

"We should stop and find food and water before the sun goes fully down." It was already low in the sky and it wouldn't be long now before I could risk flight.

"Fine by me," Kitra agreed.

"Where's Sprite?" I glanced around and found her nowhere to be seen.

“*Ensley* left us a while ago. She complained that we moved too slow and said she would meet us at the waterfall after dark.”

“How does she do that?”

“What?”

“Move without noise and randomly disappear without anyone noticing?”

“It is the way of the imp. They are special creatures of the forest and in addition to being known as master manipulators, they seem to have some sort of camouflage skills that no one besides them understands.”

“Well, that explains a lot. But it gives me the fucking creeps the way she sneaks up on us all the time.”

“Dare I say it again that maybe if you quit scaring her every time you see her then she wouldn’t have to sneak around.”

I frowned. “Somehow I doubt my behavior either way would change a thing. I think she likes surprising us in the same way I enjoy taunting her.”

She shook her head and turned away from me again. But not before I caught the little snicker sound she made as she moved. But when she suddenly stopped and I nearly crashed into her, my attention went in a totally different direction.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded.

“Nothing,” she said, pointing at a bush just off the path. “You said you wanted food and I spotted berries.”

I wrinkled my nose. “That’s not food. At least not enough to sustain a dragon.”

“What do you suggest then?” she asked. “I don’t see a kitchen anywhere nearby where someone can make you something a little more acceptable. Out here, beggars can’t be choosers.”

“I am not a beggar.” I lifted my pack from my back and dropped it to the ground in front of me, and then bent over and rummaged through it. “I am, however, prepared.” I pulled

several bricks of cheese and hunks of bread that I'd wrapped in cloth and thrown in my bag the night before.

However, before I could hand them over to her, I picked up sounds that didn't belong. I froze, bringing my finger to my lips, and strained to hear more. At first it was only some breaking twigs that alerted me, but soon thereafter I heard whispers.

"The King's guard," I said quietly.

"They're here?" she whispered.

"Probably a mile or so behind us. They're likely tracking us."

"What do we do?" She looked ready to run, and I grabbed her arm to keep her still.

"It's almost dark. We only have to keep ahead of them for a short while longer and then we can disappear."

"Do you think Magnus is with them? We won't be able to escape him."

"I would say no because of the effects of the poison, but if Sprite had the magic to get me free of the poison sickness then I can only assume the other imps do as well. So yes, we may discover the dragon is right back on the hunt as well."

"So what now?"

"Eat and move. Here." I handed her a large chunk of the bread and I swallowed down some of the cheese. I wasn't going to tell her that the dragon had hunted earlier and I probably wasn't as hungry as her.

We traveled in silence but moved off the trail and instead traveled through the brush that ran parallel to it. That way we were still going in the right direction but if someone waited on the trail up ahead, we would not get ambushed.

As the sun set behind the trees, I grabbed her hand and urged her to stay close. With the dark shadows of the forest making it darker than it was in the sky, her vision would be impaired. Mine would not. Shifters were granted with heightened senses even when not in their shifted form.

When the sky fully darkened and the stars winked above us, I searched for a clearing big enough to accommodate the dragon.

“This could get dangerous, Princess.”

“Everything I’ve done since my mother’s death has been dangerous. Let’s just do this and get it over with. I’ve lost track of where we are so I have no idea how much ground we covered. I just hope it’s enough and we don’t have to spend too much time in the sky.”

“Nervous about riding the dragon, little beast?” I softened my words to a near purr and her head jerked up at the sound.

Immediately, the air scented with her arousal and I stared down at her, not moving a muscle. What had just happened?

“Of course I’m nervous,” she finally answered when her breathing evened back out. “We’ve got imps with poison hunting us, the King’s guard following behind us, and probably another dragon in the sky just waiting for us to make a move. Who wouldn’t be nervous?”

While her reasoning was logical, it made me smile nonetheless. But as much as I wanted to reassure her, she was right to be worried. Although, whether she liked it or not, I would do *anything* to protect her. A fact I chose in that moment to keep to myself.

“Do you trust me to get us there?”

She took some time to answer. Too much time and I frowned. The answer was no, no matter what she said. Although I didn’t entirely blame her, I would have thought we’d been through enough that she could at least trust me to help her find the amulet.

It’s what happened after that point that would be the true problem.

“I trust that you are being honest when you say you can do it. I am concerned, though, that you are still underestimating Magnus.”

I bristled at her assessment. “That’s where you’re wrong Princess. I can sense how strong he is and his determination to capture you is as solid as they come. But he is not stronger than I am. Only my twin is matched to me.”

“Where is he? Your twin. And why is he not here with you? I would think that two dragons would be better than one.”

The dragon growled. “Ian and I do not see eye to eye on this mission. In fact, we rarely do. He did everything he could to stop my father and I from taking this step.”

“You must really want that amulet. I think when we get somewhere safe, I’d like to hear more about your twin and what this amulet means to you.”

“If I do, will you give it to me willingly?”

She didn’t answer, but the look she gave me said it all. No. She would not.

Too frustrated to continue this conversation, I crossed the clearing, removing my clothes as I went. I then called the magic and welcomed the heat of the dragon as it washed over me and my body transformed. The need to bolt into the sky under a stream of dragon fire pulsed over me. An impulse I had to suppress for both our sakes.

If I couldn’t keep myself under control, then this plan had no chance of success before we even left the ground. Hopefully, she remembered the instructions I’d given her as we walked. As long as she sat centered between my wings and held onto the horned ridges of my spine, no matter what happened, I could keep her safe.

If Magnus was out here, I doubt he’d risk the imps and their poison again. Even with magic, the after effects still felt like sludge in my veins. The plan was to fly low and slow to keep from attracting any unnecessary attention.

An inner smile crept into my belly as I felt Kitra climb onto the wing I’d lowered for her. And my satisfaction grew as she settled into position exactly as instructed. If I could communicate telepathically with her I’d be letting her know what a good girl I thought she was.

She seemed to have enjoyed my praise the night before and I hoped I got another chance to tell her before we were forced to part ways.

As she laid as flat as she could against my back, I opened my senses as far and as wide as I could. The guard had gained on us but were still too far away to attempt anything and I still sensed no dragon. The imps, however, were still the ultimate wild card.

They could be anywhere or nowhere, and I had no way of knowing.

With a quick flap of my wings, I lifted into the sky and laughed when Kitra's muffled scream from behind her hand hit my ears.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Kitra

If I had thought flying through the sky in a dragon's claws was bad, it was nothing like this. No, this was so much more terrifying.

I did my best to hold on, but I wasn't sure how long I could. The muscles in my arms were already screaming at the strain.

If not for the fact that I didn't think Isaac could hear me over the wind whipping around us, I'd have been screaming at him to let me back down. I could walk to the cursed falls.

I'd never had a thing about heights in my life, but I'd also never gone higher than tree level until today. And if I had a choice, I never wanted to do this again.

With desperation pushing at my mind, I forced myself to take a deep breath and then open my eyes. It was no less terrifying this way, but it did give me a tiny sense of control. Or at least a little less panic. I attempted to look down so I could see where we were, but my stomach pitched as the trees whizzed by just below us.

So much for slow.

Okay, looking down was a bad idea. Taking another deep breath, I did my best to release it nice and slow while keeping a death grip on a hard ridge of Isaac's back. My heart raced and the poor little organ pounded so hard in my chest it hurt.

I can do this.

I. Can. Do. This.

I wasn't sure I believed it, but I would pretend everything was fine. Mother always said there was nothing wrong with faking your way through something if it was important enough.

And this was pretty damned important I reminded myself.

Just as I was feeling a tiny bit confident, a strong growl rumbled from the dragon underneath me, jolting my heart into another beating frenzy. He did it again, and this time, I didn't know why, but it felt like some kind of warning. So I tightened my grip and squeezed my legs harder against his side.

A moment later a whistle sounded, and Isaac rolled to his left side, causing me to shift and scream while barely keeping my hold on his back before he quickly righted himself.

“What are you doing? Are you trying to kill me?” I didn't exactly yell, but the panic made my voice louder than intended.

He growled again and that same whistling sound started again, followed by an even louder growl. What the heck was happening? Before I had time to think, he shot upwards and into the dark sky as I held on for dear life.

Okay, big guy. It's some kind of warning. I get it. But why?

I couldn't quite figure out what was going on. The now familiar whistle came again a second before he dove back towards the ground in a different direction. But this time I'd expected it and had a second to prepare.

However, when a dark object flew by in front of my face along with the whistling sound, I gasped and couldn't hold back my scream. Oh my Goddess. It was the poison darts. We were under attack by the Imps.

Three short whistles sounded and I tried to shrink my body against his wing as near paralyzing fear shot through me. This time Isaac rolled and I didn't think I would be able to maintain my hold on his back as my hands slipped free.

Just as my body shifted, one of his wings came down over me and he dove for the ground in a zigzagging roll. I prepared my

mind for the fall as best I could so when it didn't come, I squinted one eye open to see what was happening.

The ground was still rushing towards us at an alarming rate, but his wing had cradled me in place. However, if he didn't do something soon we were going to crash into the ground at full speed. That rumbling growl sounded again, vibrating underneath me and this time I didn't have to question or hesitate. I grabbed onto whatever I could and braced for landing.

We hit hard, and I bounced from his back a little, but because I was cushioned by his wing, I plopped right back down again. Relief swept over me as I scrambled off of him as quickly as I could.

"What the hell happened up there?" My entire body was shaking, and I could feel the nausea fighting to make a comeback every time I moved. Goddess help me, I did not have time to be ill again.

"Fucking imps. I swear to the Goddess, when this is over, I'm going to roast every last one of them with dragon fire."

I covered my mouth to hide my snicker, but the snort sounded from behind my hand anyways. There was nothing funny about the ordeal we'd just been through, but it was either laugh or cry about it, and I refused to shed any tears.

When I got my bearing and looked around, I didn't have to ask where we were. The sound of water splashing into the lagoon drew my eye and the glow of the moonlight lit my way as I got my first glimpse of the waterfalls since I'd passed through them as a little girl coming to this kingdom for the first time.

I'd been in awe at the time. So full of joy that my mother was going to marry a new king. But it wasn't long after that my bubble burst and true evil became my constant companion.

The falls weren't as big as I remembered, but I guessed that made sense as I wasn't a small child anymore. They were, however, from what I could make out, breathtaking.

"I have to say I expected a guard contingency here. Didn't you say this is the main portal into the next kingdom?"

“Yes. And there is a small village that serves as gatekeepers just down that path.” I pointed to the right. “They’ll know when anyone passes through and send someone to investigate.”

“And what was your plan for that?” he asked.

“Nothing. Since I was planning to cross to the other kingdom and not come back, I wasn’t worried about it.”

He nodded and turned in a complete circle, surveying their surroundings. “We should expect someone will be waiting for us when we return. We’ll have to come up with a plan.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and Ensley is wrong about it being in this kingdom.” Truth be told, I still wanted to leave and not look back. This kingdom had been my home for more than half my life, but without my mother in it, it was hollow and empty. Dark.

“My gut tells me she knows exactly what she’s doing. She might be leading us in circles for some reason, but I’d bet anything it’s all by design.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. So I guess it’s now or never. We need to get through that portal before anyone else catches up with us. I’ve had enough excitement for one day.”

“Agreed. Do you want to lead the way since you seem to know where you’re going and I don’t?”

I smiled up at him. “You trust me to get us to the other side?”

“I do,” he answered quickly, making my smile falter. I had expected at least some hesitation on his part. Why would he trust me to do anything?

Since I didn’t know what his quick response meant or how to handle it, I turned and walked into the water. After the day I’d had I had to admit that the natural warm springs underneath this catch pool for the falls felt amazing against my legs. If I had time I’d disrobe and sink to my neck and let the water work its magic.

The water here had healing properties and while it couldn't heal the grief still weighing me down, it could soothe my physical trauma.

"Is this really necessary?" his gruff question interrupted my thoughts. "There wasn't a path we could take to take us around?"

"Sure," I said. "But it would have taken us twice as long and after that disastrous flight, I don't want to waste anymore time than we have to."

He chuckled. "Disastrous, huh? I take it you didn't enjoy riding with me."

I looked back at him. "Honestly, I hated every second of it. If I never have to do it again, it will be too soon."

He snorted. "You'll get used to it. Or at least you would if you were riding with me back home in Scotland. No demon attacks there."

"They are definitely troublesome. You don't have anything like them in the human realm?"

"Dragons are at the top of the food chain where I'm from. The only thing that comes close are witches. But they are a lot more than annoying gnats with poison darts."

"We don't have many witches here. They've all but died out. But the history books discuss the debate quite frequently of whether the witches came from the fae or if the fae came from the witches. No one seems to know."

"They'll all be dead in my realm soon too." The anger in which he said those words told me there was a hell of a lot more to his story than a dying race.

"Are they why you need the amulet?"

"Yes."

When he didn't elaborate, I sighed. Having this conversation with him was hard enough while traversing our way past the falls as the water got deeper. But if he was going to be tight lipped and answer with one syllable words, then I'd never get a real answer.

“Are you always this difficult when it comes to talking about yourself?”

“Yes.”

Again, I sighed. Maybe I should accept that he'd never be forthcoming. Still. The need to know more burned through me and I couldn't let it go.

“I thought you trusted me?”

“To get us to a portal. Not with my life story.”

“Isaac,” I said softly.

That rumbling growl I was growing all too familiar with sounded behind me. “Fine. But you aren't going to like what I have to say.”

The warning in his tone set me on edge. There was a lot I didn't like about a lot of things, but the truth mattered. And eventually we'd have to deal with this pull to each other. Although I expected after I got my magic back it would be easy enough to break. We weren't going to be bound forever.

“Whether I like it or not doesn't matter. No one is perfect.”

“I'm an asshole, Princess. Let's just get that right out in the open now. I have good days and bad and then some even worse than that. And the good ones don't make up for the others.”

So far he hadn't told me anything particularly shocking. I'd seen a glimpse of his mood swings, and while it originally caught me off guard, it didn't shock me. My stepfather was one of the worst cases I'd ever seen of outbursts of anger that made half the kingdom live in fear. And even his nephew exhibited facets of his uncle's personality.

“Tell me what that has to do with the witches,” I coaxed, keeping my tone even and without fear. I needed so much more.

“Almost ten years ago they cast a spell using dark magic the likes of which I'd never seen before. It cast all dragons from our homeland for eternity and blocks us from ever returning.”

I swallowed thickly. “That’s horrible. Why would they do such a thing?”

“That’s a question we have all asked ourselves for many long years. Which feels like an eternity by the way.”

“And you still have no idea why they would do that?”

He remained quiet long enough for me to surmise he knew enough whether he wanted to admit to it or not. “Yes and no. We didn’t have a good relationship from the time we took over their region, and those worse days I referred to—”

“You caused a lot of problems for them.”

He snorted. “That’s a nice way of putting it. But I didn’t trust them, and when I don’t trust someone, I will always be the one to strike first.”

I pressed my lips into a grim line and tried to digest what he said and what lay between the lines of what he spoke of.

“Did they fight back?”

“Always. Magic is strong in the North American continent. The earth there was all but untouched when we first found it. So while they were strong there, so were we. But a fire breathing dragon with an attitude problem is more dangerous than you can imagine.”

“Oh I can imagine. But there are always two sides to the story and if you antagonize a dragon, you’re going to get what you get.”

He laughed heartily behind me, and I soaked up that rolling sound as it brushed across my skin and lit up my nerve endings.

“And they are the reason you need the amulet?”

“Yes. I don’t think we would under any circumstance stop searching for a way to break their curse, but the fact that my mother and my twin’s mate are trapped on the other side of it, is driving all of us mad. Even Ian, who is the most levelheaded of us all, is slowly turning feral.”

I stopped walking and turned back. “What? Your mother is trapped?”

He nodded, his facial expression hard and locked down, void of all emotion. But as much as he tried to hide it, I felt his pain as swiftly as my own. His mother may still be alive, but his ache of loss was very strong.

“She is. And Ian’s mate. She’s an omega too and I think because of that he feels the loss of her more keenly than normal.”

“That’s awful.” And more of a complication than I expected. He had more than a good reason to find the amulet. He had the pain of loss driving him. Crap.

Now what the hell was I supposed to do? Turn my back on him?

Yes. A little voice in my head whispered. He’s not fae, you owe him nothing.

But I didn’t think that little voice understood all the facts. Isaac and his dragon was a complex creature and I had a bad feeling he found me for a reason beyond the fact the King sent him to hunt me.

Fate meant for him to find me and now we were both screwed.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Isaac

While I'd left out a metric ton of details about the kind of man I truly was, I hadn't technically lied.

What was the point of telling her the worst? Better to sugar coat it a little and make my history a bit more palatable. She didn't need to see all the blood on my hands.

As we emerged from the water, I scanned the area with all of my senses on high alert. If anyone waited for us, they were hidden from me.

Just like those damned imps who were hell bent on taking me down every time I took to the skies. It was a crime that I couldn't fly free here. I would have liked to try again with my little beast, and show her the true wonders of freedom that normally comes from soaring in the clouds.

The dragon snorted inside my head and I felt that loss as deeply as he did. I'd never wanted someone on my back before this, and now that she'd been there, I'd want to do it again.

"I don't see Sprite anywhere."

Kitra emerged from the water with her soaking wet dress clinging to her curves. In the moonlight, her pale skin practically glowed. There was something almost ethereal about her and it pulled me to her with magnetic force.

I'd seen her naked, and yet this silhouette, even from behind, with the moonlight shining down on her, was the most erotic thing I'd ever seen. I tried to ignore the tightening at the front of my trousers, but it wasn't easy.

When I didn't exit the water right away she turned around. "What are you doing?"

"Enjoying the view."

She gave me a look that almost made me laugh. "Isaac." I assumed she'd meant to admonish me, but my name on her lips came out breathless and needy. Also, she took several steps back to the waters edge. I doubt she realized what she'd done until I emerged and grabbed her hand and pulled her to me.

"You are going to be the death of me," I said, meaning every word and yet not caring as long as she let me touch her. I knew it was a mistake we would pay for later, but it couldn't be helped. Her interest in my life without being quick to judge wasn't something I'd been prepared for.

She shivered under my touch and that led me to cup the back of her neck and pull her fully against me. My ability to keep her at arm's length was quickly eroding. Even the threat of being caught at any moment didn't seem to dissuade me all that much.

"Would this be easier if we had sex?" she asked, her lower lip trembling. "Will this feeling go away?"

I laughed. "I think not. Going as far as we did before only abated it for a short while and I still can't get it out of my head. What do you think will happen when I finally get my cock in that tight pussy of yours?"

"Isaac," she cried, arching against me. "Don't say things like that."

"Why? Are you too delicate for my crude words? They didn't bother you before. You should probably get used to it because as long as your body is tormenting me I'm not going to stop talking about bending you over and getting as deep inside you as I can."

Her heart raced against my chest, and I groaned. I could peel her dress from her body right now and take her here and I believe she'd let me. Fucking mating heat. And now that I'd stoked the flames, we would both ache incessantly until something was done.

"Fuck." I released her, and pushed her away. "I should not have done that." My words as breathless as hers now.

"Why not?"

"Look around, Princess. We aren't safe here. And yet I'm a breath away from pushing you down into the dirt and mounting you like an animal."

"You wouldn't do that."

I laughed darkly. "I would. The delicious scent of your arousal lingers in my head, but now it's as ripe as a southern peach and I need to partake." As if the words weren't enough to get my message across, the tone in my voice had turned downright guttural. The dragon was as close to the surface as he could get and his presence pushed me to claim what was ours.

"What do you want me to do? How can I help?"

My thoughts darkened at the invitation of her words. I didn't think that was the spirit in which they were meant, but it was all I could think.

"How close is the portal? Can you take us through it now?"

She nodded her head, and bit her lip. "Just through there." She pointed to what looked like a cave opening that I hadn't noticed before now.

"Good. Lead the way."

For a moment she looked unsure, but the good girl in her seemed to sense when I most needed her to comply. She turned and started walking and I followed, doing my best to keep some distance between us. If I touched her one more time, it would all be over. I'd have to have her and damn the fucking consequences.

We entered the cave, and while my eyes could easily adjust to the dark, they didn't seem to need to. Up ahead there was a

source of light, and it was pretty fucking bright.

She stopped in front of it and held out her hand. “Ready?”

I took a step back, trying to maintain some distance. “You can’t touch me right now. I want you too much.”

Her eyes softened as she fully turned to me. “You must. You are not fae and cannot pass through without a connection to fae.”

“Oh he is fae. Or at least fae enough.”

We both jerked at the voice of someone new and turned to find Magnus standing behind us.

“Get behind me,” I barked at Kitra.

Magnus laughed. “What? Are you actually going to defend her from the big bad dragon who has helped protect her since she entered this kingdom? That’s rich. Really, Kit. Is this what we’ve come to now?”

“Maybe,” she said on a shaky breath. “Your kindness tends to come and go at your whims, and lately it’s been pretty far gone.”

His expression darkened and his eyes flared with anger. “And how is it you think you got out of stepdaddy’s little dungeon. On your own, with no magic?”

She gasped. “You helped me? Why?”

“I always knew you were special. And the last person in this realm who deserves anything special is him.”

“But he’s your uncle. You’ve supported him through everything.”

“There’s a difference between support and loyalty.”

“What did you mean when you said I’m fae enough?” I said, interrupting their discussion. My concern for Kitra had taken top priority at his appearance so it had taken a few minutes for his words to sink in. But now that they had I wanted some answers.

“You are half fae, on your father’s side. Although you must already know that since there was only one way you could have gotten here. Your father must be dead.”

My blood ran cold at Magnus’s words. There was so much in that statement I didn’t know where to start. My father’s stupid idea to sacrifice himself for this amulet still made me angry when I thought about it so I’d pushed it out of my mind.

“My father was a dragon shifter.”

“Dragons are born of fae,” Kitra said quietly. “They are rare, but in certain bloodlines they do exist.”

I shook my head, unbelieving. “He would have told me.”

Magnus laughed. “You are a fool to believe that. No male fae shares all of his secrets. Not with anyone.”

“Then you’re lying. This is just some kind of tactic to stall us until what? The King’s guard arrives to haul us back to his palace?”

Magnus’s laughter died and anger marred his already scarred face and twisted his lips into a grim line. “If I wanted you back at the palace, I don’t need the guard to assist me. I’d simply do it myself.” His eyes changed to the slits of his dragon as he called his animal forth, forcing me to do so in kind.

Kitra stepped between us, and I growled at her. “Get back behind me.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.” She didn’t wait for a response and immediately turned to face Magnus. “What do you want? I’m not going back. I’ll die first.”

Dragon scales erupted across my skin at her words, the idea of one hair on her being harmed enough to set off the dragon inside me.

“Kitra,” I warned on a nearly unintelligible growl.

“Keep your dragon in your pants,” she hissed and Magnus snickered, which drew her attention back to him. “I wouldn’t laugh if I were you. Isaac here would just as soon kill you as talk to you. And I’m the only thing standing between you and that fate.”

“I’d like to see him try.”

“Done,” I said, pushing Kitra to the side. The dragon ripped through my bones, skin and clothes.

“No,” Kitra screamed. She jumped in front of me and grabbed my arms before the dragon could fully emerge. I snarled deep and fought against my own mind, as the scent of her fear filled my head. Thankfully the dragon and I both understood the importance of Kitra and what it would take to keep her safe.

I grabbed her back and stared into her eyes to keep myself focused on what meant the most. Keeping her safe. The dragon snarled in my head but we both knew what we had to do as the magic washed over me and the scales disappeared and I was left standing with her in my arms panting for air.

“I could have hurt you.” My words were not kind, but the fear of what could have happened to her stepping in front of me like that still seized my heart. “You can never do that again.”

“I can’t make any promises.” Her fear had receded, but it still lingered on the air. “Especially not when you are acting like a possessive child.”

Magnus snickered behind her. “I see she’s already got you wrapped around the balls. Nice job, Kit.”

His mocking tone and familiar nickname with my mate pushed against my restraint.

“Shut up, Magnus. If not for me, his dragon would have ripped you to shreds.”

“If not for *me*, he would have been dead. The King wants his head on a spike, and I’ve let the both of you slip away more than once. Enough is enough. And don’t even get me started on what the sick son of bitch will do to her if he gets his hands on her again. As much as she deserves better than you, the two of you need to go through that portal and not come back.”

“You arrogant son of a bitch. I’m not dead because you know you’re outmatched. Fuck you and fuck the king who leads you around on your pretty little leash commanding you what to do. Me and my omega will leave when we’re good and ready.”

Magnus's eyes snapped to his dragon, the golden slits glowing with anger and the growl that emitted from him rose the hairs on the back of my neck. As soon as I got Kitra clear it was going to be time to finish this.

"Stop, please. This isn't a dick measuring contest, and I'm not some sort of prize. Eww. Magnus is like my brother."

"I'm not *your* brother, I'm his."

"I don't ca—"

"What did you just say?" A fresh wave of heat tore through my chest and I wasn't sure I could hold back the dragon in his presence much longer.

"You heard me."

I looked down at Kitra. "Get behind me. Now," I ordered, barely restraining an attack.

She shook her head. "No dragons. I'm not going to watch you two tear each other limb from limb."

"I don't need my dragon to ground this lying fucker into the dirt."

"I'm not lying," Magnus bared his dragon teeth, his eyes still flashing. "Your parents made a deal with the Fae King. And as is his way, the price was higher than they expected. He took their firstborn son. Me."

"More lies. My mother has only been able to carry dragonlings to term once in her life. That is a fact. She told me that herself and I would have scented a lie."

The silence that suddenly filled the cavern turned eerie. In the heat of anger I didn't believe a word this imposter said. But I remembered that nagging feeling I got the first time I met him. And the way the King had studied us both when we stood before him in his palace. Something had not been right.

I reached out with my senses now, taking a deep breath to try and find the deceit, but the scent of my mate filled every available space, making anything else impossible. It was different than before. Stronger. The dragon whined in my head as I tried not to stagger under the sheer power of it.

Mating heat.

Fuck.

I grabbed her by the arms and pulled her against me. I had to protect her at all costs. No other could touch her...

“Your mother didn’t lie,” Magnus said the words, but I barely understood them. I was about to snatch Kitra from this cavern and get her as far away from him as I could. “I hate to tell you, though. But you aren’t the firstborn of your line.”

“You aren’t making any sense. I was born before my twin. I am my father’s heir.” I dropped my nose to Kitra’s hair and breathed deep. I needed to bathe in her scent. Fuck. I needed to bathe in her.

Magnus shook his head. “Stop thinking with your dick for one minute and listen to what you’re saying.”

“Isaac, what is happening? You’re hurting me.” I had tightened my grip on her to the point I knew it would leave marks, but I couldn’t help myself. I needed to get her away from the other male.

“You’re the one talking in circles. Just go before I can’t control my dragon anymore. You are putting my mat—”

“Jesus Fucking Christ. You aren’t a twin, you thickheaded idiot. “You’re a triplet. And the second born.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

Isaac

I staggered back, taking Kitra with me. I didn't want to believe anything this asshole said, but...

"Isaac, are you okay?" Kitra's voice sounded so far away as my head spun with everything happening at once. My little beast cupped my face with both her hands. "Look at me."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, but the scent of her mating heat was still swirling everywhere and pulling most of my focus.

Magnus's head jerked to the side and mine followed. "You two are out of time. The King's guard is here."

"Isaac?" she asked again, clearly concerned.

"We have to go." I finally said, grabbing her hands and placing a kiss on one of them. I savored the taste of her skin for only a moment before releasing her. "Don't worry about me, little beast. I shall survive. As for Magnus," I turned to him and looked at him with different eyes. As I'd noticed before, his eyes were a match for Ian's, but that wasn't enough to convince me. "Just because you believe it to be true, doesn't actually make it true. My father warned me that fae were fond of trickery and he warned me to stay on guard."

"Isaac," Kitra whispered. "We have to go now or we won't have time."

I nodded down at her and turned back to Magnus. “This isn’t over.”

“Of course it isn’t,” he agreed.

Kitra grabbed my hand and pulled me through the cavern until we emerged on the other side where a twin waterfall poured water into the pool in front of us.

She tightened her grip on my hand. “Just in case Magnus is wrong, okay?”

I smiled, despite the turmoil snaking its way through my chest. The mere idea that Magnus could be telling the truth had me reeling. And now, with Kitra in full blown, unavoidable, mating heat, we were in more danger than ever. Magnus had to know. He was a dragon shifter, there was no way he could have missed it.

Kitra led me into the center of the fall of water and a moment later we emerged on the other side, but no longer in a pool of water. We were in the middle of a meadow with six fae guards standing in front of us their bows drawn tight and aimed at our chests.

“Wait. I am Princess Kitra Gilwen, daughter of King Gilwen the first and I seek asylum from King Aegron’s realm. Please, I beg of you.” Kitra’s voice shook, but her grip on my hand remained strong.

“Princess, we are so sorry. We did not know it was you.” The six guards loosened their bows and put away their weapons. “Welcome home.”

“Home?” I asked, more confused than ever.

She gave me a tight smile and a nod. “My father was the king of this realm before his death.”

Well, that was unexpected. She said nothing about being a princess across two realms. What the hell had I gotten myself into?

“Do you wish for an escort? We can get you safely to the nearest village where you can get a message to the King. I’m sure he will want to receive you.”

“Thank you,” she said, squeezing my hand again. “But that won’t be necessary. I have brought my own escort.”

The fae in charge seemed to give that some thought for a moment and the dragon inside me tensed, before the fae nodded and backed away. “I assume you still know the way then.”

She laughed. “How could I forget?”

They seemed satisfied with her answers as they disappeared down the path to our right.

“Princess of two realms? That’s quite special.”

“It’s all a formality and not at all true. When my father died and his brother became king, I lost that title. And of course as the stepdaughter to King Aegron, I’d never officially be a princess there either. Not unless he made a formal order, which he absolutely did not. So see? Not a princess at all, *dragon*.”

She started to pull away from me and I swung her into my arms before she could get away. “That’s a princess in my book.” I gave her no chance to escape or say anything else before I swallowed her protests with a kiss. If I’d thought she was irresistible before, it was nothing compared to now. The sweet candy taste of her mouth was even better than the scent of her mating heat.

We were still standing out in the middle of an open meadow and I was ready to rip her clothes off and take her here on the soft grass. I broke the kiss and gasped for air and a modicum of control.

“What’s wrong?” she asked in alarm.

“When I touched you back at the falls. We must have triggered the mating heat. I can’t even think straight now.”

I watched the alarm fill her eyes and her throat bob with a hard swallow. “It feels like a burn in my core that I can’t put out.”

“I guess fate got tired of us moving too slow.”

She smirked. “Fate can kiss my sweet ass. I’m not going to be beholden to something like that. If we’re going to do this, it’s going to be because it’s what we both want.”

“Oh, little beast. I’m pretty sure I wanted it from the first moment I met you in the forest. But when you ran, for sure. That little chase triggered the dragon and he’s been pushing me to mark you ever since.”

“We’re not just animals. It doesn’t have to be like that.”

“Speak for yourself.” I flashed my dragon eyes in her direction and watched her own eyes widen in surprise.

“I don’t know if I’m ever going to get used to that.”

I smiled. “Oh, I think you will. Just give it some time.” On that note, I bent her backwards over my arm and kissed her harder. I pushed my tongue deep into her mouth and explored every sweet inch. This wasn’t just a kiss anymore, it was a possession.

When I finally let her up and got a glimpse of her glassy eyes and kiss swollen lips, I groaned. “We need to hurry to that village you were talking about.”

Suddenly she frowned and I had a feeling whatever she was about to say I wasn’t going to like it.

“First, we have to find the place my mother would have chosen to leave us a clue. I was joking about the stone and the simplicity of her just telling us exactly where it was instead of with a vague statement, but there is actually a spot near here that was always my mother’s favorite...”

Dammit, she was right. “Okay, but lets make it quick or you’re going to find yourself bent over the nearest rock taking my cock deep into that sweet pussy of yours right here in broad daylight.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened on a small, silent gasp. When I thought she might finally protest against my filthy words, my nostrils flared as I caught the heightened scent of her arousal. Damn. I scrubbed at my face and tried to think of anything but stripping her naked and making my claim.

“You’ve got about thirty seconds before it’s too late,” I warned.

I caught a ghost of a smile before she turned and ran, making the dragon leap to life. I shook my head and followed, deliberately taking slow steps instead of giving chase. The little beast had no idea how much trouble she was in right now.

By the time I caught up with her, I found her bent toward a rock formation on a cavern wall. Her fingertips tracing a pattern in the stone.

“Did you find it?” I asked.

“I think so. But I thought Ensley would be here to help us figure this out. Didn’t she say she was going to meet us over here?”

“She is unpredictable,” I offered as an explanation. “Although if I had to guess, I would probably say that means she’s up to something and it’s probably no good.”

“You’re too suspicious. Maybe she hid because of the guards.”

While that made sense, it didn’t give me any real comfort when it came to that little minx. Her disappearing and reappearing acts were annoying at best and dangerous at worst. We had to be prepared for anything.

“Can you decipher the message?”

“I think so. But it’s been a long time since I’ve seen this language.”

I stared at the wall and looked at the series of symbols and pictures. “That’s a language?” It looked like a child’s drawing.

“It’s ancient. It’s been lost for probably centuries. My mother may have been the last to truly use it. Although there are probably more like her out there who could at least decipher it if they had to.”

“So what does it say?”

“It’s kind of confusing. It indicates that the amulet is hidden in the palace, but then it also talks about a tree, and a book. I have no idea how the amulet connects to all three of those or which she might be talking about.”

“Of course it’s hidden in the palace. The one place that will be almost impossible to get into.” I guessed Magnus and I would be working through that bullshit he threw my way sooner rather than later.

“Well, but how does a tree and a book connect to that? Unless...” She placed her hands over the roughly carved symbols and pictures, this time using both hands, her fingertips connecting to several different indents. A second later, the tell-tale blue glow of fae magic lit beneath her hands.

“Is that safe?” She ignored my question and started mumbling words that had no rhyme or reason.

“I know where it is.” She stepped back with her hand wrapped around her neck, an emotional look across her face.

“Okay, are you going to tell me?”

She looked up at me, her eyes awash with tears. “When I was little, my mother commissioned a special gift for me to play with. She had an elaborate castle carved from wood that was a replica of the one I was born in. She said since I couldn’t remember it very well, and she didn’t want me to forget where I’d come from, she’d had it made special. I played with that thing forever. For hours on end. And then eventually as I got older it became a decoration, until I declared myself too old to keep a child’s playhouse in my room. So it had been relegated to nothing but a decoration from then. She said I had to keep it though, because one day I would want to revisit it and give it to my own child. I don’t think anyone has touched it in years. It had a small library filled with books, and a tree carved into the outside of the palace just like our home. It has to be there.”

I nodded, thinking that sounded exactly where it would be. My mother would have done the same thing if she’d had a girl I’d bet. “So where is it? I don’t remember anything like that in your quarters.”

Her forehead creased with worry. “I don’t know for sure. Maybe the King had it moved? But it has to be in the castle somewhere.”

“Do you think Sprite would have an idea?”

“Maybe.”

“But as usual, she has gone missing when we need her.”

“That’s not exactly fair. She’s helped us plenty. Maybe if we wait here for her she will show up like she said.”

I had my doubts about the little brat, but what choice did we have. We needed a plan before we returned to the Faldikar realm. We both were in need of rest and some real food, and we had another pressure issue that wasn’t going to give us any peace.

“How far is that village? We need food.”

“An hour’s walk maybe?”

“Good. That means I can get us there in about five minutes.”

She backed away, lifting her hands. “Uh huh. No way. I’m not doing that again. If you’re in a hurry, I can stay here and wait for you.”

I frowned and narrowed my eyes. “No way in hell am I leaving you unprotected.”

“I’m fine to handle myself here. No one is coming after me in this realm.”

Yeah, until the wrong person caught her scent. Since I didn’t have a handy checklist of creatures that resided in this realm, I would be taking no chances.

“Not happening, Princess. You and I are sticking together like glue from here on out.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

Kitra

By the time we reached the closest village, I was beginning to regret not letting Isaac save us the trip.

Despite traveling in the dark of night, the heat in this realm had taken its toll. I forgot how different the climate was on this side of the portal. My skin itched, and I was desperate for something to cool me down.

When the sun came up the next morning, we were both going to melt.

“We might have to find a place to camp for the night. From what I remember this village has no inn. It’s too small.”

His face scrunched up like he thought I was crazy. “Surely there’s a pub with a room or two. Even the smallest village has need for such a place.”

Since it had been many years, I wasn’t going to argue. “I guess anything is possible. It has been a long time since I’ve visited.”

“None of that will be necessary.”

I jumped and whirled at the sound of Ensley’s voice. “Are you kidding me?”

Isaac laughed. Or at least that’s what I guessed that rumble from his chest meant. He wasn’t smiling so I couldn’t be sure.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m starting to understand why Isaac is so annoyed with you. Why do you keep disappearing and reappearing? What is your deal? And why do you have to sneak up on us? Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. “If you don’t think you need my help, I could always leave.”

I stared at her for a few more seconds before I ultimately sighed and shook my head in defeat. This heat was making me behave irrationally. “I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. It’s just odd how you appear and disappear. It’s unbalancing.”

“It’s fucking annoying,” Isaac said. “You don’t have to sugarcoat it.”

“You are a brute. It’s no wonder you keep getting poison darts to your ass,” she fired back at him. “The imps are right to do whatever it takes to keep you away from them.”

“Anyways,” I interrupted before this dissolved into her getting mad and disappearing again. I had a feeling we were going to need her when it came to getting back into the palace without getting caught. “Why would we not need to find a place to rest? We’re both exhausted, and if we’re going to cross back through the portal tomorrow, we need to be ready for whatever.”

She was already shaking her head, and I waited with bated breath to find out what the problem was.

“You can’t go back tomorrow. It’s too soon. You need to stay here and hide for a few days.”

“We don’t have a few days,” Isaac grumbled.

I started to ask why not when Sprite started running in circles and screeching unintelligibly.

“What the fuck?” Isaac covered his ears.

“Ensley, what is wrong?”

She cried louder and ran faster, her little body practically vibrating with the ferocity in which she moved. I had no idea what was happening, but I guessed she would just have to get whatever this was out of her system.

“Are you going to stop her?”

“Hell, no. Whatever it is, she needs to get it out.”

“Then I will. There’s more to her than meets the eye. I can feel it.”

I shook my head, and stepped into his path. “Leave her alone. You’ve bullied her enough.”

“It’s not bullying when she keeps instigating this shit.” He seemed angry, but he also didn’t make any more moves in her direction.

“You have to stay here until I come back for you.” We turned in relief to find she’d stopped whatever insanity had gripped her. “I’ve made arrangements for you. There’s a cottage on the outskirts of the village where you can take shelter and hide until this passes. The less people who know you are here the better. Especially now.” She wrinkled her nose as if something stunk.

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that. We were met by the King’s guard. Several people will already know by now.”

“I’m not worried about them,” she said. “Some of the villagers report on both sides, and the less the other side knows about your whereabouts the better. With any luck they’ll all assume you’ve made your way to uncle’s palace by now. The more they think you’ve moved on and that freedom is the only thing you hope to gain, the better.”

“That makes sense,” I said.

Isaac nodded. “Yeah, as much as I hate to admit it, I agree. So where is this cottage and will there be food? I’m fucking starving.”

Sprite pointed down a path that led into the woods in the opposite direction from the village. “Follow to the end of that path and you won’t be able to miss it. Everything you need will be waiting. And for Goddess’s sake do something about that stink. If you two cross back through the portal smelling like you do now, they’ll know you’re coming before you make it past the falls. Wait until it passes before you even try.”

I started to ask what she meant, but as usual, she ran off without looking back or giving us a chance to ask anymore questions.

“Fucking creepy. I can’t believe we keep having to rely on her help.”

I turned back to Isaac. “If it makes you feel any better, I doubt she trusts you anymore than you trust her.”

“Nothing about her makes me feel better,” he grumbled as we began following the path in the direction she pointed. “However, if I don’t get some rest and some food in me, we’re going to have a much more dangerous creature to deal with than a demon.”

“And apparently we need to bathe. We must stink.”

He stopped abruptly and I turned to face him.

“That’s not what she meant. You must know that by now. And you absolutely do not stink. Quite the opposite. Your scent is like a field of wildflowers laced with the smoke of wildfire. It’s intoxicating”

I resisted lifting my arm to test his words since he had to be insane to compare me to wildfires and flowers. “Then what did she mean?”

“Your omega status, little beast. It rockets your scent off the charts and draws in every alpha creature who could mate with you. Including me.”

I shook my head and turned away. I didn’t want to hear this right now. There was too much at stake for us to get waylaid by sex now. Although he did look particularly delectable at the moment despite his grumpy attitude.

“I think we have more important things to worry about right now, don’t you? We aren’t safe.” And talking about it only brought everything I felt into a sharper focus. The ache, the arousal. It had been simmering for quite some time and even I was concerned that I would explode with it if I didn’t find a way to keep it locked down.

“She’s right you know. Your scent is pronounced, and it will only get worse before it gets better.”

“So you keep insisting. But what about what I feel? Or want for that matter?”

“Both are important. Although since you are an omega, what you need and what you want may be at odds for the next few days.”

“A few days! Are you insane?” If he was implying that I would need sex for days before I could function properly, then he truly was out of his mind.

Although the heat building under my skin was starting to make me uncomfortable. I needed to get out of these clothes.

“We’ll see, little beast. Maybe I am insane and maybe I’m not. That has been a lifelong debate for me.”

I marched ahead of him, his words barely penetrating my mind now. All I could focus on was getting to that cottage.

We rounded a bend, and to my bitter disappointment did not yet see any building. Not even a hovel that could be mistaken for a cottage.

However, the mist curling from the spring in front of us reminded me of a memory as a child.

“Oh my Goddess, I completely forgot about these.” I ran forward, stripping as I went. Finally I could get some relief from this oppressive heat.

Ignoring whatever protest Isaac was nattering on about behind me, I walked straight into the water and sank down to my knees.

“What the hell is happening? I thought you were in a hurry to get to the cottage?”

I turned back to him, a wide grin splitting my face. “This is even better. These are hot springs and the water feels divine.”

His right brow raised sharply, and that look said he was completely skeptical. But after a few moments of his staring at me, and me making it obvious that I wasn’t going anywhere

else right now, he peeled off his own clothes and entered the water as well.

You'd think by this time I would be used to seeing him naked. He took off his clothes every time he shifted to dragon form and seemed to give it no thought. But seeing him now, when he wasn't shifting, and we weren't in imminent danger, had a different effect on me.

His sheer size alone staggered me. And all those chiseled muscles and the way they moved underneath his deeply tanned skin. I could barely fathom how beautiful and perfect he looked as he walked into the water, more like a God than a man.

Not that his dragon wasn't gorgeous, too. When his black scales shimmered, they took on an iridescent glow that easily mesmerized me as a rainbow of colors shifted across him.

But right now it was the man I wanted to focus on. His chest rose and fell as he took in breath, his lips slightly parted reminding me what they felt like when pressed to mine. I could almost feel them now.

"What's wrong?" he asked, stopping in his tracks.

"I—I was just—." It was more than a little embarrassing to admit that I couldn't stop staring at his body. His abs were hard and ridged, looking as if they'd been carved from stone rather than the muscle and flesh they actually were. And the small amount of hair that ran down leading to his...

I swallowed hard, looking at his cock. It wasn't rock hard like I'd felt it pressing against me several times now, but it wasn't flaccid either. Heat clawed its way up my neck and back down again before settling low in my belly where it flared like an inferno being stoked to life.

I thought it was a pocket of heated water or something at first, but as my temperature rose, and sweat broke out across my skin, I realized it was all coming from inside me.

"Oh fuck," he said, his eyes widening as he stared at me almost as intently as I did him. His nostrils flared and the

muscle at his jaw ticced relentlessly. “I thought you were coming in heat before, but it was nothing like this.”

“What are you talking about?” I stumbled backwards, trying to get my bearing as the flare of need in my pelvis took my breath and robbed me of further thought.

“Oh, little beast. We are in so much trouble.” He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again as the dragon peered down at me. The golden glow of his slitted eyes raked over me. The ache between my legs built and itched along my entire body just underneath the skin, making it tingle.

“There’s something wrong with the water,” I gasped.

A rumble of sound erupted from him, but it was so far from a laugh I didn’t know how to describe it. It was dark, and decadent and melting across my skin as he stalked closer.

“It’s not the water.”

My blood pulsed with every step he took in my direction until my entire body beat with the need for his touch. It was like a fever trying to ravage me, forcing me to do something about it.

“Come here,” he commanded.

As if drawn to obey, I stood and walked towards him. It was his turn to stare at my body, and despite the heat of embarrassment burning up my neck and into my face, I was pleased by the look burning in his eyes. I had such little experience with this kind of thing, but I couldn’t mistake the want peering down at me from his hooded eyes. Or the slow rumble that rolled through his chest and sounding a lot like a purr.

My stomach jolted.

Did dragons purr? It sounded weird to think that question, but it wasn’t the first time I’d heard it and the sound was unmistakable.

It made me want to tackle him, to rub my body against his, and

“Your need to mate is growing painful, and I have no desire to watch you suffer.”

“I don’t understand why this is happening. I’m not sure I even understand what it truly means.”

“So you keep saying,” he said. “And yet here you are. You can continue to fight it if you want, but you will lose the fight. At least now you have the choice to face this with dignity. Later that will not be the case.”

I reared back, seared by his words. “I’m no longer some charity case you have to sleep with. Or a child you have to scold. I’m well aware I already embarrassed myself before when I suggested giving you my maidenhood simply because I didn’t want the King to get it.”

A shudder worked over me at the reminder of how precarious my situation still was. His cold words were the stark reminder that I wasn’t safe. I brushed by him, but he reached out to stop me. The connection of his hand on my arm sizzled and burned, causing me to gasp.

“Kitra.” The sound of my name rumbling through his chest nearly did me in.

I looked up at his eyes and got the impression that he might regret his poor choice of words, but for whatever reason he couldn’t seem to voice them.

“Isaac,” I returned.

“It has to be me,” he said. “I didn’t want to be the one because of our opposing goals, but it *has* to be. I won’t let anyone else touch you.”

“That sounds like the worst reason anyone would have sex for.”

He laughed. “Hardly. And I’m sure you know better. Many do it simply for the pleasure, whether it means anything or not. And even others do it simply to procreate.”

I jerked my arm free, and despite the feeling that I was going to burn alive, I walked away from him. “I’m not breeding with you either!”

“Wait.”

“No,” I threw over my shoulder as I grabbed my clothes and without dressing, continued on the path towards the mysterious cottage. I needed a few minutes to pull myself together.

And if it was an orgasm I needed to feel better, I didn't need him for that.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

Kitra

By the time I made it to the cottage my situation had reached a boiling point. Even the brush of the air on my skin had become too much. I was lying to myself about the whole mating thing, but it couldn't be helped. Isaac's words had cut deeper than expected. Whether that was a fair assessment or not remained to be seen.

We'd been through a lot together in a very short time and I was under the false impression that had meant something to him. The reminder that he was still as focused on the amulet as I was frightened me. If we were as close to getting it as I thought we were, we would both soon have to make a choice.

I stomped towards the door of the tiny cottage, far too distracted to admire the charm of my surroundings. The front and side yards overflowed with flowers, stone pathways, and a riot of every imaginable color. All of it was overgrown and in dire need of someone to take care of it, but beautiful nonetheless.

In my haste to put some distance between me and Isaac, I didn't even consider whether someone occupied this cottage and we would be their guest, or if this place stood empty. I jerked the door open, entered quickly and closed the door behind me.

Nothing was going to keep Isaac away from me for long, but as I leaned against the door, closed my eyes and took a deep

breath, I gave myself a much-needed moment of alone time. This constant push-pull when it came to a certain dragon shifter was threatening to break me once and for all.

If ever there was a time to have my magic back, this would be it. Without it I was too vulnerable, too lost, too needy. Too everything. Trying to live as a fae without it simply wasn't working.

It forced me to rely on others for too much. If this whole thing with the amulet didn't work out, I was going to have to find another way. I couldn't continue like this.

When I finally opened my eyes again, I realized the cottage was simply one big room. There were some old chairs that looked comfortable enough in front of a small wood stove that would provide more than enough warmth on a cold night after the sun went down.

Straight behind that was a small kitchen that was only big enough to hold the basics. A sink, a refrigerator, and one bank of cabinets to provide a small countertop for workspace.

And the owner had used a row of bookcases filled to the brim with hundreds of books to separate what I assumed would be a sleeping area from the main space. It was a clever way to maintain some privacy while you slept.

There was nothing fancy about the space, but the coziness of it gave me a calming vibe that I desperately needed right about now. And that feeling made a new exhaustion begin to set in. Isaac would want to forage for food, but I simply wanted to rest.

And make this itch go away.

Choosing sleep, I made my way to the bedroom area and nearly gasped when I rounded the bookcase wall. There was a giant mattress on the floor with what looked like hundreds of pillows and blankets all over and around it.

My heart leapt at the sight. If I could have created my own ultimate space for how I felt right now, I couldn't have even dreamt of something this perfect. Suddenly the idea of

burrowing into that bed and all of its softness was all I wanted.

Well, that and something to keep this internal heat from burning me alive. Giving no care about anything else, I ripped the dress over my head and dove into what simply looked like the perfect fae nest. The only thing missing was a tree to put it in. A giggle ripped from my throat as the cool blankets, sheets, and even furry textured pillows brushed against my skin as I burrowed deep.

I took a deep breath, and felt my muscles relax as I blew out the air. I could stay here forever. While that might not be possible, I had every intention of shutting out everything we still had to deal with and take a moment to breathe.

“Wow.”

Isaac’s sudden appearance and exclamation couldn’t even move me. My body had given in to the exhaustion the moment it hit this heaven of a bed. “Mmmm,” I mumbled face down in a pillow.

“Apparently Sprite knew exactly what you needed even more than either one of us did.”

I hadn’t thought of that. I lifted my torso and peered at Isaac. “You think she did this? For me?”

“Yeah, I do. And it’s something I should have thought of. Maybe not all the lady shit, but the fact that omegas need to feel safe and comfortable. Especially during their heat. Ian talked about it with Cordelia, and while I heard what he said, I’d blown him off.”

Looking at Isaac had caused the heat in my chest to increase ten-fold. I had to do something to assuage it. “I need some water.”

“Stay there. I’ll get it.”

I closed my eyes as he rustled around in the kitchen. I couldn’t seem to control anything anymore. “I don’t think I like this,” I called out.

“I’m not sure I do either, but I think we’re both going to have to embrace it. Here.”

I opened my eyes to a glass of water shoved in my face, and a broody man standing over me. Even that looked sexy to me this time. “Am I really that bad?”

“Of course not,” he replied. “But I’ve never felt this way. Not to mention I could hurt you. I am a dragon. My anatomy is different.”

A rush of heat surged between my legs and I could feel the wetness seeping lower.

“Isn’t that the point of an omega? They are made to take *all* the needs of their alpha?”

“In theory, yes.”

“What did you mean when you said that you’ve never felt this way?” I had a feeling that question led down the path to madness, but I couldn’t seem to help myself. I had to know.

“When it comes to my baser needs, I usually have no trouble controlling myself. But with you,” he paused, his pupils growing larger. “I find I don’t want to control myself. I don’t want to hold back.”

I sipped at the water, still trying to measure my thoughts before I blurted out things I couldn’t take back.

“So what should we do?”

As far as I was concerned, the fact I’d been able to keep from saying something far more direct, was a testament to my own self control. But it was slipping, and I wasn’t sure how long I could hold onto it. The longer he stood there and stared at me with obvious hunger in his eyes, the worse I got.

I could think of nothing I wanted more than his hands on me. Everywhere. At once. His lips too. I dropped my gaze to the grim slash of his mouth and imagined those lips encasing one of my nipples in his blazing heat. Or his teeth grazing over my sensitive skin.

That control I thought I had was a joke. I was kind of shocked I hadn’t spread my legs yet and begged him to not hold back.

So many images ran through my head as I wondered exactly what a virile dragon shifter looked like when he did whatever he wanted to a woman's body.

I had to know. Otherwise I was going to explode.

"I'm afraid," I whispered.

He pulled his brows together. "Of what? Me?"

I shook my head, allowing my legs to part slightly. "Of going insane if you don't touch me right now."

When this was over I would probably be horrified by my wanton behavior, but right now I didn't care. Being embarrassed was the least of my worries at the moment.

His nostrils flared wide as more of my scent permeated the room. On a shuddering breath he closed his eyes, unable to hide his own reactions. I wasn't making this any easier for him either, but I didn't care. Somehow meeting him had started all of this and we were going to have to end it—together.

"Are you sure this is what you want? Twenty minutes ago you were running away from me."

"Yes." It wasn't a lie. I needed *him* and I couldn't imagine anyone else the same way.

A few more beats passed between us before he finally reached between my legs and rubbed his fingers up and down my inner thighs. I whimpered as disappointment warred with yearning. Teasing me wasn't going to help. He had to know that.

On the next path, his fingertips grazed over the heart of my heat, forcing me to release a shaky breath. I tried to inhale, but I couldn't get enough air into my lungs.

"So wet," he murmured. "The stories of an omega's slick heat was not exaggerated. I cannot wait to taste it. Will it be sweet and submissive or tart and feisty I wonder?"

"You can find out," I stated desperately as his words crawled up my spine and grabbed me at the back of my neck. I closed my eyes against the unbearable want now bearing down on me. His touch had ignited a blaze that threatened to burn me alive.

The pounding between my legs intensified, as I fought not to shove my hand alongside his and create more friction.

“By the time I’m done with you, you’ll be a dripping mess. Between your slick and my cum, your cunt will be juicier than a southern peach dripping down my fucking chin.”

His filthy words sent a fresh wave of need shuddering through me. I had no idea what a southern peach was, but I was pretty sure I wanted it. Right now.

“Please,” I pleaded. “You’re torturing me.”

“That’s kind of the point, little beast. Tit for tat. Your scent has tormented me basically nonstop since I found you in that forest, and now it’s my turn to play.”

“I don’t want to play,” I whined. “I want to fuck.” I lifted my hips in an attempt at more friction from his fingers, and he immediately withdrew them. However, before I could voice my protest, his entire hand slammed down against my pussy, sending a jolt of pain and pleasure through my entire body.

“Isaac,” I cried, unsure whether I was horrified or about to beg for more.

“I told you I couldn’t hold back.”

“Then give me more,” I cried through another wave of need that seemed to never end.

He stared down at me, his gaze traveling up and down my body. The urge to cover myself hit me hard, and then dissipated just as quickly. Fae were attractive on the outside, I wouldn’t hide from that. But I wanted him to see more than just that when he looked at me.

“I like you like this. All wanton and unafraid. Demanding what you need from your alpha is as important as giving what he needs.” His growled words rolled through me, pebbling my nipples and making my body arch in his direction.

He reached down and unfastened his trousers before dropping them at his feet. I studied him again, looking for the differences between him and fae. His sheer size alone had caught my eye from day one and I’d gotten stuck there. But as

my gaze traveled over the planes of his abs to the thick column of his magnificent cock, I did notice things I'd not before.

Instead of the sleek smooth penis we were taught about in school, his varied in thickness from the root to the tip, with a somewhat wider section not far from the base. And there was more. Along the top of his shaft there were tiny ridges with blunt tops running all the way to his tip. The underside as well.

My pussy clenched at the thought of what those would feel like inside me, rubbing against my walls. A low keen escaped my lips from just thinking about it. Which was met by a rumbling purr from Isaac's chest as he continued to stare down at me.

"Tasting you is going to have to wait. You need my knot first."

I swallowed thickly. "Your knot?"

"This spot right here," he pointed at the thickness I'd noticed near his base. I swallowed hard and licked my lips, and I swore he groaned when I did. "It's already swollen, but just before you make me come, it will grow larger and lock me inside you. You'll be filled with my seed, and it will have nowhere else to go. You won't be able to escape it. It's what your body craves."

My eyes widened. "Will I get pregnant?"

"I'm not going to lie. It is possible. Although not probable during your first heat."

I could barely breathe as he said those words. I knew I should freak out about the possibility of a baby, but in the face of his—him. I didn't hate the idea.

"If I had my magic, I could cast a spell."

He lifted one of his brows like he so often did when he didn't seem to care for what I'd said. "That's unnatural."

"It's reality. When you aren't yet a concubine, a baby... Well, it might not be a good thing."

"In dragons, a baby is not conceived exactly as a human or probably a fae. Do fae have barbs?"

“Uhm, what?” I wasn’t sure I’d heard his question correctly as my gaze had snagged on his hand continuing to rub his knot, and I’d been thinking about pushing him aside and touching it myself.

“A barb,” he repeated. “Do fae men have them?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I licked my lips again as a bead of pre cum oozed from his tip.

“I didn’t think so.”

“Huh?” My brain was on the fritz, but my body was taking over anyways as evidenced by my hips lifting from the bed of their own accord. I didn’t even know what I was doing beyond the technicalities of sex and yet, I was half out of my mind with the need to take him in my body until we were both mindless.

Maybe if I took him in my mouth I could distract him from all this talking. He was never this chatty.

“You aren’t hearing a word I’m saying, are you?”

I shook my head on a definite pant. “I can’t think beyond this need. The heat inside me is building so high I’m going to explode with it. Is this what it feels like to have a dragon inside you?”

“Hardly. But you’re right. Talking isn’t what you need.” He squeezed his cock harder and more of that creamy fluid appeared at his slit. “You’re ready for this.”

I wasn’t sure if that was a question or not, but I moaned either way. The wait was killing me and my frustration mounted. Why was he hesitating? Did he not want to do this?

“What’s wrong?” I finally asked, unable to hold it in any longer.

“I know this is your first time and I’m trying to make sure I have some measure of control when I enter you.” His words were stilted, and for a moment I wanted to cry. I turned away so he didn’t have to see the wet sheen in my eyes. If he didn’t want me...

He must have seen the fear in my eyes because the next thing I knew his fingers were cupped around my jaw and forcing me to face him. “Whatever’s going through your head, little beast, it’s wrong. There’s a big difference between wanting you and not wanting to hurt you. I’ve never been a gentle man in my life. I’ve been allowed to run wild, taking whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted and until now, nothing ever really mattered. But your heat...it’s intoxicating.”

Oh Goddess.

I reached out and touched his face in return. “I don’t want you to hold back,” I said. “I want you. The real you.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

Isaac

“**F**uck. Kitra. You slay me.” I slid my hands from her face down the sides of her body and across the curve of her hips. The rough texture of my hands against her smooth skin lit up my nerve endings like nothing ever before. And when I grasped her hips tightly and tilted her into the position I wanted, she nearly lost her mind.

“Isaac. Hurry,” she urged, her entire body quaking from the fiery need I could sense driving her. She grabbed onto my biceps and squeezed. She didn’t have to urge me because I was already parting her with the tip of my cock.

She sucked in her breath as I pushed slowly forward. I was bigger than I imagined she could take, but the frenzied need rioting through her core told me otherwise and as I stretched and stretched her, she cried for more.

My continued movements forward were agonizingly slow, and by the time I was most of the way in we were both shaking from the strain of holding back. Sweat coated my brow as I held her gaze the entire time until finally I pushed the rest of the way in.

Her body strained to accommodate me and I sensed how precariously I rode the fine line between pain and pleasure with her. She struggled for breath, but that didn’t mean she didn’t want more as she greedily pushed her hips up to mine to increase the friction.

“If you don’t move, I’m going to kill you,” she growled through gritted teeth.

A dark laugh erupted from me. “That’s all I needed to hear, little beast.” I drew back out, shifted my hips, and pushed back in a smooth, steady pace this time. Not hard, but not slow either. When my hips met hers, I angled myself a little differently to add just the right amount of friction to her clit to render her mindless.

“Goddess yes,” she cried out. “More. Please”

I continued my strokes in and out as her heat built to an impossible high. My nerves wound tight and I could feel we were both on the precipice of something big, but we weren’t quite there. There was something missing. I quickened my pace and she met me thrust for thrust, no longer thinking about pain or consequences or anything beyond the pure pleasure of my cock stroking in and out of the tightest pussy I’d been given the pleasure to explore. I swear I’d never felt anything quite like this.

I purred in her ear, the sound vibrating across both of our bodies as I coaxed her impossibly higher.

“Those ridges,” she gasped. “Is that what is causing this? It feels so good. It’s as if they are touching my core.”

“As if they were designed for your pleasure,” I crooned as I twisted my hips.

“Ohh. Ohh. Ohhhh.” I’d hit a new spot that got her thrashing underneath me. I grabbed her arms and pinned her down, holding her still so that I could slam into her harder this time.

“Yes!” she cried, unable to move, but still loving the way I caged her in place to give what I believed she needed. What we both needed. I’d set a punishing pace that would hurt so good, even I could no longer tell the difference between pain and pleasure. It all felt right. And really fucking good.

The harder I fucked into her the more frenzied she got. We would both come soon. But I needed her to go first. Instinctively, I knew that only the hot splash of my cum would

soothe her. As if reading my mind, she thrashed harder against me as I picked up speed, grunting with each thrust.

“I don’t know where I am anymore, but wherever it is I never want to leave this place. It’s bliss, and sensation, and pleasure so intense I can’t control it.”

“You’re not supposed to control anything about this. I am. It’s your job to simply ride the wave and enjoy.”

“I-I—.” She didn’t finish her words because she was screaming, with each one punctuated by a low keening moan. Her body and mind had separated ways.

I didn’t think anything could get better than this until I heard my dragon roar and I felt the thickening of my knot inside her. Pleasure struck my own core like lightning as the nerve endings there were taken for a wild ride of ups and down.

“Come on my cock, little beast. Cover me in that sweet slick so I can bathe you in my cum.” She might never admit it, but my filthy words sent her over the edge as she clenched hungrily against my knot. Pulse after pulse, she did exactly as I demanded, strangling me. “Just like that, Kitra, milk my cock, take it all.”

I stopped thrusting when my knot locked us tight, but the hot pulse of my continued release triggered what felt like an endless orgasm.

“You’re such a good girl. Take what you need, sweet princess.”

My statement seemed to trigger her as her gaze zeroed in on my chest only inches away from her face. Suddenly she reached forward and licked me, a confused smile crossing her face.

“You taste good,” she said, her brows pinching together, “But I don’t understand. It’s not enough. I need something more. What’s wrong with me?”

“Do what you need to, little beast,” I said with a wicked smile crossing my face as I continued to pulse inside her.

She tentatively leaned close again and bit at my skin, scoring her nails down my back as our bodies continued to convulse together. By the time she released me, I looked to see bite marks up and down my chest and I could only imagine what my back must look like.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured as my knot slipped free from her body, and I eased to my side with her in my arms.

“I’m not. That was fucking hot.” I pressed a slow kiss to her soft mouth, separating her lips so I could wind my tongue around hers. She moaned, her eyes glazing over as she licked her lips, reminding me how good she tasted and how much I wanted to taste other parts of her.

As she licked her lips again, I got the impression she thought the same.

A sudden image of me coming down her throat with her lips locked around my knot slammed into me, forcing a rumble to roll through my chest. That was all it took and another raging wave of need sparked from her and washed over me.

Another rumble in my chest acknowledged her heat, as her nipples pebbled under my now roaming hands.

“How is this happening again so soon? I can barely move.” She sounded miserable instead of satiated and I felt the dragon stir inside me, agitated.

I purred, pushing more of my alpha power into it to soothe her. “Rest assured, little beast. I will knot you as many times as it takes until your need is satiated.” I rolled her over and blanketed her with my full heat and weight a moment before I grabbed her hips and lifted her spectacular round bottom into the air.

“On your knees,” I commanded, and she immediately complied. “Good girl,” I purred, causing a slight tremor to run down her spine.

She raised to her hands and knees, but a press of my hand at her shoulder blades accompanied by my growl forced her upper body back to the bed where I wanted her. She shivered under the ferocity of my demand as the scent of her arousal

intensified and a glance between her legs brings a smile to my face. Her slick was thick and ready for me. However, when she tried to push back for my cock, I swatted across that precious porcelain ass, forcing another moan from her.

That she seemed to like my brand of rough made me almost feral.

I wound my fingers into her hair and not so gently pulled her head back so I could whisper against her ear. “Stay still and take my cock the way I wish to give it.”

She tried to nod her head, but my grip remained tight to keep her still. A shiver rippled down her spine as her strong as ever need swamped my senses. She was ready to do whatever I wanted, and that made me want to give her everything.

To keep both our sanities intact, I thrust into her hard and fast, determined to make her fall apart with pleasure until she passed out if that’s what it took to assuage her. “Goddess, Kitra. We’ve done it now. I’m going to go mad fucking this tight pussy. I’ll never get enough.”

A moan slid from her throat.

My hands gripped her hips and she shuddered under the tight grip of my hold. I held her rigid like if I didn’t she might fall apart in my hands, or disappear if I let go. This was it for me. There was no where else I wanted to be than with her and that broke something inside me.

But with her, I had to have it all.

With no need for anything but this, I pumped in and out of her with extreme force. Her heat and our need combined had broken the dam and there was no stopping it.

Her body was so hot under my hands as I roamed them across every inch of her, pinching and plucking every erogenous zone she possessed. Her hips bucked and slammed into mine as she gave as good as she got. My little beast was a ferocious little thing and I loved taking her like this.

I leaned forward and slid my hand from her hips, into her soft, wet heat and then on to her clit so I could work her even more. I knew I was going to leave marks and bruises on her body,

but it couldn't be helped. It was all too much and not enough at the same time. We both needed more, and I pushed us to the brink.

My knot was thickening and would soon lock inside her again. I pumped harder, almost brutally, throwing her into another unrelenting release that she screamed through.

"So damned perfect," I growled as the tingle at the base of my spine grew into a ball of white hot energy that exploded with my release, locking us together. I draped over her back, licking up her spine as her body convulsed underneath me. The heat we generated almost too much to bear.

When her cries became whimpers, I eased us both forward so she could rest until I could release from her body. I peppered kisses along the backs of her arms and the side of her neck still exposed to me.

"Sleep, princess. You're going to need it." I followed my command with a low purr to lull her. It seemed to work as her body went lax underneath me and we both rested. Her pressed into the bed and me resting most of my weight on my arms to spare her my full body weight.

When the knot worked free, I slid from her body and started to get up from the bed. She would need a bath soon to ease her soreness, but for now I could gently cleanse her.

Before I could clear the bed, she grabbed my arm and shifted to meet my gaze. "Isaac," she barely got the word out before I sensed another wave of desire churning inside her.

"Again?" I asked. "Are you sure?"

She didn't even answer. This time she pushed me into the bed and climbed on top of me. With her eyes glazed, her head thrown back, and the words coming from her mouth unintelligible, she rode my dick like her life depended on it.

This went on too long and I was beginning to worry. There was no way it should be this intense. She looked like a mad woman with her dark hair flying behind her and her porcelain skin mottled with my previous marks.

I palmed her breasts and squeezed her nipples before sliding my hands to where our bodies joined to aide my mate in her chase for relief.

“Why won’t it stop?” she asked, gasping as she pumped harder.

I had a good idea what she needed, but to go there... It truly was madness. If I gave her my barb, I would be connected to her forever. Normally that meant she’d be connected to me as well, but I knew nothing about what happened during a fae and shifter mating.

But she was in pain, her heat driving her to the brink over and over again. It wasn’t normal. And I couldn’t leave her like that to suffer. Not when I had the power to give her body exactly what it wanted.

I knifed forward and wrapped my body around her as she continued to move. “You need my barb,” I whispered against her skin.

“Then give it to me,” she screamed. “You have to end this. I can’t take much more.”

Her body shook in my arms as I searched her face for some sign that she understood what would happen if I did this. I was about to claim her as mine.

Mate.

The dragon whispered in my head.

Save her.

For fuck’s sake. She wasn’t going to die. I just couldn’t bear to see her suffer. She didn’t deserve this. I had started this by coming to her realm and it was up to me to finish it. Seeing my omega through her heat was a duty I relished. Despite our circumstances. Or our conflicts.

I gently laid her quivering body on the bed and came over her. If my seed planted and she got pregnant, I would not leave her. Not even for my father’s dying wish.

“Isaac,” she mumbled.

“Don’t worry, Kitra. I’ve got you. Lie still and let me help you.” While her body needed no preamble, and my dick was as hard as steel and ready to explode at the mere idea of what I was about to do, I still kissed my way down her center from her neck to the wet heat of her sex.

First, I pressed a gentle kiss against her abused clit, then I gently swiped my tongue between her folds. As the taste of our mingled essences exploded across my tongue, I reveled in her keening moan that filled the room.

“I know, little beast. You’re ready. But I had to have a taste.” And already I was addicted.

I gently came over her, and slipped inside her as carefully as I could. While she was eager as ever, I knew she had to be sore. Her hands tangled in my hair and pulled me down for a deep kiss as I took us both to the brink once again. With my knot in place and my decision made, the barb vibrated under its sheath until I released it.

As it found its way to her pleasure center, I kissed her mercilessly until it was settled in place and vibrating fervently.

“Oh my—What is—Why is that so goooooood?” She screamed long and low as I once again bathed her in heat, convulsing with my own pleasure as she melted under me.

We clung to each other through the whole thing, as I claimed her as mine. This certainly would complicate our uncertain futures, but I vowed to do everything in my power to protect her. Even if that meant protecting her from me.

And that deep, dark part of me knew damned well that’s exactly where we were headed.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

Kitra

He'd been wrong about ending my heat. While the worst of it had eased, and I was feeling more like myself again, I still wanted him—a lot.

Of course after that first day, I'd slept through two more, so my body had time to recover.

Currently, I was on my knees in bed behind Isaac, rubbing the massive muscles of his shoulders and neck. He'd tried to push me away, but after all he'd done to care for me, I wanted to do something nice for him too. Besides just having sex.

“Do you want some of these before I eat them all?” He held up one of the orange maple muffins he'd found on the porch this morning.

“Goddess, no. I already gorged on too many. They are incredible, but my stomach will explode if I eat anymore.”

He grunted as he stuffed the last one in his mouth whole. I had to pull my lips between my teeth to keep from barking with laughter.

“Are all dragons like you?” I asked.

“You've spent years around Magnus, what do you think?”

“I think Magnus never gave me the time of day, let alone shared anything personal with me. Although I might venture to say that he is as surly as you.”

“Then you should meet Ian,” he snarled. “He’s always bitching about something. The man will nitpick a person to death if you don’t put him in his place.”

“Every time you mention your brother, it’s about the two of your fighting. Why were you always so mean to him?” I asked, plopping back into my comfy stack of pillows, exhausted.

Isaac stood and stripped his pants and then climbed back into the bed with me. “He got on my nerves. I might have been the firstborn and in line to be the next leader, but it was clear that no one wanted that for me. I was too volatile. Too prone to fights. Too foolish.”

“So you were basically angry all the time.”

He sighed. “I guess. Although I’d prefer the term annoyed.”

I smiled weakly as a wave of exhaustion took control. “You are an Alpha. Doesn’t having a mean streak kind of come with the territory? What about your father? What was he like as a king.”

“Temperamental, but fair. He ran his shifter kingdom with an iron fist, but he always said that he never did anything that wasn’t absolutely necessary.”

I wasn’t sure what to think of that. I’d seen Isaac’s temper and his ability to be cruel. But most of it had been deserved. Although what he had against Ensley I didn’t understand. He bullied her to no end and for no apparent reason other than he seemed to enjoy it.

“From what you’ve said and what I’ve seen, shifters seem to lack patience.”

“We have high standards and a low tolerance for mistakes. But most of all we have no choice. If we show any sort of weakness, then we’ll be challenged. Look what the witches did when we let our guard down.”

“I can’t imagine. If I was locked out of the fae realm, I think I would go crazy too. Although if I don’t get my magic back, I might as well be locked out...”

“I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you, little beast.” I was drifting into sleep when he said the words, but I felt the warmth of them along with the touch of his fingers tracing along my spine. “You are a treasure to be protected.”

I wasn’t sure he could keep that promise. When he returned to the human realm, I would be on my own. With any luck, I would at least have my magic back, and that would help. “There’s a battle coming,” I reminded him. And whether he realized it or not, it wasn’t just between us and them. If we found the amulet, then we would face off with each other.

This mating thing between us would mean nothing in the face of that. Sex was amazing, but that didn’t mean we were in love, and fate could be cruel. I turned my face away from him so he wouldn’t see the tears leaking from my eyes. There weren’t many, but it was still embarrassing.

His fingers were still coasting over my skin, and despite the fact that he’d just given me multiple orgasms before breakfast, my need for more spiked again, perfuming the air with a fresh wave of the slick building between my thighs.

I shouldn’t need him again this soon, but my legs trembled nonetheless. “Isaac,” I pleaded quietly.

“Tell me.”

I whimpered at his demand. He got off on hearing me beg for his cock. And while that should have pissed me off, I either didn’t care or I kind of liked when he got like that.

At times, he could be an alpha dick. But if I was completely honest with myself, I liked that darker side to him. Maybe because I suspected there was a softer side to him as well. Somewhere deep in there. Maybe.

“Don’t be mean,” I frowned as my body arced in his direction, desperately wanting a lot more of his touch. Especially in certain places.

“Don’t pretend you don’t like it. The words may not come naturally to you yet, but the wanton desire certainly does. And if I want to hear your little whimpers and cries as you beg for

me to give you what you need, then that's a small price to pay."

I pouted, but as his nostrils flared, I remembered that I couldn't hide the effect his words had on me. His dragon senses could scent every spike of my arousal and every lie that fell from my lips.

"You can't make me beg." I realized my mistake as soon as I said the words. His eyes darkened and that sexy rumble in his chest sounded. It was a weird reminder that he had a dragon inside him, and he had a part in this too.

"You shouldn't have said that, little beast. Both the dragon and I take that as a challenge."

I whimpered again, knowing full well that he would make sure he got exactly what he wanted before I got what I wanted. As if to prove that, his fingers drifted around my torso and into the wet heat between my legs.

"Please," I said again.

He laughed, a dark sound that didn't sound a bit jovial, and all devilish if you asked me. "Please what?"

I clamped my lips shut, determined to last as long as I could before giving in, even if we both knew that wouldn't be long from now.

He gently pushed two fingers inside me and I moaned at the delicious friction all while knowing it would never be enough to satisfy me. Not after having his knot inside me, torturing me with pleasure. He had ruined me then, and I wanted him to do it again.

"Isaac," I keened. "More."

"The words," he growled in my ear, his rumble vibrating louder until I practically felt it in my clit. I'd called the sound he made a purr, but now that I was more attuned to it, it clearly was more. Either way, it resonated through me, making my nipples stiff. Even now my body was already reaching for the release it so desperately wanted. But it wasn't going to happen like this.

“I want your cock,” I gasped.

“And?”

My back arched from the mattress as his fingers moved faster, harder. The man was relentless.

“The knot. Goddess help me, I need it.”

That dark rumbling sound returned and I felt that mocking tone all the way to my core. Part of me wanted to swat at him for it, but I couldn't do it. Not when he removed his fingers. Not when he rolled on top of me. Nor when he slowly pushed himself inside me, seemingly cautious of whether I might still be sore.

But the more I ached, the more slick I produced, making it easy for him to stretch me to fit around his thickness. My eyes rolled to the back of my head when the swollen knot rubbed against me. It would get much larger before this was over and I eagerly anticipated the pleasure it gave me.

“Such a good girl,” he crooned in my ear, making any resistance disappear. I scratched at his back and wrapped my legs around his hips to give him the best angle.

I'd never truly known I could feel this wanton. This needy. Nor that I would love it as much as I did. The arousal he'd first triggered days ago was nothing compared to the insanity of this. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't see beyond the man in front of me. And I certainly couldn't feel anything but the intense pleasure making my body come alive as he spread me impossibly open.

“You are still so fucking tight. Are you sure I'm not hurting you?”

If I wasn't so desperate I might have thought about how considerate his question was. As it was, I just wanted more and more.

“It feels so good,” I moaned as his knot swelled more and pushed against all my nerve endings at once.

“I'm going to ride you so fucking hard, little beast,” he warned a moment before he pumped harder. I dug my nails into his

back and my heels against his stellar ass as he moved wildly over me. I could already feel the build of what would surely be another massive mind-blowing orgasm.

He suddenly stopped and pulled free.

“No, what are you—”

“Don’t complain. I just want to make a little adjustment.” He grabbed one of the pillows from the bed and placed it underneath my bottom, angling the lower half of my body upwards. “I’m about to go deep, little beast,” he growled a moment before he was between my legs and plunging into me again.

Where I’d already thought he’d touched every inch of me, I discovered I was wrong. At this angle he did manage to work himself deeper and the strokes were mind bending. And as if my body knew exactly what it needed, more of my slick fluids coated his cock and my thighs, allowing him to go just a little bit farther.

Three strokes later and I was convulsing.

“Isaac!” I shouted as my latest orgasm ripped through me.

A growl erupted from him at the same time. “Fuck yes. Your cunt is so perfect. Squeeze me, little beast because I’m about to fill you with my cum and then when it starts to leak out of you, I’m going to push it back in. And then I’ll do it again and again until you pass out.”

His filthy words shot me into the sky with the stars as they exploded behind my eyes. He was pumping harder now and a moment later I felt the heat of him as he did as promised. Stroke after stroke. I opened my eyes to the golden glow of his dragon looking down at me through his eyes.

I wasn’t sure if that was supposed to freak me out, but it did not. The dragon was as much a part of Isaac as his heart. I embraced it. Fae creatures were all different. And dragons were born of the fae. He may not live in this realm, but he belonged here or there. He had a choice. Stay or go.

I only hoped he chose to stay.

Even though I knew he wouldn't.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

Kitra

By the time I woke, a new morning's sunlight shone through the cottage windows. I'd slept for many hours. I stretched my arms and legs and worked to ease the soreness.

I hadn't had such a good night's sleep in so long, I'd forgotten how blissful it could be. Of course, this cottage and its amazing comforts added to that heightened state.

I rubbed my hands along the soft fur of the pillow underneath my head and marveled at how good it felt to be in this bed.

Although...

I lifted my head and searched for what was missing.

"Isaac?"

When only the silence greeted me, I forced myself from under the cocoon of covers and first rushed into the bathroom to relieve myself and then into the rest of the tiny cottage to search for Isaac. As if a giant dragon man could hide in so small of a space.

Obviously, he'd gone out. Maybe his dragon needed out. My stomach flickered with worry. We weren't in Faldikar, but that didn't guarantee he was safe from the imps. It had been too long since I'd lived in this realm and any number of things could have changed.

Including imps moving in from other realms.

I hoped not. That thought was quickly followed by a stab of guilt. If not for Ensley, I doubted Isaac and I would have made it this far. And I was pretty sure I had her to thank for the extra creature comforts of this place.

Speaking of.

If I was going to have to wait for Isaac to return, I might as well do it in comfort. I started towards the bedroom area and that insanely fluffy nest-like bed, but I was stopped in my tracks by a loud boom and the ground shaking under my feet a moment later.

Isaac had returned and he was in dragon form.

I ran to the window to peer out and get another good look. I may not ever wish to fly with him again, but that didn't mean I didn't love the look of his dragon.

His beast was massive in size, and his mostly black scales shimmered in the sunlight. I couldn't smell the earthy scent of the smoke wafting off of him, but it didn't take much to imagine it. It reminded me of wood smoke, which I loved, but that undertone of him gave it that something extra that always grabbed my attention.

I didn't turn away as magic swept over him and he turned from dragon to man with very little effort and almost no transition. One minute he was a gigantic creature and the next a gorgeous man.

A totally naked one too. I admired his comfort in his own skin. It was well-deserved, because let's face it, he was sculpted to perfection. But it was more than that. He had a confidence that came from inside and had nothing to do with his physical appearance.

He looked up and caught me watching, and before I could scramble my way behind the curtains, a wide smile crossed his face that melted my insides to jelly and made it impossible for me to move. Despite the multiple orgasms from the last several days and the soreness in nearly every part of my body, desire rose swift and sharp.

As he dressed from the pack he always wore around his neck, I wanted to cry out with complaint. If we were going to go back to the nest and abate this pressure building in my core, he would not need those trousers.

With his pants fastened, but his chest still bare, Isaac approached the cottage. I did my best to take a few deep breaths and get myself under control. There had to be more to him and I than just this. After only a few days, we'd become an effective team, and soon we would be out there facing more danger than ever before.

We had to make our way inside the belly of the beast, and I couldn't afford to be distracted by this other business.

"Morning," he said, walking in and leaving the door open behind him. "I'd ask if you slept well, but you were dead to the world when I left."

I smiled at his assessment. "You wore me out. I needed the sleep to recover."

His nostrils flared and I watched his eyes dilate over my scent. "It's far from over though. You'll need my cock a lot more before this is over."

"And you are far too pleased with that fact. If said cock didn't come with so much pleasure, I'd be tempted to cut you off."

"Ouch," he laughed and covered his groin. "Don't talk about cutting anything off and my cock in the same sentence. You'll give me nightmares."

"Is there nothing more important to you than your manhood?" I tried to keep a serious look on my face, but I failed miserably and a laugh bubbled out.

"Yes," he said, grabbing me by the shoulders and pulling me flush against his body. "Keeping you safe."

My smile disappeared and my stomach fluttered violently. No one other than my true parents had ever cared about my safety.

"Isaac," I whispered, unsure what else to say while feeling so unsure about my feelings.

“I know that not having your magic has been a serious blow to your safety. Although you did manage to get out of a dungeon without it and that shouldn’t be discounted. From what I saw of the place, the King takes the security down there pretty seriously.”

“I thought it was dumb luck. One of the guards screwed up when chaining my cell that last time. The lock malfunctioned and after some time I was able to work it free. But now we know that Magnus had a hand in it.”

“That’s not dumb luck, Kitra. It’s brilliant thought process. How many other prisoners would even think to check something like that? And Magnus’s involvement in your escape is the only thing that may keep him alive.”

His generous praise swept over me and caused my already jelly like insides to get positively molten. I wasn’t even sure what to say to that. Was thank you enough of a response? I didn’t think it was.

I reached up on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his, initiating a soft kiss that I hoped would be enough to express my thanks. I slid my tongue inside to tangle with his and melted deeper into his embrace.

This went on for several minutes before he gently pushed me away from him. “Okay, before we let this go too far and you end up bent over with my cock deep inside you, there’s something else I wanted to show you.

My core pulsed and I took a deep breath to move past it. I was more than a walking, talking doll waiting for a man to breed me. I had to be.

“What is it?” I asked as I breathed through the rush of need.

“Come with me. It won’t take long. And then we can get back to your other pressing need.” He grabbed my hand and led me to the door.

“Wait,” I screeched, pulling free. “I need my dress. I’m not parading outside like this.” I waved my hand over my still naked body.

“There’s no one here but me and I’ve seen every beautiful inch. There’s no reason to hide now.”

I shook my head. “I don’t care. I’m still not going out there like this. I’ve happily let you push many of my boundaries since we met, but this one...? Not happening.”

He started laughing as I disappeared behind the bookcase into the bed area. “You’re sexy as hell when you put your foot down.”

I laughed too as I swiped my abandoned dress from the floor and dumped it over my head. All of the rest could wait too as I padded back to Isaac’s side, and looked up at him anxious to see what he might want to show me.

I didn’t normally go for surprises, but only because these days a surprise was never a good thing. And as jaded as that sounded, it was still the truth.

“Ready?” he asked, grabbing my hand and pulling me towards the still open door without waiting for an answer.

His normal grumpy exterior seemed to soften with each step. Or maybe it had happened before and I was only just now noticing it. But something had changed about him, and I couldn’t quite pinpoint it.

“Just around here.” He led me around the corner of the cottage and to an open field not far from the back door.

A field big enough to hold a dragon. My stomach plummeted to my feet. My steps faltered. I hope he didn’t plan on...

“What’s wrong?” he asked after I froze and refused to budge another step.

“Look, as much as I love looking at your dragon and even rubbing my hands along his incredible features, and just because we are having sex and you’ve gotten in your head that I’m yours, does not mean I am going back into the sky with you. I was serious about not doing that again.”

“What? No. I mean I would like you to go for another ride when you aren’t under duress or in danger. But this has nothing to do with that.”

Relief swept over me. “So what’s this about then?”

“You see that circle out there?”

I looked to where he pointed to see a target set up. “Um... yeah.”

“I got you this from the village this morning.” He reached behind a boulder next to him and pulled a tall, skinny pack with arrows poking out from the top of it and what looked like the end of a bow.

“You got me a bow?” I hoped I didn’t sound as idiotic as I felt, but I didn’t understand. “What am I supposed to do with it?”

He laughed, and I soaked up the rumbling sound like a sponge. I was never going to get enough of it. “Yeah. Without your magic, you need something else to protect yourself. Don’t get me wrong. Keeping you safe is a job I take seriously and intend to do everything in my power to ensure it. But, depending on how things go when we return, I want you to feel safe no matter what, so having a back up protection system in place won’t hurt.”

I stood stock still simply staring at him. I wasn’t much of an archer, but the idea that he’d gotten this for me so that I’d have my own form of protection made my insides tremble. It had been a long time since I’d felt truly safe and even longer since someone concerned themselves over me.

If I hadn’t already started seeing Isaac from a different lens, this gesture gave me more to consider.

“Thank you,” I said, accepting the bow and arrows with a trembling hand.

“Would you like to give them a try?”

I snorted. “Yes!” I clapped my hands. “It’s been years since I’ve done this. I am not sure I’ll be any good at it, but I can’t wait to give them a shot.”

“If you set your intentions and trust your instincts, then I think you’ll be fine. Plus, I’m a pretty good teacher. We can practice as much as you want while we’re here, and then when we head

back through the portal, you'll have an extra something to keep you safe"

I fought not to cry. I don't know why this gift made me so emotional, but I was grateful for Isaac taking the time to do this. To hide my face, I bent my head and pulled both the bow and an arrow from the quiver and I moved a little closer to the target.

I lined up the arrow, lifted the bow and pulled the string back towards my ear like I'd been taught as a child. I took a deep breath and then eased it out slow and released the string at the same time. The arrow flew far but wild, hitting the edge of the target but as far from the bullseye as it could get.

"Okay, so you'll need more practice. No big deal. We've got some time. How about another?"

I nodded, repeating the move and getting the arrow a little more on the target.

"See," he exclaimed. "Two shots and you're already making progress."

We both laughed and for the rest of the day we alternated between time in bed, eating food, and target shooting. The day would go down in my book as one of the best I'd ever had. And if my stomach fluttered every time I looked at Isaac, or I screamed his name every time he made me orgasm then that didn't have to mean anything other than we enjoyed each other's company.

I wasn't falling for him, or anything crazy like that.

And he certainly didn't love me back despite the gifts and attention he continued to shower on me.

We were just two people with the same goals.

And soon they would clash, leaving us no other option than to become enemies again.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

Isaac

The morning dawned as gloomy as my black heart. Although after the last week alone with Kitra in a cocoon of bliss one might not consider my heart as dark as it once was.

They'd be wrong. It was still black, but there were new cracks.

Sure, the mating heat pulled our bodies together to both of our enjoyment. But in between those moments, I'd enjoyed listening to her talk. Her grief for her mother still seemed fresh, and it drove many of her actions.

For a brief time we'd been in a bubble where the rest of the world didn't exist. But the moment I saw the rain and Sprite sitting in the tree outside, I knew our little game of house was about to come crashing down on our heads.

Kitra's scent had changed overnight. She still smelled like peaches and pine, but it no longer carried the undertone of urgency. Her mating heat had broken.

"Kitra." I nudged her with my shoulder, but when I turned to look at her she was already sitting and wide awake.

"It's time," she whispered.

"Aye. Why don't you get dressed and I'll make tea and gather what we have left for a quick breakfast."

“You don’t have to make food for me anymore. Besides, I’m not hungry.”

The bitter tone in her voice soured my stomach as well. And that never happened. Not a moment went by that my dragon didn’t want food and more food. His appetite was ravenous.

We dressed in silence until the dreaded knock sounded at the door. I was kind of surprised she didn’t just appear in the room with us like usual.

“That’s Ensley,” I informed her.

She looked at me sharply, her eyes narrowed.

“What?”

“I think that’s the first time you ever used her true name.”

I shrugged. “Don’t get excited. It doesn’t mean anything. She’s still a thorn in my side.” I poured water into a teapot and set it on the wood stove for heating and with a hard breath of dragon fire set it all to blaze.

The door opened and Sprite stood there watching over us, observing, but saying nothing. I could feel the caution and condemnation in her gaze as she looked over at me. Apparently, our truce had come to an end.

“It’s time to go.”

I watched Kitra flinch from the corner of my eye. As anxious as we’d both been a week ago to find that amulet, the fever for it had cooled. Now it would be stoked back to flame and if I wasn’t careful we’d both get burned.

That amulet was still my only chance at breaking my people’s curse, and if that worked, only then would my father’s sacrifice begin to be worth his loss. I had no choice but to keep that in my sights. Kitra would have to accept that. There was no other choice.

“We’ll be ready to go in a few minutes.” I spoke the words more harshly than I’d intended, but I could feel my nerves beginning to fray the more I watched Kitra go through the motions of packing her meager belongings in her pack and then mine.

It took all of my control to keep from demanding she stop. Her body had recognized and welcomed me to her bed. I'd marked her as mine in every way that I could. Even ways I had vowed not to. And yet... I would still have to break her heart.

The amulet could not be sacrificed.

I fixed the tea the way she liked it with a touch of honey and handed it over to her.

"Thank you," she offered quietly, her continued compliance setting me more on edge.

We drank in silence until the Sprite shook her head, turned, and walked back out the door. I guessed she didn't want to watch whatever this was shatter to pieces.

"About the whole mating thing," she began.

I could feel the denial coming a mile away and I had to stop her before she did something crazy. Like incite the dragon and send him or me back into the pits of madness that always seemed to be waiting with open arms when we couldn't face whatever hardship had come to bear.

"Don't, Princess. We don't have time to get into this now. We've got to keep our minds clear and focused on what we must do. The consequences of our actions will come later."

She nodded, but I could read the doubt on her face and feel my own burning in my chest. I turned away then, and gathered my pack and shoved my feet into my boots. Unable to resist her touch despite everything, I grabbed her hand and led us both into the garden where Sprite waited for us.

"I hope you won't be this slow when you get to the palace. Otherwise, you might as well give up now."

Her caustic words scraped down my spine as I was sure she'd intended.

"We're more than ready to deal with whatever comes our way. Aren't we, Princess?"

"Of course." She patted the sheath holding her bow and smiled.

“I hope you’re right,” Sprite said as she jumped from the low hanging tree-branch she sat on, and set her wings to flapping. “Follow me.”

When she didn’t take the path back to the falls, we both stopped and looked at each other. “Where the hell are you taking us, Sprite?”

“You? To hell if I have anything to say about it.”

Kitra sighed. “Can’t you just call her by name? A little kindness goes a long way.”

I snorted. “She’s a demon. What do they know about kindness? And you don’t seem to mind my using your nickname.”

“What the hell, Isaac? What has gotten into you this morning? She not only helped us get this far, but she provided us comfortable shelter for the last several days. How can you say that’s not kindness?”

“You’re too naive. I’m sure there’s a reason and it has nothing to do with her good heart.”

“Okaaaay,” Kitra sniffed. “The grump is officially back. Great.”

“Stop talking and get moving. We have to get there before the tide comes in,” Ensley interrupted.

“Tide? What nonsense are you spouting now? I thought we had to go back through the portal.”

When Kitra sent me another harsh glare, I sighed and relented. “Ensley,” I said through gritted teeth.

The imp didn’t stop or slow, she just kept moving in and out of the trees, following no path as she made her way to some unknown destination.

“I’m going to follow her.” Kitra took off after the little demon, and on an exasperated breath I did as well. I wasn’t going to let my mate walk into demon led danger without me to keep her safe. Wherever she needed to go I would follow.

“Let’s hope this way doesn’t lead to more of her kind and their poison darts. We need to stay alert,” I whispered to Kitra when I caught up with her.

“Are all dragons as paranoid as you?” Sprite suddenly stopped and turned back to us. “I think if I wanted either of you dead, it would have been done by now, don’t you think?”

She had a point, but I had no intention of admitting that. Instead, I let the dragon flash through my eyes and forced her back.

Kitra stepped between us, her back bravely to me. “Appease the dragon and tell us where we’re going? I trust you, but knowledge is as important as trust.”

The silence around us stretched and I was about to break it with a mind-bending roar. “Why bother helping us if you’re going to throw it all away now?”

Kitra whirled on me. “Shut up, Isaac. Seriously. Enough.”

Under the guidance of the end justifies the means, I held my tongue. But I began a tally for my little beast and all the punishment she had just earned. Later when I had her draped across my lap, my hand burning her ass, we’d see who would be the one giving out the orders and making demands.

Sprite laughed and I gritted my teeth and planned her demise when this was all over.

“There is another way back to the realm. It will drop you deeper into the dark forest, but it will at least give you a chance at making it back to the castle. Magnus and his King’s guard have set up a perimeter around the falls.”

“I thought they would have lost interest by now,” Kitra mused, her heart beginning to race.

“I guess the King is pretty determined to have his Princess.” She disliked when I called her that, but if her annoyance with me took away some of her fear, it was well worth it. Not to mention I liked her when she got feisty.

“I am not worth all of that.”

I didn't agree and judging by the look on the imp's face, it was safe to say she didn't believe it either.

"You are worth everything and more. But I guess Ensley is correct. We need to get moving and finish this before it gets worse."

A sly smile crossed the little demon's face as she turned and continued her erratic path.

"I shudder to think of what would be worse," Kitra murmured as she followed.

I didn't want to voice my concerns, but there was no doubt in my mind our situation would get a lot worse. I only hoped that Kitra would one day forgive me for what I had to do.

CHAPTER
THIRTY

Ian

Scotland

“I feel like we’ve been through these books a thousand times.” I shoved the latest one, a tome of ancient alchemies, back on the desk and rubbed my fingers across my eyes.

“We have gone through them a lot.” Cordelia set her own book down and crossed over to my desk. She moved behind me and began rubbing at my shoulders.

“Too much time has passed. If Isaac and father’s plan to break the curse hasn’t worked by now, I’m afraid it’s never going to happen.”

“And would that be so bad? We have an incredible family and community here. And I’ve watched you agonize over what happened with those two and how hard it was for you to understand, let alone forgive. But you did. Whatever Isaac’s faults, he gave your father what he needed in the end. I don’t think we need more than that to be happy.”

A smile pulled at my lips. “I just don’t want their deaths to be in vain.”

“They’re not. I may not have known either of them all that well, but from what I’ve read and what your mother has seen in her visions, all they really wanted was for their family to be reunited. And that we accomplished despite the curse.”

I nodded. "I don't even think of the way Isaac and I fought with each other anymore. Nor do I linger on the memories of all the trouble he caused. But I do miss him."

She pressed her lips to my head. "Of course you do. The two of you shared everything growing up. He is your twin, and we both know that comes with a special bond. Hard or not, it shaped the man you've become."

I twisted in my chair and pulled her onto my lap with a squeal from her. "Do you think if he'd made it through the veil and found the amulet it would have changed anything?"

"I think the what-if is not the point anymore. The thing is they had an idea, albeit a wild and risky one, and they were willing to risk their lives for their family. Even Isaac, who'd seemed to care about no one but himself had gone along with your father's plan. That's what we should focus on, don't you think?"

"Perhaps you are right. Trying to break through to another realm seems ridiculous at best and foolhardy at worst."

"Of course I am," she giggled. "If only the rest of you realized it more often."

"Ahh. Do you not think your King appreciates his Queen enough?" I smiled down at her as I palmed her breast through her blouse to discover her nipple hard and eager for my touch.

"I didn't say that," she whispered.

"Oh, but you certainly implied it well enough." I pressed my mouth to the small indent of her neck and savored the sweet scent of her skin.

"Never," she panted. "I only want you to be happy."

I pulled back and stared into the dark depths of her eyes. Had my quest to figure out my brother taken too great of a toll? Mother's visions were too vague to obtain any clear answers, but I'd had my own dreams about Isaac that had led me to an understanding of where his head might have been.

Every one of us had suffered in our own ways through those years and I was in no position to judge my father or my twin

for their actions.

“I am happy. More than any one man has a right to be.” I touched her silky lips and thanked the Goddess once again for sending this woman to me.

“If anything, your resentment should be focused on me. If not for the evil works of my coven, none of this would have happened.”

I growled, loudly, filling the room with the warning I felt to my soul. “I have never, nor would I ever blame you for what happened. I know you know this, but if you need me to say it again, I will. You were an innocent pawn and had no culpability in their actions. What they did to you was as reprehensible to what they did to the rest of my family.”

“I know but—”

“There is no but in this discussion. I won’t have it. My issues with my brother have persisted for years, and what happened on the night of our wedding only brought everything to a head. It had to happen.”

Her gaze softened, and if not for the fact our children were afoot, I would have bent her over this desk and shown her once again how thankful I truly was for having her in my life.

“We should do something to honor your brother. Your father has that beautiful cliffside monument.”

I sat up straighter, pushing my mate to her feet as I realized what a perfect idea that was. Swatting her gorgeous ass playfully, I smiled up at her. “Have I told you recently how brilliant you are?”

A wide smile crossed her face and some of the tightness I’d carried in my chest lessened. If I couldn’t tell Isaac in person that I’d come to understand the sacrifice he made, the least I could do would be to speak it to the Goddess in front of the entire kingdom as my witnesses.

“Wow. I’m right and brilliant in the same day. I don’t know if I can take all this praise at once.” She raised her palm to her forehead and made like she was about to swoon.

A dark laugh rumbled through my chest alongside some equally dark thoughts as I imagined her on her knees in front of me squeezing my knot as I told her what a good girl she was...

“If it’s praise you seek, I have some ideas on how you can receive more.” When her smile fell, and the scent of her sudden lust filled the room, I knew what had to be done. “Go and lock the door.”

“What about the—”

“The staff can handle them a bit longer.” I stood, my hand going to my belt and I began to unfasten it. “You should know by now that this Alpha will never let his omega’s needs go unfulfilled.”

“I love you, Ian.” Her words trembled and her hands shook as she reached to help me. It nearly caused my dragon to explode from my skin to see her like this.

“Forever, Cordelia,” I whispered before taking her mouth in a kiss that I knew would leave us both reeling for more. And in the end it was I who ended up on my knees and the sweet taste of my omega forever burned onto my tongue.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

Kitra

“**W**e’re here,” Ensley announced, coming to a stop at the mouth of a tiny cave. Although calling it a cave was too generous. From its small size I would call it no more than a tunnel.

“You must be joking.” Isaac came up beside me and we both bent down and peered into the dark hole. “I doubt I will even fit through that.”

“It’s not my fault you’re so big,” Ensley smirked.

Isaac moved to go after her and I grabbed his arm and shook my head. “You know it doesn’t help if you frighten her. Now would not be the time for her to disappear.”

“This better not be a trick.”

I shook my head, tired of the constant back and forth between these two.

“I can go back on my own if need be. I know what I need and where to find it.”

“That’s not happening,” he snarled.

“That won’t be necessary. The magic will make it work. Although I wouldn’t recommend turning dragon while in there.” She giggled, and even I felt it all the way down my spine. I had no idea why she wanted to help us, but what choice did we have? I had to get my magic back at any cost.

“Go now, before it’s too late.” We both looked down when the water at the edge of the bank lapped at our feet. As she’d predicted, it was already beginning to rise.

We started forward, but at the mouth of the tunnel I realized she still stood on the opposite bank. “Aren’t you coming?”

“No. You have to do this on your own.”

“I told you she was up to something. What’s waiting for us on the other side? A horde of demons?”

She shook her head. “I hope one day, dragon, that you will learn to trust. Without someone at your side that you can believe in, you are never going to get what you want.”

“Don’t give me your cryptic bullshit, and tell me what’s on the other side,” he roared, his patience obliterated as the water crept towards the tunnel.

“I did. The dark forest. No one will be expecting you there because very few know of its existence, and if they did they wouldn’t venture that far into the darkness unless their life depended on it.”

“And even you don’t want to go to that part of the forest?” I asked, beginning to see Isaac’s point.

“That is true. But I am not you. If you trust in each other and believe in what you hope to gain, then you’ll make it. Now hurry.”

I hesitated, looking between the tunnel, the imp, and a dragon I was connected to. What chance did I have if I didn’t go? I had to get my magic back or I’d be nothing.

“I’m going.” I didn’t wait for Isaac to respond before I dropped to the ground and crawled into the darkness. I couldn’t see very far ahead of me, but I was going to have to do as Ensley said and trust in her. A tingle of warm magic moved through me and I gasped.

Mother.

I knew it was impossible, but if there was some chance she watched me from beyond the veil then she would find a way to encourage me.

“Kitra? What’s wrong?”

At the sound of Isaac’s voice behind me, the warmth disappeared and I was left wondering if I’d imagined it. I refused to accept that.

“Nothing. It’s all good. Are you coming?”

“Aye. I told you I have to see this through.”

I nodded even though he likely couldn’t see me. He was as devoted to his needs as I was to mine. I pushed forward, forcing myself to keep my mind on the task at hand. Getting through this forsaken tunnel and hopefully not dying in the process.

I had no idea how long we crawled, but the further along we went, the closer the walls got until I worried I wouldn’t fit, let alone him.

“Your heart’s racing, Princess. Take a deep breath. Take it easy.”

“I’m scared. It’s getting really tight in here.”

“Tell me about it. My arms and legs have been scraping the walls since we entered. So much for the magic.”

“I believe we’ll make it and you should too.” The sound of the dragon rumbling echoed through the cavern as I picked my way through what I hoped was mud and nothing more than a dead rat or two. I shivered thinking about it but refused to let my mind imagine anything worse.

Ten minutes later we hit a foul smell and I began to gag. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Sure you can. We have got to be almost there.”

As if his words conjured the magic from thin air, a soft green glow lit the space around us and magic tingled and washed over me. One second I was crawling through a nightmare and the next I was on my hands and knees in the middle of a murky forest, inches deep in a foul swamp.

“What the hell?”

“Oh shit. We need to move.” I stood to my feet and tried to run. But the thick goo around my boots was like moving through lead.

“Why? What’s wrong?” He didn’t sound any happier than I felt.

“This is the black bog. It’s supposedly where the demons bury the dead and diseased. All manner of creepy crawlies live in here and I don’t want to know what happens to a demon after death, do you?”

“Fuck no.”

Before I could respond, Isaac had his arm wrapped around me and lifted me into the air. He didn’t exactly run either, but he did still move twice as fast as I did.

“I think I’m sinking.”

“What?” I tried to look down at his feet but they were too deep and it was too dark. We’d gone from the overcast gray of morning in one realm to what looked like the dead of night in the dark forest. I didn’t think time moved differently between fae realms, but I couldn’t be sure. “Let me down. You’re probably sinking because of me.”

“Hardly.” But by the time we’d gone ten more feet the dark mud had risen to my butt.

“If you don’t let me down, we’re not going to make it.”

“If I let you down, I’ll lose you to this nightmare.”

I wanted to rail at him for making decisions for me, but this wasn’t the time to fight. He was making headway to the embankment—slowly.

A wail sounded behind us and I started to look over his shoulder.

“Don’t. Whatever the hell it is, I don’t want to know.”

I nodded tightly, my muscles tense as he pushed harder to get through the sludge. Another wail sounded from my right side and I twisted.

“Don’t. Just close your eyes or look at me. I need everything I’ve got working to get us out of this mess. I cannot worry about what kind of dead demons are trying to reach us at the same time.”

“Okay.” I opened my mouth to take shallow breaths, because the stench coming from whatever was coming, smelled like ass.

“We’re almost there.”

As soon as he said it, something brushed my hand at his back and I screamed, yanking it away. “It’s right there.”

“I know.” His words were hard to understand, and I had a feeling it was the dragon in charge now, not Isaac.

Goddess, if we didn’t die from whatever had touched me, then surely I would when my heart burst from fear. I looked up at Isaac’s face to keep from looking anywhere else and sure enough, his eyes glowed golden and his skin was dark from the push of scales right up against it.

Isaac was no longer Isaac. He still held me in human arms, but the rest that I could see was unrecognizable. Monstrous even.

Another brush against my arm and I was ready to fling myself away from it. I grabbed onto Isaac’s shirt and buried my face in his chest, hoping we weren’t about to die. Not like this. Please. I didn’t think there was anyone listening to hear my pleas, but I offered everything I had to the moon goddess and my mother’s spirit that I could.

But the wailing grew louder, and I was pretty sure there were a lot more than two of them about to catch us. Isaac went down, and the sludge of the swamp went up to my neck. His arms loosened and I had no choice but to turn and look. We were nearly surrounded by black mist, but through that nightmare I saw the embankment only feet away.

Yes. I slid from his loosened arms and pushed myself through the thick, sludge like liquid until my feet touched solid ground and with burning muscles and pure adrenalin I pulled myself free from the swamp. I fell onto my stomach and into the dirt, but I didn’t care. I was prepared to kiss the ground.

Isaac.

My stomach seized as I tried to turn around and find him. But the swamp was fully encased in black swirling smoke, making it impossible to see anything. Whatever it was, or they were, they must have been magically confined to the water because where I sat was now clear.

“Isaac” I screamed, but he didn’t respond, or if he did, I couldn’t hear him over the keening wails of the dead demons. What the hell kind of cursed place had Ensley dropped us into? If I lost Isaac, I would choke her with my bare hands.

I pulled myself back to the water’s edge, but when the shape of a demon broke free from the plume, I was forced to retreat. Unshed tears burned in my eyes as I called out for him over and over, desperate to hear his voice or anything that would indicate he was still alive.

I tried again to broach the liquid, prepared to give my own life for his if that’s what it took when a loud roar tore through the darkness and a shot of fire emerged from the middle of the swamp.

Isaac had managed to turn fully to his dragon form, bringing both his body out of the water and allowing his fire full reign. The smoke or demon forms or whatever it was, dissipated. Hell, maybe it had been a magical illusion designed to frighten fae to death.

Sadly, in my case, it had almost worked. My pulse still raced, and my heart still threatened to beat out of my chest as Isaac flew into the tree line and then back down to shore not too far from where I stood. The ground rattled under the force of his landing, and if his roar hadn’t woken every creature in the forest, then him shaking the earth certainly did.

I slumped to the ground in relief as Isaac’s dragon melted away under the magic that returned him to me. My pulse still fluttered erratically, but at least our deaths didn’t seem as imminent as it had moments ago. I glanced around. Now we only had to get through the rest of forest and into the palace without further incident.

“Are you okay?” Isaac bolted in my direction, his hands going everywhere seemingly to check for damage.

“I’m fine—now. You?”

“Yeah. Those demons did their best to suppress my magic with that nasty goo, but my dragon is way too stubborn and egotistical to allow a bunch of dead assholes to take us down.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Maybe I was wrong then, and your ego won’t be the death of us all.”

“Sometimes it pays to be a stubborn asshole,” he said, reaching for the side of my face where he tried to wipe it clear. But nothing short of a bath or some magic were going to clean this crap up. It clung to my clothes, my skin, even my hair.

“Did you lose your pack?” he asked, pulling his from around his neck.

“No.” I pointed to a spot in the grass where I’d dropped everything to attempt a rescue. “I managed to keep hold of it all.”

“Good girl. Then let’s get changed and get the hell out of here before something else comes along.”

We dressed in silence as I put the red dress he’d given me back on. In between our marathon sex sessions at the cottage, I’d found just enough time to clean all of my clothes, and repack my pack. I hadn’t known what we would face coming back into the realm, so I’d tried to be prepared for a little of everything.

I left my ruined clothing at the edge of the swamp as I resettled my gear on my back, and we headed in what I hoped was the direction of the palace.

The forest continued to make eerie sounds, and if the continued moaning was any indication, I couldn’t help but think we were being followed.

“Do you have any sense of how far we are from the palace?” Isaac asked. “And why is it so dark? I don’t remember a time shift when we moved from this realm to the other?”

“That’s because there isn’t one. But this forest is cursed with darkness of all kinds, including a lack of sunlight. That never changes. And we’re in the belly of the beast, so to say, so it’s the darkest yet. But I think I’ve figured out where we are and you’d be surprised how close we are to the palace. I guess Ensley knew what she was doing after all.”

He frowned. “She could have warned us what would happen when we passed through the portal.”

“That’s assuming she knew.”

He growled. “Oh she knew. That little she-devil knew exactly what we were getting into.”

I couldn’t help but think this time he might be right. Although I refused to give him the satisfaction of agreeing with him over the imp. He already hated her enough.

“Well, let’s finish then, shall we? If you’re going to enact your revenge on a mischievous demon, we have to first find our way the hell out of here.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

Isaac

Letting Kitra lead the way wasn't easy, but she knew this forest, and letting her guide gave me the chance to watch her and study our surroundings.

Of course, her ass swishing from side to side in the dress that I had procured for her took up a lot of brain space. Especially now that I'd had my hands spreading across that beautiful body part as my cock shuttled in and out of her.

This wasn't the time or the place for that picture to be playing through my mind, but what was I supposed to do? Her heat cycle had broken, but my desire to be inside her, around her, with her, had intensified ten-fold since we'd left the safety of the cottage.

I shook my head, trying to push the images away, but they wouldn't budge. My little beast had burrowed her way inside me and it was changing everything.

I wanted her, and for more than her body. I'd never understood love so fiercely until she'd talked about her mother—and her father. Not even Ian's incessant crying about the loss of his mate had gotten to me like this. Kitra ached with the grief of her loss, and I felt her pain as if it were happening to me.

And I didn't know what to do to make it go away. We were so close to getting that amulet. I didn't need to know my way through the forest to feel it this time.

My inappropriate thoughts aside, when I looked at her I felt a well of pain locked inside her that I had to release.

I stumbled as my heart tripped and then beat frantically harder. Was that her?

No. It couldn't be. I'd not felt it before. Why would I suddenly sense that emptiness inside her where her magic should reside? Was I losing my mind—again?

The dragon snarled in my head and I got his meaning loud and clear. But I had to keep my mind clear and focused on getting the amulet. My father had given his life so that my mother could reunite with her children. I couldn't ever forget that.

A crack of wood sounded in the distance and I grabbed Kitra and stilled us both. When she glared at me and started to say something I shoved my finger against my lips to keep her quiet. Her eyes went wide as she nodded and she glanced around in every direction as if she could spot whatever I'd heard.

I pulled her against me and pressed my mouth to her ear and whispered, "We're not alone."

"We never were," she whispered back. "We've been tracked since the moment we left the swamp."

"By who? Why didn't you say something?"

"I don't know who. They've done a decent job at keeping themselves hidden."

"Until now," I growled.

"We have to keep going. It's not much further to the castle."

Another crack sounded and the hairs at the nape of my neck rose. "They aren't even trying to hide anymore. We have to move faster. We should fly. I don't want another swamp situation on our hands."

"We can't take the risk. The imps will be expecting you in the sky. I guarantee they will be ready."

"Little demon shits."

“Exactly. So we know they are there and they know we are here. I’d say that means it’s time to run.”

She didn’t wait for my response before she took off on a tear. “Dammit!”

I cursed her headstrong nature. The last thing I needed her to do was run off half cocked and right into our enemies’ arms. For all we knew. The creatures following us were flushing us out. Pushing us in the direction they wanted us to go.

Despite that, I didn’t love her idea to run. The sooner we got out of here, the better. I just didn’t like this not knowing where the hell we were going. I took off after her, jumping over decayed trees and other debris, some of which reminded me of human bones.

A shiver worked down my spine. I needed to catch up with her now. I pushed harder. She couldn’t have gotten far, but suddenly we were enveloped in mists with visibility knocked down by half.

Dammit!

“Kitra!” I called out, while moving faster in the direction she’d gone. I was definitely adding a tick or two on her tally of punishments. It was the least she deserved for scaring the hell out of me.

The sounds behind me increased, indicating that whoever followed had also began running and they really didn’t care about hiding anymore.

Finally I saw her figure in the distance. The red dress the only thing I could make out in this mess. Thank fuck I didn’t get the black one. I caught up with her in a half dozen more strides and grabbed her arm to stop her.

“What are you doing?” she gasped, her breaths sawing heavy in and out of her lungs as she tried to catch her breath.

“We have to stay together,” I growled, struggling to maintain a calm I didn’t feel at all.

“You were right behind me.”

“The mist. It’s moved in thick and making it difficult to see.”

“That’s not mist.” Her voice went ice cold as she glanced around us. “We need to move.”

I wanted to ask what she meant, but it wasn’t as important as us getting the hell out of this Goddess forsaken forest. What kind of insane magic created a place so dark and dangerous?

This time I grabbed her arm and we ran together. If we were fleeing from the boogeyman to only run into the arms of our enemies, then we would do it together.

Once again I could feel the pressure of the forest creatures no matter how quickly we moved. But the instinct of danger prickled at my skin from every direction. It took everything I had to keep the dragon at bay. He wanted nothing more than to fly his mate out of danger and I couldn’t blame him.

However, a poison dart now and we’d be done. The only shot we had at making it to this castle came from our head start through the alternate portal. I had no doubt that by now the King’s guard and Magnus knew we were here.

Kitra squeezed my hand, and her fear and strength rippled through me. Goddess help me. This woman.

“The edge of the forest is just ahead. One hundred feet or so.”

I didn’t know how she knew that considering our hampered view, but I trusted her and her knowledge.

“We need to change direction. Go in at an angle. Just in case.”

She nodded and I redirected us, it would cost us several more minutes in this place, but my gut told me it was the right thing to do. Up ahead was too quiet. The creatures chasing us were trying to mask that fact, but I’d seen through it.

Finally, I could see the proverbial and literal light at the end of the tunnel. We were emerging from the darkness. Only a few feet more, and we’d be out of this fucking nightmare.

Kitra ran into the light, and I—

My body jerked backwards, and my grip on her loosened. She turned.

“No!” she screamed.

I tried to yell at her to keep going, but I couldn't breathe let alone speak. I grabbed at whatever had wrapped around my throat and found nothing.

"Isaac. Keep going. Fight it. You only have to step into the light."

Her words came to me through a thick fog, but I couldn't fight against the tight hold keeping me in place. I lifted my arm and waved at her to keep going. Praying that she didn't try to help me.

Of course she didn't listen. She started to run in my direction, heading back into the darkness. No! I tried to scream at her. Warn her. But the grip on my throat had completely cut off my breath. Even my dragon seemed to be affected. I couldn't call on him.

"Hold on. I'm coming," she screamed, grabbing at her bow as if it could help us against a mystical being.

One step away from the darkness and she froze with a jerk. Her eyes went wide, and her mouth opened in shock. My heart seized, as she turned in slow motion and fell face first onto the ground, an arrow sticking out of her back.

An imp arrow.

"No!" My dragon roared inside my head and magic whipped through me. My bones broke, my skin burned, and the heat of fire consumed me.

Rage, so intense it overwhelmed all of my control. Fire shot from my entire body, ravaging the magic that protected all the dark creatures of this forest. The pressure on my throat released, but it was too late. With pure anguish driving him, the dragon took complete control.

Trees fell, creatures screamed, fire erupted everywhere, consuming everything in its path.

Now that we were free from that demonic hold, I fought against the dragon to give me control, but he would not relent. The pain we shared made it difficult to do anything but rage.

Mate. I practically screamed the word in my head hoping to get through.

I projected images of her beautiful face in my hands, her smile when she shot the first arrow from her bow, or the sultry expression on her face when she took my knot for the first time.

I wasn't sure what did the trick, but when his body turned in search of Kitra, I knew I had him.

I have to be in control. We have to save her.

The dragon growled his displeasure, but the whimper behind it told me all I needed to know. A moment later magic washed over me, banking the fire from inside and allowing my body to return to my human form.

The second it was done, I ran to Kitra, falling in the dirt at her side. I tried to assess the damage, but it was impossible to tell.

“Did you just destroy the dark forest?” Her words gurgled from the blood seeping out of her mouth.

“I don't know. Maybe.” I was going to have to get that arrow out of her to stop the leech of poison traveling through her body. “This is going to hurt,” I said as I grabbed the end and as gently and quickly as possible I pulled it free.

Her agonized cry ripped through my heart, and I knew it would forever more star in all of my nightmares.

“Isaac,” she mumbled almost unintelligibly.

“Stop trying to talk. You can say whatever you have to say later. Just shut up and let me try to heal you.” I was worried. My healing magic had only worked partially on me, and I knew next to nothing about her fae physiology. I only knew I had to do something.

Without her own magic, she would die.

A warm rumble sounded in my chest as I placed my hand over the wound and directed my magic into her. My need to help and protect my mate overwhelmed me. I would do anything to save her. *Anything.*

When the familiar tingle traveled through my fingertips, I thanked the Goddess for my mother and the gift of healing she'd passed on to her children. I'd taken it for granted more times than I could count, and I'd do anything to make it work one more time.

Please. There was no one in this world who'd made me feel this way. It didn't matter that I'd only known her for a short time. It was enough. She wore her heart and her strength in a way that anyone could see them. It was no wonder the King had tried to break her. To have that love and power in your favor made your heart and magic soar, but to lose it...

I shook my head forcing my attention back to what needed to be done. Putting everything I had into healing my mate, I pushed images into her of the poison leaching from the wound. I then focused on her tiny body and the damage the arrow might have caused.

Her heartbeat slowed and I realized her most vital organ had been nicked by the blade. Anguish tore through me as I pushed everything I had into her, including my soul. Without her it was worthless. Fate had brought her into my life and quickly woven her into every aspect of my being.

For her to die now might be fitting punishment for my self absorbed behavior over the years, but it wasn't remotely what she deserved.

The magic wound its way through her while I held my breath. I had every confidence this would work because there was no other choice. It. Would. Work.

By the time I was done, I slumped over her, pressing my ear to her chest. I didn't need to be this close to hear the soft, steady beat of her heart, but it was what I wanted. However steady her breath, and the blood pulsing through her, she didn't open her eyes.

"Wake up, little beast. I need to know you're all right." Her pulse quickened, but her eyes remained firmly closed. Despite the magic, her body needed more time.

Something I wasn't sure we had. I glanced around, checking our surroundings for demons and other creatures. I didn't see anything, but I didn't trust that meant we were in the clear.

Imps hid everywhere and only made their presence known when it was to their liking.

Except at the palace.

We had to move. Being in the open like this left both of us vulnerable. I stood, scooping Kitra into my arms and started the rest of the trek to the castle. She had said we were close and I trusted her knowledge implicitly.

I just had to avoid demons, fae, and one particular thorn-in-my-side dragon...

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE

Isaac

Well, fuck.

She'd been right. And we were closer than either of us had guessed. I'd expected a day's walk or more, but after only a few hours, I caught sight of the main tower of the castle through the trees.

Now, I needed a plan. I couldn't carry her in like this and I sure as hell wasn't leaving her in the forest unguarded. Where the hell was Sprite when Kitra needed her the most? What was the point of having her help, if we couldn't make it to the end?

I looked down at the woman in my arms. "You really need to wake up now, Princess." I infused my voice with all the Alpha power I had, hoping the omega in her would hear me and respond.

Not only could I not leave her here, she'd neglected to share with me the most important part of this little adventure into madness.

The exact location of the amulet.

If I went in blind, it could take me a week or more to search the entire castle. This place was so big, it could house an entire small city. Certainly all of Deals Gap, our home in America. Probably Portree in Scotland as well.

As before, I heard Kitra's heart beat faster and I held my breath hoping it meant she would wake. However, after long minutes of staring at her, she remained in this healing coma. At least that's what I hoped it was. Nothing else was acceptable.

I searched the surrounding area until I found what I wanted, and I placed her on a soft patch of grass surrounded by wildflowers. She'd commented how pretty the flowers were at the cottage, so maybe being among these would give her some comfort and spark good memories instead of nightmares.

And honestly, I was desperate and out of ideas to help her. After making sure she seemed as comfortable as possible considering the circumstances, I paced the area searching for danger and using the time to think through any clues I might have missed.

Everything seemed to center around her mother. It had been her entire focus when we weren't running from danger or dealing with mating heat. My body tightened from the memories. The way her skin had smelled and tasted, to the press of her soft lips to my own skin, all the way to how she'd taken my knot as if she were made especially for me.

I bent over and placed my hands on my knees. I wasn't going to get anywhere if I couldn't get my mind out of the gutter.

I had to think about the amulet. Only it wasn't easy. What had been the most important thing was now taking a backseat to the woman lying close by. I couldn't take it. Maybe I would think better if I kept her even closer.

Returning to her side, I took a seat on the ground next to her and lifted her hand into mine. When the warmth of my magic greeted me, I sighed. The healing power was still working its way through her body, and until it finished we were stuck.

Which meant I was stuck here with nothing to do but think. Great.

A slight squeeze of my hand made me gasp. I jerked my head to face her and studied her still form. "Are you awake, Princess?"

She still didn't love when I called her that, which gave me more reason than ever to use it. She needed some motivation to get a move on.

"There were better ways to get my attention, you know? I guess we should have known that we weren't getting through that forsaken forest that easy. But you'll be happy to know that we made it to the castle, and as soon as you open those pretty little eyes for me, we can go and get your amulet."

I'd called the amulet hers.

My stomach churned. I'd given her my barb. I'd made her mine in every way. And yet, I still couldn't give her this. Not this.

"Father," I whispered. "I'm afraid I am going to fail you."

Why I thought talking to him would help was beside me. He would never approve of what I'd done. His instructions had been crystal clear. Get the amulet, get back out. And whatever I did don't get involved in Fae politics and don't bring anyone back. He'd emphasized that one as the most important. He'd strictly forbidden it.

"How am I supposed to leave her behind? She's my mate." I had no idea what he would say to that. Only that his focus would firmly remain on the importance of the amulet. A mate was a complication neither of us had even imagined.

I sat perfectly still. Waiting. As if I stupidly thought someone might answer me. My father was dead. There was no way his spirit lived in the fae realm simply because his body did. They would have separated at death. I only hoped he'd somehow made it back to my mother.

Fuck. I jumped to my feet and resumed pacing. She was the reason I'd come here and would be the reason why I would hurt my mate.

My chest seized. Just thinking about hurting Kitra clawed at my soul. "I can't do it." But either way the guilt was going to eat me alive. I looked at her. Studied her. For as long as I lived I would ache for her. Because...

I strode back to her side. “Because I love her,” I whispered. “And I’ll do anything. Give anything for her to open her eyes again. Even that stupid amulet,” I spat, a shot of fire and magic emerging as I did.

A roll of thunder sounded from above, and lightning cracked in the distance. I looked up. “Of course that would get you excited. It would seem you are about nothing but pain.”

“Isaac.” A weak voice spoke my name.

I looked back down to see Kitra’s dark gaze looking up at me. “What’s wrong? Why are you so upset?”

I made a choked sound. Because I wanted to laugh and couldn’t. “Thank the Goddess,” I finally managed.

“One of the imps got me didn’t they?” she asked, forcing herself into a sitting position.

“Don’t get up yet. Give yourself the time you need.”

She frowned at me. “I’ve taken more time than we could afford, haven’t I?” She glanced around. “Where are we?”

“Hidden in the forest just outside the castle.”

Her eyes widened. “Then we have no time to waste. We’ve got to finish this.” She pushed to her feet, her arms and legs visibly shaking as she did.

“You’re not ready.” I tried to pull her back down into my lap, but she surprised me by jerking free.

“I appreciate you are worried about me, but we must go now before it’s too late. The guard will be back soon I’m sure.”

I raised to my feet, stuffing down my reservations and handed her her bow and arrows. If she insisted on going through with this, she still needed some kind of weapon. My knife was still stuffed in my boot, and easily accessible should I need it.

“Do you have a plan for getting into the castle?” I asked.

“There are so many ways in and out. As someone who dedicated her teenage years into sneaking around the place, I probably know it better than even the King.”

I didn't doubt that for a second. "Okay then, you lead the way. But if you start to look even slightly ill, I'm shutting this down."

She smirked, and like it or not I was taking that as her tacit agreement. I settled my gear across my back and followed her. We circled the castle until we were on the backside at which point Kitra crouched low and hissed, "Get down."

"What's happening?" I bent down to her level.

"The King has increased his security. He's got people all over the grounds."

"That's not surprising."

"We can't wait for dark. It will be too late. We're just going to have to go in between them."

Together we observed each one as they made their rounds, and it wasn't long before we memorized their patterns. "As soon as the next one goes by I think we can break for it," I whispered at her ear.

She nodded. And just in case I pulled my knife free and took the lead. I ignored the widening of her eyes as they fixated on my weapon because we didn't have time to chat about it.

"Let's go," I ordered, running through the open field with my hand firmly wrapped around hers. The dragon tensed inside me, but I ignored him. Whatever he sensed, I'd deal with it when I had to.

"Go there!" Kitra pointed to a small door at the bottom of a nearly hidden staircase. We scrambled to the bottom, but when I tried to turn the knob I found it locked.

"How the hell are we supposed to get in? Is there a key?" I searched for a lock of some sort and found nothing.

She shook her head. "No. It needs magic to open."

"Then how the hell are we going to get through it?" Was this her big idea of us getting inside? "We have about forty-five seconds before the next guard walks by and I guarantee he won't miss us down here."

“We aren’t going through the door. We’re going in there!” She pointed at a very small window that was covered in bars.

“Again. How the hell are we getting in through there?”

She yanked her hand free and shoved me aside. I didn’t actually budge so she had to squeeze by me, but it was a nice try.

“Just push.” She put her weight against the bars and they bent forward. She then jumped up on the ledge and slithered through the opening.

I hated to tell her, but I wasn’t as small as her. I was going to have to destroy that opening to get in. I only hoped it didn’t make as much noise as I expected it would.

As soon as she cleared the window, I pushed on the bars almost as hard as I could, and they gave way as easily as a piece of paper. “What the—?”

“Fake,” she whispered. “I made them years ago so I could go in and out.”

Shaking my head, I squeezed myself through the window and hurriedly put the bars back in place before the guard passed by.

We both blew out a breath of relief before I asked, “Where to now?”

“My room.”

I turned to her in alarm. “Are you kidding? That will surely be under guard.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. But that’s where we have to go because that’s where we’re going to find the amulet.”

“You had it all along?”

“Apparently. Although I didn’t know it and likely never would have if not for the message from my mother.”

“This is insane.” I grabbed her hand and laced our fingers together. “But I guess if we’re going to do this, then we’ll do it together.”

She narrowed her eyes and twisted her mouth. I didn't blame her for her skepticism. We'd avoided talking about what happened once we had it in hand. And now was not the time.

Since I already knew the way to her personal rooms, I took the lead, making sure we avoided passing anyone who could question us.

When we got to her floor, she pulled me to a room on the opposite side of the floor. "Not here," she whispered. "Just to be sure we need to enter from one of the adjoining rooms."

I nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly with that plan. We crept along the walls, keeping to the shadows until we entered one of the rooms.

"This place is like a maze."

"It is. But for a bored kid, it makes a great playground. Come on. My room is just through here."

I could see a younger version of Kitra running and hiding all through this house. Ian and I had done something similar in our old home as well.

She pushed the door open, and with my focus on the area behind us, I failed to notice she'd come to a sudden halt until I crashed into her and nearly sent her flying across the room.

I grabbed her and steadied her.

My eyes widened and then narrowed on the man sitting on the edge of Kitra's bed, as my dragon heat flared to life and a growl erupted from my chest.

"Now is that any way to greet your brother?"

Fucking Magnus.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR

Kitra

What was going on? Besides Magnus sitting in the middle of the room, waiting for us, the room had been cleared of everything personal. Not a shred of evidence remained that I'd lived in this house for more than a decade.

"Where are all of my belongings?" I tried to keep my voice even, but it was impossible to hide the rising hysteria. Especially when I glanced at the corner where my treasured dollhouse had sat.

Magnus shrugged. "I have no idea. Probably given to the needy if I had to guess."

Anger tightened my chest as I stepped forward. I was going to wipe that smug smirk off his face if it was the last thing I did.

A hard hand grabbed me out of nowhere at the same time the dark slither of magic washed over me, causing my vision to narrow and my stomach to pitch. Immediately I realized that the king had phased into my room and grabbed me and now we could be anywhere.

His ability to move between time and space was a rare and coveted fae trait, and part of the reason he'd managed to stay king for so long.

"You have become a serious problem, my dear."

“Kitra!” I could hear Isaac’s dragon roar, but it sounded like it was miles away instead of just behind me as it should have been.

“What have you done to him?”

“You should be far more worried about what I’m going to do to you. You have been a thorn in my side since the day I married your mother, but now you are a total embarrassment, not to mention costing me time and money.”

“Then let me go. It’s all I want. And you of all people should know that I’ll never stop. You can lock me up in your dungeon again, keep my magic bound, and even fuck me against my will. But I will NEVER stop. NEVER.” Spit flew from my mouth in my rage, but I didn’t care. No one ever spoke to the King like this without the fear of death. But we both knew that he wouldn’t kill me. Not as long as he wanted something from me.

“I don’t have to do anything against your will, you little bitch. One way or another you will come to heel. I am your King, and as long as I live, my will is your will.”

“Those are just words, and they mean nothing. No true King would do the things you do.”

“If you believe that, then you are an even bigger fool than I thought. But fortunately it’s not your mind I’m after.” He grabbed my arm again, with a magic-infused hold that I had no chance in hell of breaking, and dragged me down a dark corridor.

We didn’t make it ten steps before the house began to shake. I screamed as plaster from the ceiling rained down on us and the King cursed. “He had one fucking job. One! And he couldn’t even do that.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. I only knew if I didn’t find a way to get away from him, I was going to end up dead or worse. Magic was my only hope. I had to stall whatever this was until Isaac could get to me.

“Where are you taking me?”

The floors shook and we both had to reach out for the railing to keep from stumbling.

“Somewhere secure I’d hoped. But now I’m not so sure.” He looked around worriedly. “My nephews are going to tear this place down.”

“Nephews?” He looked at me again like I was stupid but as everything shook, cracks appeared and raced along the walls. Even the railing I was holding onto broke free, forcing me to my knees to keep from falling into the abyss below. “We have got to get out of here.”

He looked at me for a moment, and I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. But the moment his magic began to shimmer I figured it out quick. He was leaving me here to die.

A second later he was gone as he phased away. “That motherfucker!”

I crawled away from the open balcony and pressed my back to the interior wall. Every few seconds something new would crash down and so much plaster had come down it created a cloud of thick dust that made it difficult to see.

I needed to figure out where I was and find my way out of here. We’d been heading somewhere down this hall and maybe if I knew where I could find my way out. I didn’t think there was a single area of this house I hadn’t explored—

Except the north tower.

I’d been forbidden to go there. And although I’d tried, my magic repelled me every time I got near it.

Great.

On my hands and knees I rushed toward the end of the hall until I was somewhat certain I could stand without being flung over the edge of the open balcony. There was only a single door in this direction, and while I seriously doubted it would lead to an escape, I had to know what was going on.

I turned the knob, noticing there were a series of locks on the outside of this door, and to my surprise it opened with ease.

I stepped in and gasped. My belongings had been moved to this room. My bed stood in the middle, my dresser next to it. My chairs...

I turned in a circle, and bolted around the room. I even checked the attached bathing room. Dear Goddess, it had to be here. I searched every nook and cranny until tears were streaming down my face with hopelessness. I slid to the floor with my back against the wall. It wasn't—

Was it? I didn't want to get my hopes up, but I couldn't help it. There was something under...

I crawled on my hands and knees to the bed and felt around until my hand hit the corner of whatever it was. I wrapped my hand around it and yanked as hard as I could. It didn't budge much, but it did move. I did it again and again and it moved a few inches.

Goddess, when this was all over, I was going on a vacation somewhere. I was exhausted and running on pure adrenalin now. And I wasn't sure how much of that I had left. By the time I got it far enough out to confirm it was the dollhouse, I was soaked in sweat.

Fortunately, I didn't have to get it out the whole way. I only needed access to—

A louder crash sounded right next to the bed and I scrambled to get out of the way as several more chunks of the ceiling fell on the bed and around where I crouched.

Good Goddess. What the hell was going on with Isaac and Magnus? I had to hurry and get the hell out of here before they completely demolished the palace.

I pulled one more time and finished exposing the top half of this thing. I'd never realized this thing was so damned heavy.

I scooted around the side and pushed all of the accessories out of the way and tugged at the curtains glued to the faux windows to the secret panel that I'd carved into this thing when I was about eight years old so I could hide silly childhood things that were now meaningless.

As I dug my fingernails into the crack in the wood to free the cover, a tingle of magic snaked up my arm and wrapped around my chest. I sucked in a breath as it settled around me with a welcoming hum.

Oh My Goddess.

It can't be.

My heart hammered wildly when the piece of wood broke free and clattered to the ground and I got my first look at what was hidden underneath. I pulled a white piece of paper out first and held my breath as I unfolded it slowly.

Mother.

She'd left me a note. A quiver overtook my lower lip. My hands shook as I looked down at the words scrawled across the paper.

My Dearest Darling,

I knew eventually you would find your way to this spot. I only wish I was there with you now to share in the rest of your life.

As the first tear fell on the paper, I dropped the paper to my side. There was no way I could read the rest of this now and not fall apart. And Isaac was counting on me, and if I didn't get out of here now I'd end up as part of the rubble this place was being reduced to.

I refolded the paper and shoved it in my pocket. The next time I was alone, then I would read it.

I reached back into my secret compartment and pulled out the black cloth pouch. I couldn't believe it. If I thought my heartbeat was out of control, it was nothing like now. The sound of it whooshed through my ears and tuned out all other sounds.

With shaking hands, I pulled the tie loose and upended the pouch and dumped the contents into my hand. Another intense blast of magic shot through my fingers, leaving me breathless. It couldn't be. There had to be some kind of mistake.

I turned the amulet over in my hand, looking for some other sign and the magical buzz increased until it thrummed through

my body, wrapping me in a warm cocoon of safety.

Mother.

How could she do this?

“Kitra.”

I turned at the pained growl of Isaac’s voice, shocked to see him standing at the threshold of this room.

“Isaac,” my heart skipped a beat at his rough appearance. There was blood on his face and deep cuts across his arms and chest that looked like—

“I’m okay. As soon as I shift again, I will heal. What’s going on here? You can’t stay in here. The structure of the castle is compromised. He glanced around, his gaze landing on the series of locks on the outside of the door, and then the bars on the windows. “This is a prison cell.”

I nodded tightly, my throat thickening as the amulet hidden in my hand continued to buzz. “I am not surprised. He seemed determined to take whatever he wanted from me however that he could. Even if that meant keeping me locked up for the rest of my life.”

“And where is he now? I’m going to kill him.”

“That’s not likely to happen, Isaac. He’s a coward who ran at the first sign of trouble. And with his ability to phase from one place to another, he could be anywhere.”

The rumble in his chest grew louder. “And what about the amulet?”

I didn’t answer right away. I could lie and tell him I was wrong about its location. There was no indication he sensed its magic. But his reasons for wanting it were noble. He had a chance to reunite with his mother. I squeezed my fingers harder around the metal in my hand, knowing I had to tell him.

“I found it.”

His eyes widened and he took a step forward. “Where is it?”

The intensity in his gaze frightened me. Now that I actually had it, how far would he go to take it from me? He'd called me his mate, but in the face of his goals, what did that even mean? I raised my arm and slowly opened my hand, holding it up for his appraisal. We both stared at it.

The amethyst stone set in the middle of a dark gold coin with symbols etched all around it didn't seem like much more than a trinket. But the sense of magic from it still surged through my veins, calling out to me. I wanted to speak the spell that would break the binding of my magic and set my mother's free as well.

"Hard to believe such a small thing holds so much power."

"I think it holds more than we even knew."

His right eyebrow arched. "How so?"

"I—I think it contains my mother's magic."

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE

Isaac

“Excuse me?” Surely I hadn’t heard her correctly.
“My mother left me a note, but I didn’t read it all yet—I couldn’t. I’m not ready. But the minute I touched the amulet, I felt the familiar caress of my mother’s magic against my senses. It’s practically begging me to set it free.”

I growled. Not in anger at her, but because so far, this Fae realm bullshit had been nothing but one complication after another. How could my father have sent me here with so little knowledge of how things worked here?

When you are king, you have to expect the unexpected, and be willing to pivot quickly.

The fact I heard that spoken in my head, as if he still stood here, was enough to make me grind my teeth. His little life lessons had been annoying back then, and I didn’t want to accept them as fact now.

He also failed to reveal how he was connected to this realm and why he knew so much about it. I’d been a fool not to ask more questions.

Not that I’d believed a word that asshole Magnus had said. Why he would claim to be the firstborn son of my parents, I couldn’t fathom. If I hadn’t sensed Kitra’s distress, I would have finished him.

And if that amulet contained her mother's magic and the solution to free hers...

My head ached with what it would do to her if I took it now.

"I told you I'm not a hero," I murmured as weight settled in my chest. "But you are my mate. It's my duty to do anything and everything to protect you." I looked around this shit hole of a room. They may have moved her things up here, but they were still going to lock her in. And do what?

Breed her?

My dragon roared to life, letting me know that no other man could be allowed to touch her let alone hurt her.

Her eyes shuttered closed and pain pinched her face. "Neither one of us asked for this," she said, opening her eyes again. "And it's not your duty I want."

"What then?"

She didn't answer and I really did want to roar until the rest of this castle crumbled to the ground. Or maybe I should just set it on fire and go ahead and let it burn.

"You could go back with me. Take your place at my side as queen. No magic necessary."

"My magic is who I am. Without it I am nothing."

"That's not true. Your fierce determination, your unerring loyalty, and your love of family is who you are. None of those have anything to do with magic."

I don't know whether I was trying to convince her or me. I was asking her to make too great of a sacrifice and I knew it. She deserved to get everything her heart desired, including that connection to her mother.

Suddenly a roar sounded from several floors below and the entire house shook again. I rushed to Kitra to steady her before she lost her footing and pitched forward.

"We've got to go. This pile of stone and iron won't last through another round of me and Magnus."

“Good. Let it crumble. The King deserves that and so much worse.”

“Agreed. But you’re here. I’ve put you in enough danger. Say the spell and then let’s get the hell out of here.”

“We can’t just—.” She blinked a few times, looking up at me. “Wait. What?”

“You heard me,” I growled. “Take the magic. But hurry before I change my mind and do something I’ll regret the rest of my life.”

“But your mother. Your brother’s mate...”

“I’ll find another way.”

The house shook violently again and more plaster rained down on us. “Now, Kitra!” I put all my Alpha power into my command that I knew would compel my omega to obey. “Speak the spell and take the magic. It belongs to you.”

She jumped into my arms, forcing me to catch her a second before she pressed her lips to mine. “I love you, Isaac Ferguson.”

Without giving me time to respond, she wriggled down again and opened her palm to reveal the amulet once again. She bent close and whispered the words her mother had written in stone for her.

Hear now the word of the fae. The secret we hid and the Goddess that be. The work of blood and tears in this vessel and in this fae. I call upon the power locked inside. Bring the power given to me. I want the power given to me.

The stone came to life and I sensed the magic swirling around the room. It wrapped and clung to her like a golden, sparkling skin and I wanted to stare in awe at the change. However, Magnus was seconds away from discovering us here and we had to go now.

“Do you trust me, little beast?”

She shot me a glance. “Yes, why?”

“Remember that.” With that, I grabbed her around the waist, and ran to the window.

“Isaac, what are you—?”

I grabbed the iron bars, and forcing the dragon close to the surface, I used his strength to knock them loose and fling them to the ground.

“No. No. No,” she cried as I jumped out the window with her in my arms.

The second we were free and falling towards the ground, my shifter magic washed over both of us, and the dragon ripped from my body, while carefully keeping hold of her in a claw.

“I hate you!” she screamed as I flapped my wings frantically.

I wanted to laugh but I could feel the heat of Magnus’s dragon fire emitting from the castle. He was officially on a rampage now and if his dragon had control, there was a good chance more than just this castle would burn today.

I flew hard and fast and searched my memory for somewhere close to take us that would keep us safe. The best thing to do would be to return to where the portal to the human realm was hidden and make our escape from there. But flying that far in broad daylight was too great a risk. I couldn’t afford a repeat of those little demons getting either of us with their poison arrows.

They won’t.

Before I could question how she’d spoken in my head, I felt a soft brush of magic wrap around me without impeding my ability to fly.

What was that? And did you hear me?

I did. I guess it’s my magic. It’s back and stronger than ever.

Or it’s the mating bond. I had felt something snap into place when she declared her love, but there had been no time to question it. I guarded those thoughts from her. At the moment, she’d be more likely to deny what she’d said since I’d scared her half out of her mind again.

Just hurry. My magic technically makes me safer up here with you, but my stomach is still ready to pitch any second.

Anything for my mate.

She didn't respond, but I would have sworn she snuggled against me.

The rest of the trip continued in silence and I half expected she'd fallen asleep until I began my descent and she tightened her grip on one of my claws.

Please don't kill me.

I thought you trusted me?

I do. But I hate this. Flying is officially not my thing.

I landed as close to where we wanted to go as I could, but it would still be a mile walk or so.

"Thank the Goddess," she said as she stood on solid ground again, her magic winking out and leaving me slightly adrift without that connection. "We survived."

"As if there was any other option. I would never risk your life."

"I'm still not going up there again. Promise me that you won't ever make me do that again."

"I'd promise, but if your life depended on it, I would break it."

She huffed off and stomped away in the direction of the portal.

"I thought you didn't know where the portal for the human realm was?"

"I don't," she said without turning back or stopping. "But now that we're here I can feel it."

"Really? What exactly can you do with that power?"

"All kinds of things. Shields is a big thing. Which is how I could spend time in the forest as a child and not worry about being killed. I can cast spells to open and close things, heat liquids, cool liquids. Some illusions."

"Phase to different places like the King did?"

“Sadly, I cannot. However, my mother could, and now that I have her power—maybe.”

“And you can do all of this at will, any time you want?”

“Yes and no. Yes, if my power is not depleted. But if I use too much I would have to recharge.”

“Mine is like that as well. That’s why I’ve kept this on me almost the whole time I’ve been here.” I bent over and produced the gold jewel encrusted knife I’d gotten from my father. “Precious metals and gems tend to do it for us. Hence, one of the reasons dragons hoard treasure so much. Back home we had an entire separate home to store what we needed. My mother called it her retreat.”

“Tell me about your mother again.”

I didn’t want to think about her right now. The pain of letting her down again had settled deep in my chest and it wasn’t letting go. But this was Kitra, and there wasn’t much I didn’t want to share with her at this point.

“She’s fierce about family, despite the hell we put her through. Although let me be clear. It was I who created most of the problems.”

“That doesn’t surprise me at all.”

I knocked her shoulder with mine, and she laughed. My gut tightened at the sound. The idea of walking through that portal without the amulet was bad enough, but leaving her behind— I wasn’t sure I could do it.

“She’s also quite serious about her duties as Queen to the shifter kingdom. Before the witches’ curse, there was a lot of unrest and trouble brewing. Human culture was progressing at an alarming rate and it was clear things were going to need to change. My father, and especially me, weren’t embracing that idea well. My last days with my mother were not pleasant. I behaved like an asshole.”

“I’m sure she understood. Most mothers do.”

“Not likely. I was cruel to the woman they wanted me to marry. And before you say anything, I have no excuse for that.”

But since she turned out to be my brother's omega it was probably better for her that I rejected her."

"Was it better for you?"

I took a measured breath, trying to choose my words carefully. "I wasn't sure at the time. When her omega status was revealed, I didn't want my brother to have her."

"You were jealous," she said quietly, a bite of pain in her voice.

"Only because I knew that omegas were special, and it was my brother I was jealous of. Cordelia was never for me. There was no real attraction. But I realize that now more than ever. Omegas are special, but they aren't random either."

For the remainder of the walk we stayed silent. I could feel that whatever she'd been hoping I would say hadn't happened. But Cordelia had meant nothing to me because she was not for me. I wasn't sure how else I could say that without coming off even as more of an asshole than I already was.

"This is it," I stopped next to the cave I'd first emerged from. Had it really only been a few weeks ago? For some reason it seemed longer. So much had happened.

So much had changed.

"I can feel it. I've never been in this part of the realm before. But honestly, I don't think anyone comes out this far. The nearest village is many miles away, and these wild parts of the realm are known for the kinds of creatures that tend to dwell in them.

"Imps?"

She nodded. "And others."

I stared at the cave, barely hearing her descriptions of the creatures that lived here. I felt a pull to go to the portal, but I also didn't want to leave. Because of her, I was torn between two worlds. I had to go back, but I also didn't want to leave her behind.

"Come with me," I blurted, despite my father's dire warnings that no one was to come back with me.

Her body jerked. “What?”

I grabbed her around the waist and kissed her as if my life depended on it. Maybe it did. I could feel her magic in that kiss and its warmth flooded through me, winding its way around my magic—my dragon. By the time I broke us apart, I was drunk on her, and it was clear that I couldn’t walk away from her.

“Come to the human realm with me. You didn’t want to go without your magic, and that I understood. But now you can.” I pressed a gentle kiss again to her lips. “Stay with me. Let me love my omega the way I was meant to.”

“I can’t.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX

Kitra

I shuttered my eyes closed against the pain I saw in Isaac's gaze before he backed away from me.

"What do you mean you can't?" I shuddered against the nasty snarl in his tone. My refusal had struck him and I needed to remember that. The dark edge of his voice had come from pain.

"I have to figure out why my mother left me her magic, and something has to be done about the King."

"Fuck the King. If you come with me, he will be out of your life for good. You'll have nothing to worry about."

I wasn't sure I believed that. "If I walk through that portal with you to a realm I don't belong we are messing with magic we don't understand. I don't know much, but I do know time and magic are volatile in different realms. Even your coming here will have repercussions."

"That's a chance I was willing to take then and a chance I'm willing to take now."

I shook my head. It wasn't as simple as Isaac thought. But I could help him. "I can't go with you, but I do think I can break your curse."

"What? How?"

“The magic my mother possessed is similar to what you refer to as dark magic. Only we call it blood magic and it’s extremely rare, not to mention volatile. If I can channel her magic through the spell you have, it might break. But we’ll have to open the portal and hope we can keep it open long enough for it to be done.”

“This sounds like all the more reason to go with me. Won’t the spell be much easier to perform from there?”

I shook my head. “My magic is primarily fueled by the fae realm itself. It will be far more powerful from here. Please, let me do this for you. I owe you that much.”

“You owe me nothing,” he practically spat the words.

I held up the amulet that I had shoved in my pocket back at the castle. “You gave me my mother. I know you understand how much that means to me.” Tears welled in my eyes, but I refused to shed them. I would not make this harder for him by crying. I had to let him go and him me. No matter how broken hearted that would leave me.

“Kitra,” he whispered, his tone sounding as broken as I felt. He had yet to share the words my soul ached to hear, but I could feel the emotion from him nonetheless.

“Please, let me do this.”

He dropped his head. “You know I won’t deny you anything.”

My mouth dropped open. Did I?

A roar in the near distance brought his head up, and my heart sank as I realized we were almost out of time. If we didn’t do this now, we’d be caught and embroiled in another deadly fight. The outcome of which no one could predict.

“Isaac. He’s going to find us soon. We have to hurry.”

“I can’t leave you to face him alone. I’m your Alpha.”

“You are. And always will be. But you don’t have to worry about Magnus. He can’t stand up to the power I now have. I doubt anyone can.”

His eyes widened. “I knew you were special.”

My stomach flip flopped at his praise. I wanted so much more, but he had to return. It was the only way to be sure about the curse.

“You have to go now,” I whispered.

He nodded, but as I turned towards the cave he grabbed me around my waist and hauled me against him. “I’m not sure how I will live without you. Which means after I free my mother, I will begin the hunt for another way back to you.” He pressed another heart melting kiss on my lips and I drank it down and imprinted it on my heart. He wasn’t even gone yet, and my entire body already ached for him.

By the time he released me, those tears I’d promised not to shed were running down my face. I had to turn away from him or I was going to beg him to stay with me.

We walked together into the darkened cave and towards the pull of magic that felt as comforting as it did foreign. I’d never dreamt of the human realm before. Only because I knew next to nothing about it. But now that my heart was about to walk through that portal with a dragon man with an attitude, I would dream of nothing else.

“Do you have the spell you need written down somewhere?”

He shook his head. “Nay, I memorized it. We didn’t want to risk it falling into the wrong hands or it getting lost.”

“Okay, then I’ll need to repeat each incantation when you speak it. With both of us joined in, it should make the magic that much stronger.”

I came to a halt in front of a large rock that blocked our path. It looked ordinary, but its essence of magic told a completely different story. “I still can’t believe this has been here all this time and no one knew about it.”

“That’s because the agreement between brothers, our King and his King, had sealed it permanently. Only when Isaac killed our father, did it open.”

I gasped at the voice behind us. I grabbed my bow and arrow and pulled it taut against my cheek in his direction. “Don’t move, Magnus.”

“Aww. Are you going to kill me, little cousin?”

“If she doesn’t I will, you lying bastard.” Isaac growled from beside me.

“What the hell am I doing?” I dropped the bow and arrow I had aimed at his heart. “I don’t need those to shut you up.”

Magnus’s eyes widened when the magic swelled inside me, he tried to lunge for me, but Isaac moved faster than I did and swiped his dragon claws down the front of Magnus’s chest, slicing deeply into his skin.

He dropped back, clutching at his wound. I didn’t hesitate as I pushed a blast of power in his direction, forcing him to the mouth of the cave and trapping him behind a shield of magic.

“That should hold him long enough for us to get this done.”

“I am not leaving you with him.”

I rolled my eyes. “Trust me, I can handle him. Dragon form or not, he’s no match for blood magic.”

Isaac’s brow lifted. “Does that mean...?”

“Yes, I could lock you up too. Your alpha status doesn’t trump my magic.”

He looked like he didn’t believe me, but there was no time to prove it. We had to get this done before any reinforcements arrived. One dragon I could hold. An entire army I wasn’t sure about.

“We have to open this portal first.”

“That I can do.” Isaac stepped close to the rock, placed the hilt of his dragon blade on the rough surface and whispered.

*I shall only count to three, When I get to three, I shall see.
One, awaken. Two, create the path. Three, now I can pass.*

Magic shimmered and the rock disappeared, giving way to a doorway that led to the other side. I couldn’t see much beyond a cliff and the raging sea, but the scents and sounds of another world washed over me.

I held out my hand. “I need a drop of your blood.”

He scraped a claw over his hand and cut a thin line across his palm, before turning it over and squeezing several drops into my outstretched palm.

“You have to enter,” I instructed, feeling the blood of my mother surge through my veins in reaction to his. Isaac reached for my other hand and I shifted away from him. “No. I can’t.” My heart was too broken. If he touched me again it would shatter me.

With a new shade of darkness clouding his eyes, he stepped inside the gate and magic shimmered over him, encasing him in bright light and making him look almost ethereal.

I called upon the blood of my mother, and the ancestors that she was connected to. Magic surged. “The spell, Isaac, now.”

He nodded, his face solemn and hard.

By power of blood and spirits undead. Scales, wings and fire be free. Wings of glory, wings of power, aid us in our quest. So that we may destroy the bindings that hide in the dark.

Wind whipped violently through the cave, as the words of the spell bound with the power of the blood.

Isaac and I both repeated his chant as the power filled the tiny cave.

Dark flames burned across my vision as I saw the witches casting the spell against the dragons. The blood they spilled and the power they called upon that was not their own. It was filled with anger, resentment, and determination.

But they were no match for the fae as the magic I cast unraveled the binding piece by piece. It was complicated and woven tight, and I could see why they’d found no other way to break it. It had taken an entire coven to make it happen.

When the final piece broke, I slumped forward and grabbed for Isaac one last time. But the breaking of the curse had pulled him through. The gate had closed and my hand landed on solid rock. The tears that I’d thought were done came back as I sobbed for both of us.

“Kitra.”

I spun around and found Ensley standing behind me, her hands on her hip and a smirk on her face. “You’re too late to say goodbye,” I choked, attempting humor to staunch the flow of tears.

She scoffed. “I doubt he or his dragon is too worried about that. Besides, it is you I seek, not him.”

“Why? Your job is done. I have my magic as well as my mother’s. Everything will be fine now.”

“Will it?” She shook her head and paced the small cave before she looked skyward. “Your daughter is acting like a fool. I should have refused you when I had the chance.”

I looked up and all around to see who she was talking to, because it wasn’t me. Her words made no sense.

“Ensley,” I said on a sigh. “I’m tired of playing games with you. Whatever it is you’ve come to say, just say it. But don’t play games with me anymore. I can’t take it.”

“This is no game. And as much as it pains me to say this, you need to go after him. You have to walk through that gate.”

“What? Why?”

She made a disgusted face before she continued. “Because it’s clear that you love him and he loves you. And for someone like you there is nothing more important than that.”

“Someone like me?” I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at what she said. Ensley had a way with words even if it was strange as hell.

“You are so much like your mother than you even know. She once walked away from everything she knew and loved to be with your father. And she never looked back. Although he was a good man, with a kind heart and I could see that she would have been lost without him. And I was right. After his death, she married that fool king and her life went to hell. No one ever takes what I have to say seriously.”

I stood staring at her speechless as she rambled on about what a horrible person my stepfather was because my brain was trying to process too much at once.

“Ensley, stop. I get it. No one knows better than I do how horrible King Aegrond is. I don’t need a reminder.”

“Apparently you do. Which is precisely why you need to leave. All he ever wanted from your mother was her magic. Whether it came to him through a son, or some other way. If you stay, he’ll eventually find a way to take it from you too.”

“I’m more than capable of fighting him now.”

Ensley shook her head. “Maybe so. But that future is not for you...” She clutched her stomach and made a pained face. “Please don’t make me say it again.”

“Say what?”

“You are a horrible child for this.” She took a deep breath and through gritted teeth she continued, “You belong with the man who loves you.”

“But he didn’t say that.”

She sniffed haughtily, the sound pushing through the grief cloaked around me. “Men like him rarely do. But I’ve seen this and he will need you more now than ever. What he has to face now cannot be done alone. You are his omega. You are the light to his dark, and he needs that to keep his meanness at bay.”

“You’ve seen my future? How is that possible?”

A slight smile crept across her face. “Anything is possible. You should know that. Maybe if you’d read your mother’s note.” She tilted her head in the direction of the piece of paper peeking from my pocket. “I’m sure she would tell you to follow your heart. Now go before it’s too late.”

I turned from her to look at the stone where the gate had opened. “It already is. I don’t have Isaac’s blood or the dragon blade to reopen it.”

She scoffed. “We definitely do not need him for that.” She waved her hand and the magic shimmered to life. “Now stop making excuses and go before I push you through myself.”

That definitely made me smile. I didn’t doubt she would do something crazy like that. “Who are you?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “What you needed. Now stop asking questions and go. Next thing you know you’ll be crying again and trying to hug me or something.”

I smiled down at her. “I would never,” I lied. “But I think I am going to miss you.”

She immediately covered her ears. “Go. That gate won’t stay open forever.”

I looked back at the rock and watched the magic glimmer enough for me to realize she was right. It had not closed yet, but by instinct I knew it would soon. I started to thank her for all of her help, but she’d disappeared like a puff of smoke. As usual, she was there in one moment, and gone in the next.

Like it or not, she would be missed. She was also right. I had to go.

It scared me to walk through that portal. I’d known nothing but the fae realm, and it wasn’t until a fire breathing dragon, who’d chased me through the woods and made me his captive, came into my life that everything had begun to change. We’d already been on one adventure together. What was one more?

Before I could talk myself out of it, I followed my heart one last time...

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN

Kitra

There was a man standing at the edge of the cliff, looking over the edge as I stepped into the human realm.

My heart soared at the sight of him, the man I loved, but he looked off. His clothes were different and his hair shorter than only minutes ago.

Isaac?

He whirled around, his eyes going wide. “Kitra.”

That was all he said before he took off in a run in my direction, lifting me off my feet when he reached me and embracing me in a hold that both hurt and felt like the best thing in the whole world. And it was putting my broken heart back together in record speed.

We’d only been separated for a handful of minutes, but it could have been an eternity.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “I thought you couldn’t come through?”

“Let’s just say I got the extra nudge I needed to face my fears. Plus, I couldn’t leave the human realm all to you. No one needs a bad-tempered dragon raging around just because he can.”

Sadness broke over his face, and I stroked my hand down his cheek, wanting to wipe it away.

“You are truly the balm that I needed. Goddess, I love you.” He buried his face in my neck and breathed deep. Since he still held me off the ground, I wound my legs around his waist and held on for dear life. Because that’s what he was. My life. We stayed like this for a long time, simply reveling in the fact that we were together, and would be for the rest of our lives.

Eventually, I moved, using my hands to lift his head and cup his cheeks. “I love you too, Isaac. But what’s wrong? Did my spell not work? And why do you look so different?” I brushed my fingers through his shortened hair. “Did my magic do this to you?”

He lifted me to the ground and stood facing me. “How long after I went through the portal did you follow?”

That was a weird question. “I don’t know. Maybe five minutes or so. Ensley showed up in the cave after you left and insisted I had to come with you.”

A weak smile crossed his face. “I’ve been here for months. That whole thing you warned me about. The time and space between the realms. It’s so much more than you can imagine.”

“Months? How is that possible? We were just together.” I shouldn’t be shocked because I knew damn well anything was possible, but months?

And if we were apart for months... “But you were in our realm for weeks you said. How long—?” I couldn’t finish the question because I was terrified of the answer.

“Over one hundred years.”

I gasped, my hand flying to cover my mouth. My reaction certainly wasn’t going to help, but oh, my Goddess. “You can’t be serious.”

“Very serious. I’ve spent all this time trying to piece together everything that happened with the dragons as well as adjust to an entirely different world. If I thought the fae realm was weird, it was a walk in the park compared to the current human realm.”

I glanced around as if that would give me some kind of indication of what he meant, but we were alone on a cliff far

from anything else. I couldn't even make out anything in the distance.

"This island is small and separated. I guess despite all the changes it was never developed into anything more."

"What about your mother? The curse?" I had a million questions running through my mind and I didn't know where to start. It was all too overwhelming.

"She is gone now. But she did live to a long age right here in Scotland. From what I've been able to piece together through old journals and photographs, she and Cordelia endured hardship after hardship in the Americas before they were finally able to scrape together what they needed to travel to Scotland via ship."

"Wow."

He nodded. "Yeah, apparently she was pregnant with Ian's firstborn son before the witches placed the curse, and before he hit puberty and suffered the same fate as the rest of us, she fought tooth and nail to scrape together the resources to bring both her son and my mother to Scotland to search for answers."

"I think I would like this Cordelia. She sounds brave."

"Apparently, they arrived here not too long after I went through the portal." I could see the pain on his face at that admission. They'd been damned from the beginning when it came to their choices.

I reached up and touched his face. "Are you okay?"

"I'll definitely be better with you here."

"It sounds like I have a wildly different world to learn how to live in."

"That is an understatement. They have these places called airports now where they use planes that allow all humans to fly now. They travel all over the world with ease. It makes it a lot harder for me to get around unseen."

"And what of the other dragons? Are they all gone?"

“Nay, there are a lot of them here in Scotland. Ian and Cordelia had many children. They must have discovered the curse broken not long after it happened as they have all returned to the Americas.”

“Then why are you here?”

“That’s where it all gets really complicated. Are you sure you’re up for this now? I’d like to take you home where you can rest and eat something. If you are still living the same day as when I left you, then you must be exhausted. You fought so hard and well. I was so proud of you.”

My shoulders slumped as I sought a rock to sit on. “I can’t believe it’s over. At least for me.”

“What do you mean?”

I pulled my mother’s note from my pocket and unfolded it slowly. “Apparently, I should have read this as soon as I found the amulet.”

“Why? What does it say?”

“I guess we’ll have to find out together.”

My Dearest Darling,

I knew eventually you would find your way to this spot. I only wish I was there with you now to share in the rest of your life.

However, since I cannot, I have done my best to offer you help so that you can find the course you are meant to take.

A dear friend of mine has offered to help, and I’m forever grateful for whatever assistance she provides.

You will have met her already. Her name is Ensley, and I promise, whatever form she has appeared in, you can trust her.

She probably thinks I am crazy to go to these lengths, but I know that my King will do anything to get what he wants and that includes hurting you, my darling.

However, I’ve seen your future, and no matter how bleak it looks at this moment, it will eventually be bright. For you have been touched by the Goddess herself.

But you will need my magic to see this through. I know it sounds overwhelming, but trust your instincts. Love is the most important thing and if you listen, it will guide you, I promise.

To be chosen as an omega is a rare and beautiful gift among fae. Even if your Alpha is not what you would expect. He has an important task, and he needs you to help him.

I know that sounds vague, but I have probably said more than I should. It is a tricky thing not to mess with fate. So I will leave you with only two important things you must never forget.

Trust your heart.

And know that you will always be loved by me until the end of time.

Mother

HOW I WASN'T CRYING by the time I put down that letter escaped me. But as impactful as her words were on the paper, I was more grateful than ever that I'd gotten a chance to see Ensley one last time. Isaac wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into his lap. For a long time we simply sat there staring out at the sea, us both lost in our thoughts.

"I can't believe Ensley was a gift from your mother. She was such a pain in the ass."

I swatted at Isaac. Trust him to break the tension with sarcasm. "You were mean to her. What did you expect?"

"Now that I know who she really was, I would say a lot more."

I shook my head. "You are impossible."

"Aye, I am. And I'm your Alpha."

"Oh, Goddess. I knew that part was going to go to your head. That doesn't mean I'm going to submit to your every whim. You should get that out of your head now."

He leaned me back over his arm and stared into my eyes. "Are you sure about that? Because I remember a little fae omega in heat begging for everything I had to give."

“And what a cruel twist of fate that was,” I said with a smile.

“I’d be happy to show you more of my cruelty with my knot AND my barb.” Somehow he managed to roll us into the grass without much effort and in a way that put him between my legs and his hardening cock in just the right spot.

I almost gasped as my stomach quickened at the memory. Not to mention the pressure he so expertly applied to my most sensitive spot.

“You really are an evil bastard.” I laughed.

“Evil you say? How about clever instead? Because somehow I’ve managed to get the love of my life on a deserted island in the middle of nowhere with no one around for miles and miles. Which means I can get her naked and make her scream to my heart’s desire.”

“The love of your life?”

“Oh aye.” His Scottish brogue had seemed to thicken since his return to Scotland and it slid over my skin like a silky touch. I loved it. “And now I’ve got the rest of my life to show you just how much that means to me.”

“How about we focus on right now and worry about tomorrow later?” I grabbed at the edges of his shirt and with a little extra supernatural power, ripped it open and bared his naked chest.

I gasped at the nasty red scar that bisected his body from his left shoulder down to his right waist. “What happened to you? Can your dragon not heal that?”

“Oh he did. You should have seen it yesterday. This is miles better than before, trust me.”

“What happened?” I asked again, concerned that he’d been sliced open by what look like something large and jagged.

Like a claw.

He rolled off of me and I whimpered at the loss of his heat and his touch.

When he didn’t answer I rose up over him and looked him in the eye again. “Isaac, you’re scaring me. What happened?”

“I was going to wait until later to tell you this, but it seems your blood magic is a little trickier than we thought. Especially when there is someone close by who shares my exact blood.”

“Magnus,” I whispered, the connection clicking. In between my conversation with Ensley and the blinding need to be with my Alpha, I’d forgotten all about leaving Magnus shielded in the cave. “He’s here.”

“Aye, that he is, and he’s on a rampage.”

EPILOGUE

Isaac

The wedding ceremony conducted a month later may have been an intimate, two-person affair in a public courthouse, but it was perfect to me. It was also all we had time for at the moment.

“How do you feel, Mrs. Ferguson?” I asked, as I stroked my hand down her bare leg.

Kitra smiled, and stared down at her hand and the gigantic diamond in the shape of a dragon’s egg. “Like a concubine.”

I snorted at her answer. “You do realize that still means something different here than it does in the fae realm, right?”

“Oh well. I’ll try to remember that, but there are entirely too many rules here for me to remember everything.”

“You are my wife and my mate. Wife by human law, and mate by fate and love.”

“Are you trying to romance me?”

I looked at her sharply. “I knew I shouldn’t have gotten us those smartphones. There is too much noise on the internet. Especially that dancing app you love far too much.”

She laughed. “Get over it, already. I’ve learned a lot about modern humans on those devices. It’s been a wild crash course. Not to mention it’s helping us track Magnus.”

“Who continues to evade us while wreaking havoc that we have to go behind him and clean up. This was not what I expected our honeymoon to look like.”

“I’ve taken your knot three times already today. What more were you expecting?”

I arched my brow. “I know you’re not trying to imply that you weren’t begging for it each and every time.”

“I’m not implying anything, my love.”

Her overly sweet response did not fool me. My little beast had gotten a little big for her britches since coming to the human realm.

I leaned over and swatted her ass good and hard. “Just remember, your heat is coming again soon, little beast. I could withhold my knot until you’re absolutely mindless for it.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You could, but you won’t.”

I gave her a look that would make her wonder. But she was right. I’d never let her hurt like that. I would do anything to keep my love and omega safe and happy. But she could bank on me finding some creative ways to make her rethink some of that sass.

“Holy shit!” Kitra shot to her feet, that questionable cellphone device waving in front of her face. “We’ve got him.”

A growl erupted from my throat as I too jumped from my feet. “Where is he? I’m going to kill him.”

“We have to catch him first. Plus, I still say you have to talk to him before you do anything rash.”

“Biting his head off and tossing his body into the ocean is not rash. It’s a well thought out plan.”

She shook her head. “Then I’m not going to tell you where he is.”

I lunged for her phone and she threw it over my head, but she underestimated my reflexes as I jumped into the air and caught it one handed.

“Well, that wasn’t a well thought out plan on my part,” she said, a beautiful frown on her face.

I swallowed down my smile as I looked down at her locked phone. Another growl rolled through my chest as she snickered behind her hand.

“I guess you think you’re clever. What’s the password?” The gloat on her face should have annoyed me, but she had a way of getting to me in a whole different way. Instead, my dick got hard again.

I prowled toward her, my alpha growl morphing into that sound that resembled a purr that I knew would melt all of her resistance.

“That’s not fair,” she said, taking a step back, but faltering as she did.

“Then tell me the password.” Two could play this game.

“Knot happening, with a capital K.”

“Don’t tempt me,” I said, shaking my head. Incurable brat was racking up punishments again.

“No, that’s really what it is. If you don’t believe me, try it.”

“Don’t test me on this, little beast. If you’re yanking my chain, I will blister your cute ass.”

“Tick tock,” she replied. “If you don’t hurry, we’re going to miss him again.”

As I typed in the two words, I could not believe I was doing this. But sure enough, after I hunted the letters on the keyboard and typed out the two words, her phone unlocked and a breaking news story popped onto the screen.

“What the hell is wrong with him? A train derailment just outside of Edinburgh?”

“This isn’t like him. We need to find out why he’s gone off the rails like this.”

I zoomed in on the map of the accident. “That’s less than ten minutes away if we fly.”

She shook her head, backing away. “Nope. That’s not happening. You go. Or we can drive. That car you bought practically flies.”

Her fear of flying was as real as it got and no way was I going to push her on this. I’d promised her that unless her life was in danger I would never force it again and I’d meant it.

“I can go.”

“Or we can drive. I’m afraid if I’m not there, he really won’t survive your encounter.”

I could see that she didn’t want to be left behind and her concerns were valid. Brother or not, I’d had enough of his bullshit.

“Or we can drive.” I agreed.

“Perfect. Let’s go.” She grabbed her phone from my hand and dropped it into the back pocket of her shorts. That were criminally short by the way. She’d embraced the twenty-first century lifestyle practically overnight. Since I’d been raised here in a different era, I was still struggling to catch up. Although in some areas I’d gone all in. Like cars.

Flying was great, but driving European sports cars was an adventure. I snatched the keys from the strange bowl Kitra had placed inside our front door, grabbed her hand and pulled her to my side.

“Ready to go, wife?”

“Concubine.”

I laughed as I kissed her mouth. “Okay, my love, whatever you want.”

**EXCLUSIVE FREE BONUS EPILOGUE COMING
SOON TO THE NEWSLETTER.**

THANKS so much for reading *The Soul of the Dragon*! Are you ready for a little extra bonus epilogue that includes a a little bit more of not only Isaac and Kitra, but also Magnus?

Don't miss it! Sign up for my [newsletter here](#) and receive this **FREE bonus as soon as it's published.**

In the meantime...

If you are curious about the shifters in the modern world that Isaac has returned to, be sure to check out the Southern Shifters series that begins with [Shifter Marked](#). And while it takes a while, the Ferguson dragons do make a return to America in **Ian and Cordelia's daughter's story in [One Crazy Wolf](#)**. A lot of time has passed and so much has changed. And there is more to come.

The Fire of the Dragon is coming soon...

ALSO BY ELIZA GAYLE

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