

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HOLLY RENE



A KINGDOM OF FIRE AND FATE

HOLLY RENEE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A Kingdom of Fire and Fate should only be read by mature readers (18+) and contains scenes that may make some readers uncomfortable.

This book contains depictions of sexually explicit scenes, violence, and assault. It contains mature language, themes, and content that may not be suitable for all readers. Reader discretion is advised.

*For my readers—
I will never be able to thank you enough for your love and support of this
series.*

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CHAPTER 1

THALIA

The sun crept over the horizon, its orange blaze tinging the sky with a fiery hue. The air was still and silent around me, and though I felt calm on the surface, my heart raced in my chest like a caged animal trying to escape. Fear coursed through my veins as I watched the light of day chase away the darkness.

War was coming.

I took a deep breath and shook off the fear that threatened to consume me. The world was about to change, but I refused to be swept away in the chaos. Gavril and his army were advancing on our kingdom, determined to take what didn't belong to him as he always did.

But I refused to allow him to see a single trace of fear in my eyes when he arrived.

He would show no mercy, but neither would I.

No matter how hard I tried to forget my past, to forget him, his cruel words and brutal touch had become a brand on my skin just like the scars he'd left behind. My heart raced with terror every time a thought of him crossed my mind, but I was determined not to give in to that panic.

"You okay?"

I jumped at the sound of Jorah's voice and looked in his direction.

"Yes, I'm fine," I replied, my voice steady despite the unease I felt inside. "Just preparing myself for what's to come."

Jorah nodded, his eyes scanning the horizon. "We're ready to face him. You're ready." He looked back at me, but I quickly looked away.

"I am." I nodded and tried to settle that truth deep inside my bones.

I wanted to believe it as much as he did.

Jorah was one of my most trusted friends, and he had been such since I arrived in the Blood kingdom. Since I had arrived a completely different woman than who I was now.

I was no longer the scared, powerless girl who Gavril took from whenever he chose. I was no longer his prisoner, his Starblessed, yet the fear that used to come with his presence lingered inside me. He no longer had control over me, but every part of me seemed to remember what it used to feel like when he did.

"Gavril won't touch you. I won't allow him close enough to look at you." There was a strength in Jorah's voice that bled into me and doused some of my rising panic.

"You can't promise that." I shook my head and looked back toward him.

He was watching me, his gaze trailing over my features, and my chest ached before the next words left his mouth.

"I could promise you so many things, Thalia. If only you'd allow me to."

I stared up at my friend, this warrior who longed to fight for and protect me, but my heart didn't belong to him. Not when it already belonged to another.

Jorah deserved so much more than just my friendship, but this was all he would ever have from me.

I stepped forward, brushing my hand against his arm gently as I gazed up at his handsome face. "You are an incredible friend," I said softly. "And no matter what happens next, we will always be there for one another."

He nodded, but his gaze was haunted. "Of course." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Jorah." I reached out for him again, but he took a step back before I could touch him.

"It's Sorin, isn't it?" We were all friends. We had been for a long time, but hearing Sorin's name from his lips right now sent my heart racing far faster than my fear of Gavril ever could.

"What?"

"It's always been him, hasn't it?" His gaze lowered to my mouth. "When he's in the room, he's all you see."

"That's not true." The lie tasted bitter on my tongue.

Jorah looked over my shoulder, and I followed his gaze until my own slammed into Sorin walking through the streets of our kingdom with Evren. He hadn't noticed either of us standing there, and I hoped he didn't.

I didn't want to face him in this moment when I was trying to find peace. Sorin was the only one who could tear down my defenses without trying.

He would see the fear that still ate at me the moment he laid his eyes upon me, and he would demand things of me that I wasn't willing to give.

I let my gaze roam over him as he spoke to Evren. He was dressed in his leathers, every bit the warrior I knew him to be, and something inside me settled when I saw the harsh look on his face.

Sorin would protect this kingdom with his life. He would protect me just the same, and guilt flooded me when I felt a comfort in him that I couldn't find in Jorah.

"They're here." Jorah's voice held an edge of panic.

I looked back toward him, but it was too late. I saw exactly what he was seeing as soldiers began appearing out of thin air and into our kingdom.

The fae army was here.

I shot up in bed and held the sheet against my chest as my fingers dug into the fabric. I could feel my heart slamming against my chest and sweat ran down my spine. It was just a dream.

I looked around my room, my heart racing so wildly I could feel the echo of it through every part of me. It felt so real, like I was truly standing on the brink of war, ready to face the enemy. But it was just a dream, a reminder of the fears and doubts that still lingered inside me.

A reminder that I had lost Jorah. The sudden wave of anguish hit me like a tsunami, crushing my chest and making it hard to breathe. Guilt weighed down on me and clawed its way up my throat, threatening to consume me in an endless spiral of grief.

Jorah was gone.

He was gone, and I had allowed myself to become so close to him that a simple thought of him stole the breath from my lungs.

I swallowed breath after breath until I could no longer taste ash on my tongue or feel blood on my hands. I tried to shake off the remnants of the dream, reminding myself that I was safe in my own room. But as I looked

around, I couldn't help but feel on edge. The room was dark and silent, and for a moment, I feared I wasn't truly alone.

I lifted my trembling hand and shot my power out from myself to the small fireplace at the edge of the room. Flames licked up the wood quickly. The room flooded with light, and I felt a wave of relief wash over me as I saw there was no one with me.

You are okay, Thalia.

I climbed out of bed and walked over to the window, peering out at the night sky. The stars were shining brightly, their light casting a soft glow over the world below. It was a beautiful sight, and for a moment, I felt a trace of peace.

But then my mind wandered back to the dream, to the fear that had gripped me so tightly. I couldn't shake the nightmare that haunted me night after night.

I took another deep breath and tried to push the memories away. It was just a dream, I told myself. Nothing more.

But deep down, I knew I was lying to myself. The dream had felt too real, too vivid, because my guilt had become a living, breathing thing.

My fear and guilt swirled together like a relentless beast, tearing through me in a merciless frenzy. Every thought, every breath, was devoured by this ravenous creature, leaving me hollow and broken.

Would things have ended differently if I had returned Jorah's feelings? Would he have been less reckless with his own life if he had known how important he was to me?

I shook my head and turned away from the window, forcing myself to focus on something else. I walked over to my dresser and pulled out a book with trembling hands, flipping through the pages until I found the spot where I had left off the night before.

As I read, the words on the page began to blur together, and my mind wandered back to the memories that ate at me once more. I couldn't escape it, no matter how hard I tried.

I closed the book and set it down on the dresser, running my hands down my face in frustration.

I sighed and looked back out the window, searching for some sense of comfort in the dark night. But all I could see was the reflection of my own fear staring back at me.

It was a sight I had become too accustomed to seeing.

It was going to be a long night.

Just like every night for the last couple of months that had seemed to continuously repeat.

My spine straightened as I heard a sound from the hallway outside my room. Footsteps, gentle and slow. Someone was here. My heart skipped a beat as I hesitated for a moment before moving to the door and quietly opening it.

I knew who would be waiting for me before I ever saw his face.

Sorin stood in the hallway, his eyes filled with concern as his gaze roamed over every inch of me. Even though he just climbed out of bed, he was devastatingly handsome. His light brown hair that was normally tied back was loose around his face. It only seemed to accentuate the hard lines of his jaw that I was desperate to run my fingers over.

He reached out to me, but I backed away, my fear rising at the thought of being comforted by him.

I yearned for his presence, desperate for the solace and comfort only he could provide. And that desperation of how badly I needed him filled me with dread.

He seemed to sense my unease and lowered his arm, his gaze still fixed on me with intensity. "Thalia," he said softly. "What's wrong? Another dream?"

I bit down on my bottom lip and stepped back into the safety of my room. "I'm fine. I just needed to calm myself down."

"You're not fine. I could feel your heart racing from my room."

I tried not to let his words affect me. He was a vampire. He had heightened senses. It had nothing to do with me.

"I'm sorry to wake you, but I'm okay now." I started to close the door, but he slipped his foot in the way and stopped me from shutting him out.

"I need to see that you're okay." His gruff voice left no room for argument even though I was desperate to do so.

I crossed my arms over my chest as he edged the door open further.

"I just told you I'm fine."

"Excuse me for not taking your word for it. You continue to say you're fine when you're not."

I bit down the words that were on the tip of my tongue because I knew he was right. I hadn't been fine since Jorah's death. Maybe even before then. Not since Gavril.

Taking a step back to try to give myself some space from him, I held my arms out wide so he could get a good look at me. "There." I spun slowly in a circle before turning back to face him. "Are you satisfied?"

"You know I'm not." He stepped into my room, into my space, before slowly closing the door behind him.

My room suddenly felt small. It was suffocating, and the only air I could breathe had traces of him. The scent of him overwhelmed me. It messed with my head because even though fear still clung to me, all I could think about was how badly I wanted him to erase everything but thoughts of him.

"What was your dream about?" His eyes softened with his question, and I hated the way he was looking at me. It made my chest ache, and I didn't want to let that feeling in.

"I don't remember," I lied to him. It had become so much easier to let the lies slip from my tongue rather than the truth.

"You're lying." His gaze was roaming over my body, tracking every part of me. "The same dream you've been having?" He waited a moment for my reply, but I didn't give it to him. "From the battle?"

"It's none of your business, Sorin." I moved away from him and toward my bed. It was then that I realized I was wearing nothing but my undergarments and the blouse I was too tired to take off before bed. I tugged on the ends of it before turning around to face him again. The move only made the smallest smile grace his lips.

"Of course it's my business." His gaze trailed along my completely exposed thighs. "You are my friend. One of my best friends in this life. You cannot force me to stop caring about you."

I knew he was right and that I had been unfair to him. But I didn't know how to talk to him about what was plaguing me.

I didn't know how to tell him the memory of the friend we lost haunted me more than it seemed to haunt anyone else. To tell him that I desperately wanted his comfort, but the idea of it scared me to my core.

Fear, unlike any I'd ever known, settled deep in my gut as I thought about the real truth that clawed deep inside me and refused to let go. I was

thankful it had been Jorah that I lost instead of Sorin. Thankful that I didn't lose the man standing in front of me, who I could hardly stand to look at now.

Jorah's death was one of the hardest things I had ever had to face, and still I was thankful it was him instead of Sorin. Guilt fed off the very marrow of me and threatened to devour me whole.

It was then that I finally looked up and saw the worry radiating from him. He was standing there looking at me like he wanted nothing more than to fill the void inside of me, to make me forget everything that haunted me, if only I'd let him.

"I'm worried about you."

He took a step toward me, still inching ever closer, and I swallowed a deep breath, filling my lungs with the scent of him.

Memories flooded me, memories of his touch, of his body against mine.

Those memories haunted me almost as much as the others.

"You should go." I nodded toward the door and crossed my arms to protect myself from the cool night air and the urge to reach out for him.

"If that's what you want." He said the words, but he didn't move. He just stood there before me, not pushing, yet giving me every opportunity to change my mind.

"It is." I nodded and dug my fingers into my forearms.

The star marks along my arms buzzed against my skin, but I had become long since accustomed to the feeling while being in his presence.

"Okay." He pushed a stray piece of hair out of his face and behind his ear, and my fingers burned to follow that same path. "If you need me, you know where I am."

"Of course." I nodded and prayed he couldn't feel my heart racing.

He let out a deep sigh before turning his back to me, and I hated the sight of it. I didn't want him to leave. Everything inside me was desperate for me to beg him to stay.

Don't.

Don't ask him.

He moved closer to the door, and my breath went with him.

With every step he took, panic began to set in.

"Sorin." There was desperation in my voice, and I knew that he could hear it as much as he could see it on my face.

His back tensed before he turned to look back at me over his shoulder. “Yes, Thalia?”

I swallowed and avoided looking at him as I let my question fall from my lips. “Will you stay? Just for tonight.” My words were rushed and hectic. “Just until I settle back into sleep.”

“You only have to ask.” He moved back in my direction. With more determination this time, a trace of possessiveness in his gaze.

He reached for my hand as he passed me and tugged me toward the bed before I could change my mind. He climbed into my bed, a spot he had been in many times before, and he pulled me down until my head was pressed against his chest.

His body was hard, the ridges of his muscles deep and hard-earned, but he was warm and comforting. The sound of his heart beneath my ear settled something deep inside me. I tried to relax against him, but I didn’t want to get too comfortable. I didn’t want to rely on him more than I already did.

“Relax, Thalia,” he whispered against my forehead before gently pushing my curls out of my face. “I’ve got you.”

It was that promise that both soothed me and scared me at the same time. It was him who had me, only him that could settle the fear inside me until it felt starved.

It was him I couldn’t live without, and that scared me most of all.

CHAPTER 2

SORIN

I ran my hand along Thalia's back. I traced that path back and forth until I had memorized it better than any map I had ever studied.

I wanted to know her entire body in the same manner. I was desperate to know her mind, her every want and fear.

But she refused to let me.

I moved my hand from her back and slid my fingers against the base of her neck. She sighed, and the sound vibrated against my chest.

She was so close to me, yet she felt so far away.

It was only in these moments, in the dark of the night, that she allowed herself this.

This weakness as she saw it.

In the morning, she would act as if she hadn't needed me at all, but we both knew differently.

But I would let her have it if it was what she needed. I would give her anything.

I pulled back slightly so I could take in her face. She looked so peaceful in that moment, her hands were clinging to me, digging into my flesh even in sleep, but her lips were relaxed and the breath that fell in and out of them, calm.

She was breathtakingly beautiful. The past several months had been hard on all of us, but Thalia had shown a strength and fierceness that was stunning to behold. But it was in these moments, when that warrior was stripped away, that I could see the vulnerability in her face that she hid from everyone else, that stole the breath from my lungs. Every inch of her

overwhelmed me. Even the scars along her forearms that she tried to keep concealed.

The thought made my chest tighten as I thought about anyone ever hurting her. Even in death, Gavril hadn't suffered enough to satisfy the vengeance that I hungered for.

I would have tortured him, made him beg for his life until I could no longer taste her pain on my tongue.

But I didn't get the chance.

And the only consolation was that it was at Thalia's hand that he fell.

But still, I knew the memories of him haunted her.

But those memories didn't touch her the way Jorah's death did.

And I wasn't sure that she would ever recover from that.

There was so much guilt in her eyes that didn't belong there, but it still ate at her just the same.

I didn't know how to help her. How to stop it from dimming the light in her eyes that I had always loved.

Something that Jorah had loved as well.

I tried to keep my own guilt at bay, but it was hard. Jorah's death weighed heavy on my chest, crushing in the moments when Thalia wasn't in my arms.

And there was something about that fact that made my guilt fester when she was gone. As if I was dishonoring him by comforting her.

Jorah had loved Thalia as well. The depths of his feelings for her, I would never truly know. But I knew they were there. We all had.

But that had never stopped me from having my own feelings for her.

Despite my friendship with Jorah, there was nothing that could stop the way I felt about her.

I leaned forward and breathed her in. The smell of sweet lilac mingled with the intoxicating scent that was uniquely her. My fingers tightened against her neck, pulling her face closer to my own, and I let my eyes fall closed as her soft, warm breath rushed in and out against my lips.

The heat of her radiated against my skin, and my body refused to relax as I held her.

I wanted to soak up every minute that she was in my arms. My body would hate me for my decisions tomorrow, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

A soft moan fell from her lips as she shifted in her sleep, and my hands tightened against her as a spark of desire ignited within me. My heart was racing in my chest with a desperation to make her mine.

I knew she was pushing me away to protect herself from being hurt, but my want for her was reckless.

But there was nothing I could do to stop it.

I wanted her.

I didn't want to be lying in her bed because she needed me to chase her nightmares away. I wanted her to want me here simply because she wanted me.

But I couldn't force her to feel the same way. All I could do was be here for her when she needed me and hope that one day she would see me like she had before.

Because she had seen me once upon a time.

And she had let me love her in ways that I could never forget. Ways that haunted me when I was alone at night in my own bed thinking about her.

Because no other woman had ever made me feel the things that Thalia did. To think of a future together, to consider if our babies would have her eyes or mine.

It was a dangerous line I was walking.

But I couldn't stop. My addiction to her was all-consuming, and it felt as if nothing but her gravity held me together. I leaned down and pressed my lips softly against her forehead, relishing in the way her body molded against me in response.

And in that moment, I didn't care about the danger, about how much power she held to hurt me.

There were only thoughts of her that clouded my mind.

The urge to lean down and kiss her lips was unbearable, but I wouldn't do it.

Not until she asked me to give her the thing I had been desperate to give.

Until then, I would cling to the memories of the way she felt beneath me, the way she had tasted, and the exact shade of brown her eyes became when she was no longer capable of hiding herself.

A wave of possessiveness rushed through me, cascading into every bit of resolve I was trying to cling to, and I closed my eyes to try to get myself

under control.

Thalia was safe. She was here in my arms. She was safe, and nothing else mattered.

CHAPTER 3

THALIA

I blinked my eyes open against the bright sunlight that was drowning my room. I felt more rested than I had in a long time, and I knew the heat against my back had everything to do with it.

Sorin was pressed against me, the soft brush of his breath against the back of my neck, his arm wrapped around my waist, and his knee pressed between mine as he held me close.

I closed my eyes for a moment and just let myself sink into the feeling of him. This was everything I wanted but also everything I feared.

This comfort that he brought, this weakness, I couldn't become complacent in relying on Sorin.

If I was reliant on him, then he could be taken away.

And I couldn't handle losing him too.

I feared I wouldn't survive it.

I wouldn't survive without him.

I shifted slightly, feeling the hardness of his knee between my thighs, and a shiver of desire ran through me. It had been a long time since I had allowed myself to feel anything like this, to let my want for Sorin run rampant through my veins.

But it was always there, impatiently craving his touch.

I couldn't deny the way my body responded to him, the way my skin tingled at his touch.

I had allowed myself that weakness once upon a time, had begged him for it, but that was before.

I carefully shifted out of Sorin's embrace and climbed out of bed. The cool air of the room hit my skin, and I shivered as I slipped on my trousers.

I walked over to the window and peered out. In the light of day, I could slip on my mask and pretend that everything was okay. But when everything settled and night crept back in, it was impossible to do so.

I looked back toward Sorin, still sleeping peacefully in my bed.

My heart ached for him, for the way he looked at me with a longing that he seemed like he would never let go of.

I shook my head and forced myself to slip my boots on my feet before ducking out of my room without waking him.

The halls were quiet, but as I entered the kitchen, I could hear Adara talking as if she had been up for hours.

I rounded the corner, grabbing a pastry as I went, and found Adara and her father leaning against a counter. A soft smile graced his lips as he watched her talk, and I forced myself to not acknowledge the ache in my chest at the sight.

She had barely known her father before Gavril dropped him at the doorstep of the Blood kingdom, yet he had still loved her.

He had given his life to make sure she didn't end up in the hands of the fae kingdom while mine had bred me for it.

"Good morning, Thalia," Adara greeted me with a smile as soon as she spotted me. "Sleep well?" She cocked an eyebrow, and that told me everything I needed to know.

She knew that Sorin had been in my bed.

I nodded, taking a bite of the pastry to avoid answering her.

"Have you seen Sorin this morning?" She grinned harder as she watched for my reaction. "He was supposed to meet with Evren this morning, but he's running late. That's very unlike him."

I swallowed the pastry as my eyes flicked toward her father. "I haven't seen him."

"Hmm," she hummed before turning back to face her father. "I'll see you at lunch. Thalia and I are going to find Sorin, then she's supposed to be training me today."

Shit. I had forgotten about that.

Adara had been having nightmares too, but hers were different from mine. Hers didn't seem to consume her the way mine had. She could shake

them off in the light of day. She could breathe.

But she wanted to always be ready for a fight if there was ever to be one again, and I had agreed to weekly training.

But waking up to Sorin in my bed had made me forget my responsibilities.

I nodded at Adara's words, feeling a twinge of guilt about not being honest with her.

"Let's just go train. I'm sure he just overslept," I said, forcing myself not to look at her as we left the kitchen.

I could feel her curious eyes on me as we walked. She was waiting for me to tell her the truth, but I couldn't bring myself to do so.

It was a dangerous line we were walking, and I didn't want to face the truth I knew I'd see in her eyes.

"I promised Evren I'd find him before I trained. Apparently, he really needs to talk with him."

Guilt flooded me as we turned down the hall toward where the rooms were. Sorin's was just a couple of doors down from mine, but as we approached his door, mine swung open.

Sorin stepped out, his chest completely bare and his trousers slightly undone. His eyes locked on mine, and he went still as soon as he saw me.

The hard muscles of his torso were on full display, and somehow he was even more striking than the night before.

"Hi."

My spine straightened, and my stomach tightened at the sight of him.

"Hi."

I forced myself to look away from him, my eyes landing on Adara who was watching us intently with a grin on her face.

"Evren is looking for you." I blurted out the words and looked back toward him.

"Yes." There was laughter in Adara's voice. "Apparently, you overslept, and no one"—she knocked her shoulder into mine—"knew where to find you."

The small smile that grew on Sorin's lips was enough to make me want to run to him and kill him at the same time. He was so damn handsome, especially with the ghost of sleep still on his face and the memory of him holding me still fresh in my mind.

"Sorry about that," Sorin said, running a hand through his messy hair. "I haven't slept that well in a while."

I could feel heat rising to my cheeks at the knowing look in his eyes, and I quickly looked away.

"As I can see." Adara moved past me but then reached back for my hand.

I slid mine into hers, feeling comfort in the warmth of her skin, and I continued to look anywhere but at Sorin.

"Well, we're off to training. Come on. Evren's waiting for you."

Sorin moved past us toward his door, and I sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of his muscular back. Every inch of him was cut to live the life of a warrior, every muscle earned through his blood and sweat, and I found myself wanting to trace every ridge with my tongue.

"Let me grab my things." He looked back at me for only a moment before he disappeared into his room.

Adara spun on me as soon as his door closed, and I tried to hide my reaction on my face.

"What?"

"Don't you what me," she half whispered, half yelled. "I haven't seen him," she mocked me before pointing to my door. "He just came out of your room."

I swallowed hard, feeling the weight of her words. "Did you expect me to tell you the truth in front of your father?"

"What exactly is the truth?" She narrowed her eyes on me just as Sorin's door opened.

"Ready?" I asked quickly, glancing up at a now dressed Sorin. Every bit of his clothing was back in place, his weapons strapped to his body, and it did nothing but make me want to take my time stripping every piece off of him.

"Ready." He nodded once, and I moved down the hall before either of them could say another word.

I pushed outside to the courtyard that we had converted into our training space, and Evren looked up from the stack of parchment he had in his lap.

"There you are." He dropped the parchments to the side and stood.

"Apparently, you've been working Sorin too hard. He needed a good night of sleep." You could practically hear the smile in Adara's voice.

Evren's eyes narrowed slightly because we all knew that Sorin never slept in.

"Uh-huh." He looked around at all of us. "Why do I get the feeling that I'm missing something?"

Adara laughed softly as she made her way toward her husband. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed a kiss against his lips.

I looked away and moved to the side of the space to make sure I had everything ready for training today.

"Are you okay?" Sorin spoke softly, but he might as well have been screaming by the way my body reacted.

I took a deep breath to steady myself and forced a smile, trying to ignore the way my heart raced at the sight of him. "I'm fine. Just ready to start training."

He was standing so close to me that the smell of him was no longer just a memory on my skin. I breathed him in slowly and tried not to react to the way my stomach fluttered as I did.

Sorin's eyes searched mine briefly before he spoke again. "You don't seem fine."

"I am." I held his gaze, trying to keep my emotions in check.

He didn't say anything for a long moment, but I could feel the tension between us. We both knew that we were playing with fire, but I refused to be the one who got burned.

"Why didn't you wake me before you left?" His words were low and raspy and held a trace of hurt.

"I didn't want to disturb you." I kept my tone cool and indifferent, but I felt like I was wavering right before his eyes. "You looked so peaceful."

Sorin's eyes stayed on me for a moment longer before he nodded. "I was peaceful. That's what happens when I'm with you."

I looked away from him quickly, trying not to face his words.

He stepped closer to me until I couldn't escape the heat of his body pressed against mine. "You were peaceful too, you know. Your heart rate settled, and every bit of the anxiety that plagued you disappeared when you were in my arms." He whispered it so softly that I almost felt as if I were imagining them. "It could be like that all the time."

I took a quick step back, almost tripping over my own feet, and shook my head.

"That's not an option, Sorin. You know that." I tried to keep my voice steady, but it came out weak and shaky.

"I don't know that." His gaze darkened and his jaw clenched as he slowly shook his head.

I didn't know what to say to him. I didn't know how to be honest about the fears that plagued me night after night and only seemed to worsen when I allowed myself to fall into him for comfort.

"Are we ready to train?" I asked as I turned to face Adara.

She was holding on to her husband, but she was still watching me carefully.

"I'm ready." She nodded.

Sorin passed by me wordlessly, but I could feel his disappointment in me radiating from him. As he walked by, our fingertips brushed lightly against each other. A spark of electricity shot through me and my skin tingled for what felt like an eternity.

I let my gaze slide toward Evren as he glanced back and forth between me and Sorin.

"All right, Adara. Pick your weapon." I waved to the daggers and swords that were lined up at the edge of the training area and tried like hell to push thoughts of Sorin from my mind.

I couldn't think straight about anything else while he was clouding my thoughts.

Adara moved toward me and grabbed two daggers. I matched her selection and twisted the cool metal between my fingers.

"What are you doing?" Her gaze slid back to the men where they were talking near the door, and I shook my head.

"Can we talk about this after they're gone?"

"Fine." She huffed and moved into the makeshift ring.

I followed her, focusing on the feel of the daggers in my hands rather than the thoughts that threatened to consume me. Adara and I had trained together so many times now that we moved in a seamless dance, each anticipating the other's moves.

As we sparred, the sound of metal against metal echoed through the courtyard, and I could feel Sorin and Evren watching us.

Despite my attempts to focus, I couldn't help but feel the heat of Sorin's gaze on my skin as if he were physically touching me.

Adara knocked me off balance, and I stumbled back, catching myself before I fell.

"You're off today." She pointed her dagger at me.

"I'm fine."

She pressed her attack harder, trying to get me to focus, but it was no use.

My mind was consumed with Sorin, and I couldn't think straight. Suddenly, Adara's blade was at my throat, and I froze.

"Dead." She whispered it softly.

I let out a deep breath and lowered my blades, feeling the weight of frustration settle in my stomach.

"You're distracted." Adara's voice was gentle, and I could hear the worry in it.

"I know." I rubbed my forehead, trying to clear my thoughts as I looked back to where Sorin and Evren had been. They were heading back inside, and Sorin looked over his shoulder at me one last time before they disappeared through the door.

"Talk to me," Adara said simply, but it wasn't that easy.

"I don't know what you want me to say." I shook my head. "I've just not been sleeping well."

"More dreams?"

I nodded, my gaze falling to the ground.

"You do know that secluding yourself and not letting anyone help you isn't going to make anything better, correct?"

I took a deep breath and looked up to face my friend.

"I'm handling it."

"By having Sorin in your bed then ignoring him in the light of day?" She cocked her head to the side.

"It's not like that," I protested weakly.

"Isn't it?" Adara's eyes were soft, but there was steel in her voice. "You're hurting both of you by pretending that it's not happening."

"I don't want to hurt him." My voice broke as my anger built. This was exactly what I didn't want to happen.

"Then talk to him." Adara's hand found mine, squeezing it gently. "What are you so afraid of?"

I let out a shuddering breath, feeling the weight of her words settle deep within my chest.

"He's a weakness," I confessed, my voice barely above a whisper. "He's already gotten too close."

Adara nodded slowly, understanding in her eyes.

"Do you consider me a weakness?"

I toyed with the dagger in my hand before I answered her honestly. "Yes." I met her gaze and held it. "But I know that he would be detrimental to me. As Evren would be to you."

Her gaze softened, and I hated the sympathy in her eyes. "You can't live like that, Thalia."

My back straightened, and I raised my chin. "It's the only way I know."

My entire life, I had been haunted by the fear of losing something or someone because that was what I had been taught. Jorah's death only intensified this nagging dread, as it made me painfully aware that one day I would lose everyone.

And if I let myself fall further into Sorin, I wouldn't survive losing him.

He made me vulnerable and reckless, and I didn't trust myself with him.

Adara's voice was soft, but her words hit me like a physical blow. "What's the point of surviving if you're not living?"

CHAPTER 4

SORIN

It had been two days since I woke up in Thalia's bed without her. She had managed to leave the room without me noticing, but the moment I opened my eyes, I knew she would be gone.

Two days since we stood in the training ring, and she pretended that everything was fine.

That was the way things worked between us. She needed me in the dark of night, but every trace of that need would be gone with the rise of the sun. And that night had been no different.

I stared out into the tree line as the setting sun warmed my back. I was meant to hear from one of our spies over three hours ago, but neither he nor word of him had returned. Worry set in my gut heavy and vicious, and I tried not to let it take hold.

There had been little knowledge of the fae kingdom since Gavril's death. No sign of movement from his father, nor word of where he had gone. The people of the fae kingdom had a ruler who didn't dare grace them with his presence.

And they would suffer because of his cowardice.

It was said that the castle had been scarcely occupied ever since the noblemen of their kingdom had begun to mourn their lost prince.

But there had been no sign of the king himself.

But deep in my gut, I knew he was there.

Evren's father had been born and bred in that castle. He had never lifted a finger to do anything in his life. That man would rather die in his castle

than live anywhere else. Despite how quiet and careful he was, he was there.

And every part of me ached with the urge to hunt him down and make him pay for his sins just as his son and his queen had.

Movement near the tree line caught my attention. My gaze darted around the darkening forest before a dark silhouette emerged from the trees. Wearing all black, Kalen could barely be seen, and he moved through the forest edge as if he were part of it.

I moved toward him quickly, desperate for any news he had to bring.

"Sorry for the delay." Kalen's hand rested on his dagger at his side.

"You bring news?"

He nodded once before looking around us discreetly. Kalen was our spy because he was damn good at his job. He could pull information from anyone and go unnoticed for as long as he chose to.

He had been a part of Evren's army for almost as long as I had, and he had proven his value time and time again.

"There is still no news of King Riven, but the human king and his guards were seen at the fae palace."

I took in a sharp breath, and his gaze met mine. The human king hadn't been on our radar for years. We had heard of no disturbances from him, let alone thoughts of him having anything to do with Evren's father.

"And what was he doing there?"

"The entire meeting was very hush, but there are rumors going around the fae kingdom that the human king is looking for a wife."

"And he needed to go to the fae kingdom to find one?" My mind was racing with possibilities of what the human king could have wanted. There had been little talk of him, the human realm rarely stirred any issues with ours, and the fact that he was meeting with the fae kingdom now had me itching to grab my sword. "Is he searching for a wife who's fae? Someone with magic?"

A darkness passed over Kalen's face, and I knew I wouldn't like what he was going to say next. "It is said that the human king is looking for a Starblessed."

I shot back from him and tried to wrap my head around the words he just said. What could the human king want with a Starblessed? Even though Gavril had failed in his attempt to find a Starblessed wife, he was able to

feed from them. To take their power. What would a human king do with the Starblessed? What use would they have?

He had no powers to amplify with theirs.

I ground my teeth together as I thought about Thalia. Flashes of her scars flooded my mind and a possessiveness that always accompanied my thoughts of her raced through my veins.

"And did they leave the fae kingdom with a Starblessed?"

There were many Starblessed that lived in the fae kingdom, most not nearly as powerful as Adara or even Thalia. Most were regarded with respect for the curse on their skin, but they lived among the fae as if that was where they belonged.

Kalen shook his head as his fingers tapped against his dagger. "The human king put out a call. Any Starblessed who wants to compete for his hand is to come to the human kingdom within three sunsets."

Every part of the information he had just given me didn't sit right.

It turned in my gut and forced the taste of acid on my tongue.

There would be no good coming from the human king who wanted a Starblessed as his wife. There was only one reason he would specifically want a Starblessed, and that was so he could use them in some way. So he could use their power. And to know that he was somehow involved with Evren's father? That only made things worse.

There was a prickling along my spine, and I hated the feeling. The human king was up to something, and not knowing what that was put us at a major disadvantage.

"I want you to go to the human kingdom. Gather any information you can find about what he's up to."

Kalen hesitated for only a second before he looked me square in the eye. "It's the reason I'm late for our meeting. I've already been."

Frustration crawled through me that he hadn't already told me this.

"And?" I snapped even though I tried to rein in my frustration.

"And what I already told you is the information I have. If the human kingdom has secrets, they are guarding them well. We both know I am very good at my job, but I had no way in. The castle is locked down tighter than any I have ever seen before."

I sighed and scrubbed a hand down my face. "Come." I motioned toward the palace. "We need to inform Evren of what has happened, and I'm

sure he'll have questions for you."

"Of course." Kalen nodded before following me.

My footsteps echoed off the cold marble walls as we entered, each stride growing slower and more hesitant as we approached the tall, ornately carved doors. I felt my heart thumping against my rib cage in a frantic rhythm that seemed to pulse through the rest of my body until a dull ache spread across my neck and shoulders.

This news would not go over well with Evren. Even if his father wasn't involved, knowing that another greedy king wanted his hands on a Starblessed would eat at him.

I pushed through the doors to the kitchens and found Evren with his arms wrapped around Adara. He was leaning into her, whispering something in her ear, and she giggled as she clung to his chest.

I cleared my throat, but neither of them noticed us. They were so wrapped in one another, so lost in their love and want for each other, that it was often they couldn't see anything beyond it.

I cleared my throat again. "My prince." This time, Adara's head whipped around in my direction, but Evren didn't let her go. If anything, he seemed to pull her closer into him as if he was desperate not to let her go, for us not to interrupt them.

"Hi, Sorin." Adara's smile was contagious as she tried to push away her husband to no avail. "Evren, Kalen is with him."

Evren groaned and finally pulled his face away from her neck to look up at us. His gaze slid to Kalen, and he nodded once before straightening. But his grip on Adara never wavered.

"Kalen, how are you?"

"Good, Your Highness." Kalen bowed his head slightly out of respect for our prince.

"Kalen brings word."

Evren's eyes narrowed, and his grip on Adara tightened almost imperceptibly. "What news?" He clenched his jaw, and the air around him seemed to shiver against his power. He spoke each word slowly, enunciating every syllable like a warning.

I took a deep breath before speaking. "The human king was seen at the fae palace. He's looking for a wife, specifically a Starblessed. He's put out a

call for any Starblessed that wants to compete for his hand to come to the human kingdom. He's given them three sunsets."

There was a moment of stunned silence before Evren spoke again, his voice low and dangerous. "Did they leave with a Starblessed?"

Kalen shook his head. "Not that I know of. But the human kingdom is locked down tight. I couldn't get any more information."

Evren's jaw clenched, and Adara's eyes widened in alarm. "What does this mean for us?" she whispered, her hand reaching up to rest on Evren's chest.

I could see the fear in Adara's eyes, and I knew it was mirrored in my own. "It means we need to be cautious," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "We don't know what the human king wants with a Starblessed, but no good has ever come from a greedy king wanting a Starblessed at his side."

Evren nodded, his grip on Adara finally loosening slightly. "We'll send scouts to the human kingdom. I want to know everything that's going on over there."

His words rang with authority, and I knew that he was already planning his next move. Evren was always thinking, always analyzing, and it was one of the reasons why he was such a strong leader.

"I tried to pull all the information out of the kingdom that I could, but we need someone on the inside." Kalen's eyes glanced toward Adara, and I spoke before Evren caught his gaze. There was no way in hell either of us would let that happen.

"I'll go." I crossed my arms over my chest and tried to calm my racing thoughts.

Evren turned to me then, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Are you going to offer your hand in the competition for the human king?"

Adara snorted out a laugh, but I ignored her.

"No, but I'm sure there will be liaisons from every kingdom that arrive for the competition. I can go as a representative of the Blood kingdom."

"They won't let you get close enough to get any real intel."

"The human king doesn't know me. They don't need to know that I'm your second in command."

"What about Thalia?" The suggestion came from Kalen, and my hands tightened into fists as I turned to face him.

“That’s not fucking happening,” I growled through gritted teeth.

“He has a point,” Evren spoke, and I whipped my head around to stare at my friend. “Thalia is one of the best warriors we have, and she would be able to get far more intel than you ever could.”

Fury vibrated through me, causing my hands to tremble with rage. “I don’t care if Thalia could find your father and kill him on the spot. We are not putting her in that danger.”

Evren cocked his head as he studied me carefully. “Thalia is a warrior, and this is my kingdom to protect.”

That only fueled my anger. “Thalia is my... She has suffered enough. There is nothing that is worth making her suffer more.”

“And if my father has blood magic?” Evren’s voice softened, his worry bleeding into his words.

“I don’t care if he has enough magic to destroy our world. There is nothing he could possess that would convince me to put her in that sort of danger.” I looked between him and Adara. “Does she need to come in this room and pull up her sleeves to remind you of the price she’s already paid? Do you need to be the one to calm her from her nightmares so you can have a taste of my unwillingness to bring her more?”

“And if she wants to go?” Evren tightened his hold on Adara.

“Then I will fight it every step of the way. We both know she will put the good of this kingdom before herself. I’m not willing to let her. She deserves to have someone fight for the good of her for once.”

“You know she will hate you for this.” Adara finally spoke, but I wasn’t shocked by her words.

“And that’s a price I’m willing to pay. Send me to the human kingdom. Please, Evren.” I looked back at him, not as my prince, but as my brother.

Evren studied me for a moment, and I met his gaze steadily, determination burning within me. “I can get the information we need.”

“You’re valuable to this kingdom too.” Evren’s voice was quiet yet steady.

“I know the risks.”

Evren’s dark eyes scrutinized me for what felt like an eternity, and I felt the weight of his gaze. He knew I was desperate to keep her safe, even though she didn’t belong to me. If she did, if I could call her my own, I had

no idea what I would do. My heart raced as I thought about how much I would risk for her and for the kingdom we both loved.

"You are not to leave until tomorrow." Evren stepped back and pulled Adara tighter against him. "You need a clear head, and we need to strategize before you leave."

"Of course." I nodded.

Evren's eyes darted across Kalen's face, and his lips parted slightly. His brow furrowed, and he took a deep breath as he processed the situation. "You will go back to the human kingdom as well. Blend into the kingdom, become one of them, and find out anything you can outside of the palace."

Kalen nodded his head once. "I will leave tonight so no one is to see us together."

Adara looked between the three of us. A small wrinkle formed between her brows, and her eyes narrowed at me. Her chest heaved as she sucked in a deep breath of air, and I could see the muscles in her jaw clench as if she were preparing for an argument with me. "Thalia is going to hate this."

CHAPTER 5

THALIA

I stepped into the throne room cautiously, taking in the tapestries that hung along the walls and ornate thrones at the far end. Evren was seated at the table in the middle of the room. His eyes narrowed as he glanced up from a pile of parchment. He pursed his lips when our eyes met, already prepared for what I had come to deliver.

"I thought you'd be in bed by now." He looked away from me and back down at his documents.

"And I thought we were a team." I forced the words out through gritted teeth, unable to conceal the hurt behind them. I clenched my fists and my jaw as I spoke, trying to contain the bubbling frustration that was rising up from deep within me.

Evren sighed and looked back up at me. "We are a team, Thalia."

"Well, as one of the team members," I said, trying to keep my voice steady and failing. "I'd like to ask, why in the gods' names do you think it's a good idea to send Sorin into the human kingdom?" From the moment Adara told me what was going on, a sinking feeling had taken root in my gut and was growing worse by the second.

"I don't think it's a good idea." Evren leaned back in his chair as he stared at me. He ran his hand through his hair, and I could see his tiredness through the dark circles under his eyes. "But I think it's the best option we have. It is detrimental for us not to know what my father is up to."

I narrowed my eyes at him and tried to calm my racing heart. I didn't want Sorin to leave. Of course I didn't, but there was a bigger part of me

that was angry that not only did they choose Sorin to leave when I needed him so desperately, but they chose him over me.

"Oh, yes. Send a vampyre soldier into the human kingdom to try to get information. It's not like the human king has put out a call for a Starblessed and you don't have one sitting right here." I balled my hands into fists to keep them from shaking. "In case you forgot, I'm a soldier too. I'm the best shot we have to get the information we want."

Evren was silent, and I could tell the idea had already crossed his mind. His eyes were heavy with thought as he furrowed his brow and shook his head, dismissing the suggestion. "You know I couldn't risk you like that."

"But you could risk Sorin? Is this because I'm a woman?"

Evren bared his teeth at the insinuation before he growled out his response. "We both know it has nothing to do with that. Sorin was right. You have already suffered enough. I cannot willingly put you back into a situation that you fought like hell to get yourself out of."

Memories of Gavril flooded my mind, but I forced them out as I clung to what he said about Sorin.

"Sorin got a say in whether or not I was to go, but I didn't?" I could feel my pulse thrumming inside me. "My role in this kingdom, my future, is not his to determine."

"Sorin cares about you."

I tried to block out his words to deny the ache in my chest.

"If the human king is involved with your father, then we need to know what he's doing. I am the best chance we have at finding that out. We both know that."

Evren nodded once even as he clenched his jaw. "I do."

"I am a trained soldier, and I have my magic. The human king sent a call for a Starblessed, and I will do nothing except compete for his hand and keep my ear to the ground. What danger could come of it?"

"We both know the dangers of the Starblessed in the hands of a selfish king." Evren's words were quiet and careful. "Both you and my mate wear the scars of those dangers every day."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as his gaze scanned the faded, jagged markings along both of my arms. His focus shot back to my face almost immediately. He knew better than most what had happened with his brother. Neither of us needed the scars as a reminder.

Memories flooded my mind like a river after a heavy rainfall, and I fought the urge to curl into a ball right there. It was dangerous, yes, but this time I felt strong enough. This time I wasn't the same girl I had been with Gavril.

The girl from my past that I hardly remembered seemed so far from my reach. If she stared me in the face today, I was sure I wouldn't recognize her. Gavril had crushed her, and I used what was left of that girl to mold myself into something new, a person who would never be hurt by someone like him again. As much as I wanted to forget the pain of my past, I could not forget what it had taught me.

And I would not forget it in the face of the human king.

And if I stayed here and did nothing, I feared my guilt would eat me alive.

"I know the risk better than anyone, but it is my duty, just as it is yours, to protect this kingdom. I cannot protect it unless you allow me to."

Evren's gaze flickered toward the doorway before looking back at me. "Sorin will be furious."

I nodded my head once, the motion feeling heavy and consequential. The air in the room was thick with tension like a storm cloud waiting to break. If Sorin knew, if he heard of what we planned, he would lock me in my room and refuse to let me out to keep me safe, but I wasn't Sorin's to protect. The thought tugged at me like an anchor on a ship caught in a tempestuous sea. My heart hammered against my rib cage with each passing second, the sound loud enough that I was certain both of us could hear it.

"We will send you both. Sorin as your guard."

"We both know that's a poor plan. I'll never get the information we need if he's trying to protect me every step of the way. I will never get close enough to the human king." I balled my hands into fists. "I'll leave in the cover of night. He won't know I'm gone until the morning."

"And you don't think he'll come after you?" Evren cocked his head and studied me. "Are you really that blind to Sorin's feelings for you?"

I swallowed and tried not to think about his feelings or mine. If I thought about them, I would have to face them, and I wasn't ready to do that. I wasn't sure I ever would be.

"You'll stop him. You and I both know if Sorin comes after me, then I'll actually be in danger. No one from the human kingdom needs to know I came from the Blood kingdom. I can be any other Starblessed from any other kingdom in this world. They don't need to know that I'm a part of yours. Most people only knew me as Gavril's blood whore. Nothing more."

"And you think you can come up with a story to make them believe you?"

"I have no choice. I will make them believe it because I will become it. I am nothing more than a lonely Starblessed who is eager to join the human king's court and gain all the advantages that it allows me."

The air seemed to thicken with tension as Evren stayed silent, his eyes distant and scanning the room. He ran a hand through his dark hair, and his brow furrowed as he weighed the options before him. I knew without a doubt that he wouldn't put me in harm's way if there was truly any other choice.

"If your father was to make another move, and Adara was to get hurt, I would never forgive myself for not going." It was a low blow, but I knew it was exactly what I needed to say for him to agree. Evren would do everything in his power to protect her, as would I.

"Kalen is already on his way to the human kingdom. He will be laying low outside of the palace, but he will be your only way to get word back."

I nodded quickly as my heart hammered in my chest.

"If you feel risk, even for a moment, you get out. You do not try to play the hero, you do not put yourself at any unnecessary risk."

"Of course."

He leaned forward in his chair and pointed directly at me. "And you're the one who is to tell Adara. You'll need to borrow a few dresses anyway, I would presume."

That was the last thing I wanted to do. If I could have left in the night without facing her as well, I would have. But that wasn't fair. It wasn't fair to Sorin either, but I couldn't handle facing him.

I nodded once in agreement.

A ghost of hesitation, of regret, passed over Evren's face before it slipped away. "I'll have some men prepare a carriage."

CHAPTER 6

THALIA

As I made my way through the dark corridors of the castle, the weight of what I had convinced Evren to agree to bore down on me. The thought of Sorin's anger, of his fury over me taking this decision away from him, became stifling.

But it was still the right decision to make.

When I reached Adara's room, I hesitated outside the door for a moment, steeling myself for what was to come. I knew that she would probably be as angry with me as Sorin would be.

I took a deep breath and knocked. It took a few moments, but eventually, Adara opened the door with a smile on her face. It quickly faded when she saw my expression.

"What's wrong?" she asked, concern etched on her face.

"Nothing's wrong." I tried to shake off the uneasiness that sat in my gut. "I just need to talk to you."

Adara stepped back to let me in, and I walked into their room, the heavy door shutting behind me. There was such a mix of her and Evren in a room I had grown to know to be dark. She had brought a lightness to it, to him, that couldn't be overlooked.

Adara perched on the edge of their unmade bed, her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

"What's going on?" she asked again, and I could hear the worry in her voice. "Did you talk to Evren?"

"I did." I nodded and looked toward the window. Darkness had fallen over our land, and the only light I could see was the pale light from the

double moons.

"And?" Adara prompted, her voice impatient.

"I convinced him to let me go to the human kingdom." I turned back to her, and her expression changed from concern to something more. The small line between her brows grew deeper, and there was a small glow along her star marks that I didn't think she realized was there.

"I know I don't have to tell you this, but you're putting yourself in danger. You'll be alone, and we won't be able to protect you."

"Just like you did to protect your father."

Adara swallowed hard, and her gaze darkened. "I didn't have a choice."

"And neither do I. You did that because he is your family. I don't have that, Adara. My father never cared about me beyond the payout King Riven gave him for my life. This." I pointed to the ground, to the palace. "This is my family. These are the people I love."

Adara's expression softened, but it was impossible not to see the pain that clouded her eyes.

"I know." She nodded slowly. "But you don't have to do this to prove that. We can face whatever is to come from Evren's father and the human kingdom without the intel. We can face it together."

"But we would be doing so blind." My hands shook at my sides, but I tucked them behind my back so she couldn't see them. I didn't want to face King Riven again. I didn't want to face anyone from the fae kingdom, but if we were to do so, I wanted us to be as prepared as possible.

Fighting them blindly was the absolute last thing we wanted to do. They had proven time and again that they would go to whatever end to get the power they craved so desperately.

Gavril had been willing to give up his own soul.

He had been willing to give up everyone around him, even his mate.

My scars burned with the reminder of what he was willing to do to those he didn't care about.

Adara's eyes softened further, and she stood until we were face to face. "You should take Sorin with you. If anything goes wrong, he'll be there to protect you."

I ground my teeth together as I thought about her suggestion. "If Sorin goes with me, the human king will know that I came from the Blood kingdom. He will never trust me enough to let me in on any information."

She opened her mouth, probably to argue the fact, but I kept going.

"Plus, I can't do what I need to do with Sorin around. He's distracting and territorial, and it's too risky for him to be there."

Adara's expression turned stony at my words. "This isn't you just running away? I know things are hard right now and things with Sorin have been crazy."

"No. I'm not running away." I shook my head even as I felt the truth of her words echo through every inch of me.

It was exactly what I was doing.

I was running as far away from Sorin as I could get so I didn't have to face what was right in front of me. So I didn't have to face falling in love with someone I knew I would eventually lose.

Because I would lose him just like everyone else, and when he was around, it felt impossible to keep my guard up.

He broke it down so easily, plowed into me as if I had demanded he do so, and I knew I wouldn't survive him.

"I'm doing this because it's what needs to be done for the safety of our kingdom. I am a soldier, Adara. This is what I do," I said firmly as I lifted my chin and tried to force myself to believe the words.

Adara's gaze held mine for a long moment, searching for any sign of doubt, but I refused to let her see it.

Finally, she nodded slowly.

"Okay," she said softly. "Promise me you'll come back to us."

There was a desperation in her voice, an anguish that threatened to break me, but I nodded in agreement. "I promise." The words felt heavy on my tongue.

Adara stepped forward and hugged me tightly, her arms warm and almost suffocating, and she squeezed me against her. I hugged her back, forcing myself not to let fear creep in.

"This isn't Gavril." I whispered the words in her ear that I knew we were both thinking, and she stiffened against me.

"I know." She nodded, but I didn't believe her words.

"Gavril is dead. He died by our hands." I reminded myself of that fact as well. It didn't matter if the memory of him haunted me. He was dead.

He was gone, and he would never hurt either one of us again.

"I know that." Her arms seemed to tighten around me, impossibly so. "But his father isn't."

We stood there in silence for a long moment before she spoke again. "What if this human king is worse? What if they are using the blood magic for more than we could even fathom?"

I swallowed hard as my heart hammered in my chest. "Then we will defeat them just as we did Gavril." I pulled away from her slightly until I could see her face.

I looked at her, our eyes meeting, and I made sure that she could hear my next words. "You and I have already suffered at the hands of a cruel man in power. I won't let it happen again."

"I know you won't." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "But you don't have to do it alone."

I nodded, but she wasn't finished.

"I'm serious, Thalia. Sometimes I don't think you really know that. You are not in this alone." She took my hand in hers and squeezed it. "You have Evren and me. You have Sorin."

But not Jorah. I couldn't stop the thought from flooding my mind. It was always there, always haunting me.

"I know I do." I nodded and looked away from her before she could see the ghosts in my eyes.

"Okay." She squeezed my hand, and I looked back to see a forced smile on her face. "What do you need from me?"

I took a deep breath to force away the thoughts that were clouding my mind.

"Dresses."

Adara chuckled softly and moved toward their closet. "Now *that* I can do."

CHAPTER 7

SORIN

I couldn't sleep. It didn't matter how quickly the darkness of night swept in, my mind was too occupied with the journey ahead.

The quiet of my room was suffocating, and I could feel my chest tightening with each passing second. I pressed my palms against my eyes, trying to force myself not to waver in my decision.

I stood up from my bed, pacing the room back and forth. The heavy creak of my footsteps groaning against the wooden floor. I needed to clear my head, to find a way to silence the doubts that were creeping up inside me.

Doubts about leaving Thalia.

I moved to the open window, letting the cool breeze wash over me. The moons were out in full force tonight, but my attention was quickly drawn to the flickering flames of the fire from Thalia's window. It was far too bright to have been simmering through the night, and my heart beat fast in my chest at the knowledge of her being awake.

Did she know that I was leaving? Did Adara tell her when I couldn't bring myself to do so? Or was she having another nightmare that I wouldn't be here to chase away?

I couldn't leave the palace in the morning if I didn't talk to her. I needed to see her, to touch her, even if it was only in the ways that she allowed.

I moved through my room and pulled the door open. My heart ached and raced in tandem as I approached her door. I could hear the faint sound of her voice, and I hesitated with my hand raised to the door.

Was someone in there with her?

I pushed those thoughts aside and knocked gently on the door.

“Thalia, it’s Sorin.”

There was a moment of silence before I heard the rustling of fabric and the sound of shuffling feet. I clenched my jaw to the point of pain, and I leaned against her doorframe as I tried to calm my racing mind.

The door cracked open just barely enough for me to see inside, and Thalia stood before me dressed in the same clothes I had seen her in earlier in the day. But Gods, she was exquisite.

The fire light seemed to glow against her skin, and her deep brown hair reminded me of the endless night sky that held the secrets of her need for me.

“Is everything okay?” Her voice was quiet, but there was an edge to it that ate at me.

“What are you doing in there? It will be morning soon.”

“Oh.” Her eyes darted away from mine, and I could see that she was hesitant to answer. “I couldn’t sleep.”

The flames of the fire behind her cast shadows across her face, making her look ethereal. It was difficult to reconcile the image of this delicate creature with the fierce warrior she had become.

“Can I come in?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Her eyes widened as they darted up to meet mine. “Not tonight.” She shook her head and her curls brushed over her shoulders.

“Thalia.” Her name rolled off my tongue as I watched her carefully, studying her every move. Her eyes shifted away from mine too quickly and her lips were pressed in a thin line. I was sure she was hiding something.

I reached out to touch her arm, but she stepped back quickly, avoiding my eyes.

“You know?” I asked, my voice more urgent than before.

“That you were going to leave without telling me? Yes.” Her head bobbed once with a subtle tremble in her lips, and I saw anger and sadness in her eyes. She turned away, wringing her hands together as if a swarm of butterflies fluttered in the pit of her gut and gnawed at her insides.

I stepped toward her, and she took another step back. It was then that I saw the satchel of clothes that lay open across her bed.

“Where the hell are you going?” My heart raced as I stepped forward, my hand hesitantly reaching out to push the door of her bedroom open. My

eyes widened as I surveyed the piles of clothing strewn across the floor. Her once neatly kept space looked like a war zone—dresses draped over chairs, trousers crumpled in corners, and stacks of boots nearly spilling into the hallway. A chill raced down my spine as my mind suddenly filled with dread.

"I'm..."

I slowly glanced over my shoulder at her, and though her gaze was distant, I could see the flicker of emotion in her watery eyes. Shame and anguish that mirrored my own.

"It's not your business where I'm going. Just like it was apparently not mine that you were planning to leave."

Rage gripped my insides, and I fought an overwhelming urge to wrap her up in my arms and force her to tell me what was going on. My muscles tensed as I leaned closer toward her, wanting nothing more than to press my lips against hers and demand that she stop pushing me away.

"Thalia." My voice was quiet but urgent, and she tensed as I spoke her name. I watched as her shoulders straightened and her spine stiffened.

"I'm going to the human kingdom. I'm going to compete for the human king's hand." Her words cut through the air like a sharp blade, leaving me feeling exposed and vulnerable as she expertly sliced away at my defenses.

"Excuse me?"

A heavy stillness descended over us, and the seconds dragged by like hours. I shifted uneasily where I stood, wishing for the sound of her voice to break the damning silence.

"I'm going to the human kingdom." She repeated her words.

"Evren and I already decided that I will go to get information on what the human king is doing with Evren's father." This was the plan that was in place. This was what I had been preparing for.

Thalia stepped back from me with her eyes cast downward. She took a deep breath and grabbed the blue-and-white floral dress that hung on the wall, quickly folding it before stuffing it in her bag. Anger glistened in her brown eyes as she turned away from me.

"And Evren and I mutually agreed your plan isn't the right route. Why would the human king want anything to do with you, Sorin? A blood soldier thirsty for information. You'll never discover anything."

"And you will?" My breath shuddered in my throat, and I felt a churning in my gut, like a slowly building fire of rage. A mix of emotions twisted through me—resentment, sadness, longing, anxiety, and doubt.

Thalia's eyes shimmered as she pointed to her chest and declared, "I am nothing more than a Starblessed girl eager to land a king. That is who I will be. That is who they will know." She raised her chin with confidence, but there was still a flash of doubt in her eyes that she always tried to hide.

I was quiet for a moment as I weighed her words, knowing deep down that what she said was right. My fingers clenched into fists and my jaw felt as if it might snap. A wave of frustration washed over me as I slowly shook my head. Of course she would get more information than I ever could, but I still wasn't happy about it. "It's not happening."

Thalia's eyes narrowed at me, and I braced for what she would say next.

"It's not up to you, Sorin. I don't belong to you."

"You don't think I'm not aware of that? You don't think you made it perfectly clear where I stand in your life?" I ran my hands through my hair as I stared at her. "I am nothing more than the guy who frequents your bed when the ghosts of your past refuse to leave you be, but as the darkness of night fades away, so does your need for me."

"That's not true." Her voice was soft and gentle, but she still couldn't hide the lie.

"Isn't it?" My words were clipped and sharp, the desperation in my voice made it quiver, despite my attempts to control it.

"You know I care about you, Sorin."

"Then why are you leaving like this?" I gestured toward her packed bags, frustration and anger bubbling up within me. "Why are you going to risk your life when you know how important you are?"

Thalia's expression softened, and she took a step closer to me. "You know why. For the same reason you were. For the same reason you're willing to give your life for our people."

I opened my mouth to retort, but the words caught in my throat. She was right, of course. I had been preparing to go on the same mission, just like Thalia was doing now. I couldn't fault her for that.

But the thought of her leaving, of not knowing whether she was safe or not, made me feel sick.

"I don't want you to leave. Not now. Not like this."

"Like how, exactly?" She clenched her jaw, and her nostrils flared. Her hands were balled into fists, and I could feel the heat of her anger rising as she narrowed her eyes at me.

"I don't want you to leave." I repeated the only words that mattered. The room seemed to shrink as I said them, a heavy silence filling the air between us.

The tension was thick and palpable, electric charges dancing in the air around us like a storm cloud on the horizon. Neither of us moved as we both seemed to be waiting for each other's response. I could feel my heart beating faster in my chest as I wondered if she felt the same way I did—uncertainty and anger mixed with an undeniable desire to be closer to her.

Thalia's gaze darted away from me, her cheeks growing more flushed by the second.

We stood there for what felt like hours, lingering in the words unsaid that hung heavy in the air between us. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to force her to look up at me until she couldn't see anything else.

"What are you going to do at night when the nightmares still come and I'm not there to help make them disappear?"

My face flushed with anger, and I clenched my fists by my sides, but still the words poured out. I saw their impact as they landed—a thunderous shock wave that reverberated in the silence. I shouldn't have said it.

I knew I shouldn't have.

But Thalia's eyes were locked onto mine, and I could feel the heat of her gaze burning into me. Her lips parted slightly as she took a step closer to me, and I could smell the sweet fragrance of her as it wrapped around me.

"I won't need you to make them disappear, Sorin." Her voice was low and seductive, and I felt a shiver run down my spine as her hand pressed against my chest. "I can find other ways. Other men."

Rage and jealousy shot through me, and I couldn't stop myself from reaching out for her. I quickly slid my hand up the back of her neck and pressed my fingers into her skin, forcing her to look up at me. Her gaze was hooded and heavy with what looked like desire. The same desire that coursed through every inch of me.

I could feel the heat of her as she moved closer to me as if her body was being pulled toward mine. My other hand instinctively reached out to grab her waist, and I could feel her curves beneath her clothes.

“Don’t say things like that to me, Thalia.” I searched her eyes as I said the words. “Unless you want me to tie you to this bed and never let you up.”

"You wouldn't dare." She narrowed her eyes at me, and there was a challenge glimmering in the dark depths.

A smirk tugged at the corner of my lips as I leaned closer to her. “You know me better than that.”

Her breath hitched as I tightened my hands against her and my lips hovered just above hers. The tension between us was palpable, and I could feel my heart pounding in my chest.

For a moment, neither of us moved. The only sound in the room was that of our ragged breaths.

I leaned even closer to her until my lips were a ghost of a touch against hers. “I would have you begging, Thalia.” My voice was low and filled with want as I spoke. “Begging me for the pleasure you know I could give you.”

My hand tightened on her neck until I feared I was hurting her, but a low whimper of pleasure slipped past her lips.

I felt a surge of want run through me, and without warning, I pressed my lips hard against hers, pouring all of my pent-up desire and frustration into the kiss. Thalia responded eagerly, her hands tangling in my hair as she kissed me back with equal hunger and need.

My tongue slid against hers, my teeth nipped at her bottom lip, and every small noise that came from her mouth fueled me. I pushed my hips against hers, my cock pressing firmly against my trousers, and growled into her mouth when the softest whimper passed through it.

“I could taste every inch of you, Thalia, and still I’d be starved. I will never be able to get enough of you.” I nipped her bottom lip, and the sound that left her mouth made my knees threaten to buckle.

She pushed against my chest, breaking us apart and gasping for breath. I searched her eyes and saw everything I had ever wanted reflected back at me. Desire, need, and a raw connection that went beyond words. For a moment, I was so lost in her that I didn’t see it as the doubt bled in.

“I need you to leave.”

Her words washed over me, drowning me in my own desperation.

“What?” My voice cracked with disbelief and anger.

“I need you to leave,” she repeated, her voice quiet but firm and her eyes no longer meeting mine. “I am supposed to be prepared to leave within the next hour, and I have much to do.”

“Thalia.” I reached out for her again, but this time she stepped back until I could no longer touch her.

“Sorin, don’t make this any harder than it needs to be.” She clenched her jaw, and when she looked back up at me, she had replaced every bit of the desire I had just seen with the cold, calculated look of a warrior. “I have a job to do. We have a kingdom to protect, and you’re in my way.”

I had never known Thalia to be cruel, but this was her way of protecting herself. She was a far better blade than she would ever be a dreamer.

“Of course.” I bowed to her slightly and avoided her gaze as I pushed past her and to the door. “Please stay safe, Thalia.”

I heard her suck in a deep, hollow breath, but I didn’t dare turn around. If I was to see a single trace of hurt in her eyes, a trace of doubt, I would never let her leave.

So I left for her.

CHAPTER 8

THALIA

The wooden carriage creaked with every turn of the wheels as they clattered over the cobblestone street. The air was filled with puffs of dust that kicked up from beneath the horses' hooves, and the darkening evening sky shimmered in the light cast by lampposts along the way.

I sat inside the carriage with my eyes closed, trying to clear my mind of Sorin. The memory of his touch and the intensity of his gaze was still fresh in my mind, making it hard to focus on anything else. But I had a duty to my kingdom, and I couldn't let myself be distracted by a man, no matter how much he made my body ache with desire.

As the carriage came to a stop, I opened my eyes and took a deep breath, steeling myself for what lay ahead. I leaned forward, peeking outside the window, and I was taken aback by how normal the human kingdom seemed.

Even as night grew near, there were people still clamoring around the streets, bargaining with vendors, and swaying to the music that flitted through the air.

I smoothed the soft, floral fabric of my dress and felt the delicate layers bunching around me as I perched on the edge of the chair. Taking a deep breath, I tried to quell the butterflies that were taking up residence in my stomach.

Evren and I had gone over my story at least a dozen times prior to my leaving, and I had practiced it relentlessly through our long journey to get here. But the nerves still invaded me.

What if they didn't believe me? What if the human king was just as cruel as Gavril had been?

No one knew why he was so interested in having a Starblessed at his side. Humans couldn't take from Starblessed. They had no powers for the Starblessed's blood to strengthen. At least, that was all I had ever known.

But the human king had to have a reason, and whatever it was, I wasn't sure that I would like it.

The carriage jolted to a stop, and I wiped the back of my hand against my brow before peeking out to see the castle before us. It was smaller than the one of the Blood kingdom, but it was no less grand. Every stone in its towers and walls glowed with pale light, and ornate banners whipped in the wind.

The driver, one of Evren's spies from his army who was dressed as a servant from no kingdom in particular, rapped his knuckles against the door twice before he slowly pulled it open.

My body trembled as I released the handle of the carriage and stepped out. My fingers trailed along my ribs, feeling my racing heart beat beneath my skin. Bracing myself, I tugged on the flowy sleeves of my dress until they hung all the way to the tips of my fingers, desperate to keep the jagged scars hidden from view. I took a deep breath and allowed the driver to help me down, focusing on his weathered face rather than the fear dancing across mine.

I could do this. I had to do this.

The second my feet were firmly planted, the driver's hand instantly slipped away from mine. With a loud thud, he closed the door behind me, the sound echoing around us.

A line of guards stood in front of the castle, their ornate uniforms almost as intimidating as their riveting stares. My every step was watched, my presence known.

"I present miss Thalia Peret." My driver bowed deeply, then scurried to the back of the carriage and retrieved my trunks.

I nervously fidgeted with my white gloves, not wanting to meet any gazes that might be directed at me. One of the guards bowed his head in a sign of both welcome and respect as I stepped forward.

"Are you here to answer the king's call?" The guard, who was dressed in a crisp uniform with his hand resting on the hilt of his sword, scrutinized

me from head to toe with an unreadable gaze. His expression remained stoic, revealing nothing about his opinion of me.

"I am." I slowly walked around, my eyes wide as I took in the towering walls of the castle. The majestic structure seemed to stretch into eternity, and its beauty made me feel a mix of awe and fear. I hoped that if he looked into my eyes, he would see nothing more than the naïve curiosity of a Starblessed girl who dreamed of greatness. "Is this where I am to arrive?"

He waved his arm toward the gate, which was beginning to move. "It is," he confirmed. "One of my men will show you in, and another will take care of your things."

I dipped my head in a shallow bow of appreciation toward the guard before I set off. He motioned to another guard behind him, and the second guard stepped forward, his eyes focused with determination as he led me through the gate. He said nothing as we passed through, but I followed closely at his heels.

My chest felt tight, and the taste of regret was bitter on my tongue. Sorin's face flashed through my mind as butterflies swam in my stomach. I struggled to take a few deep breaths and push back the fear that threatened to overwhelm me. But I swallowed down the feeling and pushed thoughts of Sorin aside. I had no room for that here.

The guard led me forward, and the gate closed behind us with a loud clang. My skin prickled, and a chill ran down my spine. The reverberation from the sound thundered through me until it settled in my bones.

The grounds of the palace were alive with color and life. Aromas of lilac, rose, and other sweetly scented flowers lingered in the air as their petals hung from the trees like bright ribbons. As we made our way onto the grounds, dozens of people paused to take notice, eyes turning in my direction.

But the guard didn't stop to acknowledge any of them. His boots thudded against the stone floor as he briskly walked me toward a long wooden table. A woman sat rigidly, her fingers pinching a quill pen while parchment rested on the table in front of her.

"I have another Starblessed, my lady. She just arrived."

She glanced up from her parchment, her face severe and unreadable. She stared at me silently as if collecting data, her eyes traveling up and down my body with a judgmental intensity that sent a chill through me. Her

gaze seemed to linger on my curves like a physical caress that left me feeling exposed and vulnerable.

"Your name?" she asked in a bored tone.

"Thalia Peret."

"Where are you from, Thalia?"

My gloved hands were clasped in front of me, my arms stiff with tension. My gaze was soft, but my weapon belts lay heavy against my thighs. I could feel the cold steel of the daggers tucked into their sheaths, and it filled me with a sense of security.

"I come from a small village just outside the fae kingdom. Eanverness. My parents work at a small farm there."

Half-truths and blinding memories. Eanverness was the town where I had been raised for slaughter, but I guessed my father had far outgrown their farm after the payment he received in exchange for his daughter.

The woman turned her gaze away, a slight sneer on her lips. Her eyes traveled up and down my figure dismissively as if I were a piece of cattle for sale. The déjà vu hit me in my chest and stole the breath from my lungs. "Another farm girl," she sighed in disbelief, her head gently shaking with disdain. "Just what we needed."

I didn't say anything. It didn't matter that she didn't find me suitable for her king. I just needed him to believe it. "Is there any other information you need?" My tongue felt like lead, my throat dry.

She held up her hand as if to stop me from talking. "No. That is all." She wrote something quickly on her parchment before looking back at me. "You are to be shown to your room, where you shall prepare to meet King Henrick. All of the Starblessed shall arrive to be presented together."

"Of course."

Ignoring me, she leaned over to speak in hushed tones to the guard who had escorted me to her. He nodded, then gestured for me to follow him. I did so obediently, my feet shuffling swiftly to keep up with his long strides. The stone walls of the castle loomed above us as he led me through the doors.

I smiled as we passed the others and tried to take them in as inconspicuously as possible, but try as I may, I couldn't spot another Starblessed. If there were others here, they were either in their rooms or they were keeping their star marks concealed.

The guard's boots echoed down the hall as we rounded corners, descended a staircase, and passed through archways. I tried to etch each turn into my mind so I could remember the layout of the castle. Every twist and turn could be a matter of life or death—I had to know this castle inside out in case the need to leave quickly arose. By the time we finally stopped in front of a set of double doors, my eyes had tracked nine turns and one stairwell ascent.

The guard stepped aside, his thick hands gripping the handle of his sword. He gave me a quick nod and said, “This is you.”

A wave of curiosity swept over me as he turned the doorknob and swung open a heavy wooden door. Inside was a quaint room decorated with paintings on the wall and luxurious rugs strewn across the floorboards. The brightness of the room almost hurt my eyes, and I forced myself to take a step back in awe just in case the guard was taking in my reaction.

"Thank you," I replied quietly, my voice purposely trembling.

The guard's voice was flat and uninviting as he said, “Your trunks will be brought to you shortly,” and pulled the door shut behind me. I remained in position, still and silent, listening for the sound of his retreating footsteps. When I heard him leave, I took a tentative step backward and inspected the door. It had a simple lock mechanism, but it seemed too flimsy to keep anyone out if they were determined to get inside. Not wanting to draw attention to myself with a locked door, I merely left it as is.

I didn't want the human king or his staff to think that I had any secrets to keep.

As I circled the room, my gaze took in every corner and crevice. I ran my fingers along the mattress with one hand while the other moved to the dagger that was hidden along my spine. My fingertips grazed its engraved hilt before grasping it and slowly drawing it free. The cool metal felt comforting against my skin as I tucked it away under the mattress.

I knew that I couldn't afford to let my guard down, not even for a second. Every move I made had to be calculated, every word I spoke had to be measured. I had no idea what kind of danger I was walking into, but I knew that it could be lurking around every corner.

I made my way over to the window, peering out at the sprawling landscape below. It was a breathtaking sight, one that left me feeling both envious and small. In the distance, I could make out the outline of the forest

we had traveled through to get here, its trees whispering secrets to each other as the wind blew through their leaves.

The room was surprisingly luxurious, with a small connecting bathroom. I felt the shift in the air as I used my magic to run a hot bath. Magic that I would have to be extremely careful with while I was here. Swirls of orange and pink playfully danced on the surface of the water as I poured in a bottle of oil, releasing an intoxicating blend of citrus and floral aromas that filled the room. Even though I didn't want to, I found myself drawn into the scent.

After having painstakingly traced the outline of the room and its furniture multiple times, I heard a loud thud outside the door. I opened it to find two guards panting heavily, their faces reddened from effort as they moved past me and dropped my trunks on the floor with a grunt. Beads of sweat emerged on their brows, dripping onto the wooden planks below.

"Thank you," I muttered, barely glancing in the guards' direction. My words seemed to fall on deaf ears as they stepped out of the room and shut the door behind them. Immediately, I dropped to my knees and dug through my trunks, fingers steady as I pulled out one of the beautiful dresses Adara had loaned me.

It was imperative that I make an impression tonight. I needed to catch the king's eye. Despite every other Starblessed that would be in attendance, I needed him to be looking at me. If I could pique his interest and hold it, then I would stand a chance at getting the information we needed. If there was any chance that blood magic was still being used in the fae kingdom or this one, I wanted King Henrick to want to confide that information in me. If he wanted a Starblessed at his side, I would become the one he wanted until I could figure out why.

I quickly dipped my body in the steaming hot water, scrubbing away the dirt and sweat from my day of travel. The oil clung to my skin as I savored its scent. Clambering out, I grabbed a plush towel and wrapped it tightly around myself. Glancing in the steamed-up mirror, I stared at myself and refused to look down at the scars that littered my arms.

My fingernails dug into my palms as I clenched my fists, forcing myself to look down and confront the scars on my body. They had become a part of me, but so deeply rooted were the feelings of shame, regret, and guilt that still sat in my heart. Each one a reminder of a past that I desperately tried to

forget. Every dress I had brought from home was thoughtfully picked out to conceal the marks. But no matter how hard I tried to avoid them, I feared that I wouldn't be able to keep them concealed forever.

They had been there for so long that they now felt like a part of me, but still, I despised them. They were reminders of who I had been. Of what I had allowed. I wanted to look away as I was filled with shame, but I forced myself to gaze upon them. Even though it caused me pain, I forced myself to look down at them so I would never make that mistake again.

I closed my eyes and lifted the thin fabric of the pale purple dress over my head. I felt the subtle caress of its silky texture as I pulled it down to cover my body. The fabric fell in delicate drapes, grazing the ground just at my feet.

As I spun around, the fabric of my dress cascaded off my shoulders gracefully, resting along the top of my breasts and revealing the star marks along my shoulders and collarbones. A myriad of beads and jewels were sewn onto its surface, sparking like a thousand stars in the dim light.

I allowed myself the smallest moment where I imagined what Sorin's expression would look like if he saw me in this dress. I could practically feel his fingertips as I imagined them pressing into the fabric.

Shaking off the thought, I gathered my hair, twisting it tightly and securing it with a thin band. I tugged some strands free to caress my cheekbones and draw attention to the soft curve of my face. I let a delicate gold chain snake through my fingers as I lifted it from my jewelry box, one that Evren had gifted me. Its subtle beauty wouldn't raise suspicion, but it would draw attention to the marks that branded me. It was subtle but powerful—just enough to captivate the king's wandering gaze.

I strapped my daggers back in place under my dress, one resting against each thigh inconspicuously. With trembling fingers, I fiddled with the buttons of my dress and made sure every inch was perfectly in place. Before I could take a step back to admire it, another knock reverberated throughout the room. Bracing myself, I opened the door wide and saw the guard standing there, a scowl etched into his face as he barely gave me a once-over before waving me through.

I stepped out into the hall, every step I took sending an echoing noise along the long corridor. I pulled the door closed with a quiet click and stood still for a moment. But the guard didn't pause in his steps. The fabric of my

dress trailed behind me like a ghost as I moved toward him, and my hand instinctively went to my thigh where I could feel the reassuring presence of the dagger tucked beneath my skirt. A reminder that no matter what happened while I was here, I would be prepared.

My heart raced as I followed the guard down a long hallway, unsure of what to expect. He led me toward a ballroom, and the sound of conversation and laughter filled the air. The hall was a whirlwind of fine tunics and colorful dresses. Most were human, but it was easy to spot a few girls who looked just as anxious and out of place as I felt. The guard led me to join them where they stood just outside the ballroom doors, and my mind raced as I fidgeted with the skirt of my gown.

The girl before me slowly turned her head as if she was trying to conceal the way she looked at me. Her long blonde hair was cascading down her back in soft curls, and the beautiful green dress she wore was elegant yet subtle enough to showcase her innocence. "Oh wow," she said softly. I met her gaze, and she gave me a gentle smile. "You look lovely."

"Thank you. As do you." I motioned toward her and let my gaze fall upon her dress. It hugged her body in a way that made it obvious it was made just for her.

The smile that lit up her face fell slightly as she looked over my star marks. I could feel her curiosity, it bubbled inside her as her gaze quickly moved from one mark to the next. "I assume you're here as a contender?"

I smiled and shifted on my feet. "Guilty. You?"

"Yes." She grinned broadly and could barely contain her excitement. There wasn't an ounce of me that believed it was forced. This girl was eager to meet the king. She was eager to win the crown. "My star mark is just a little more concealed than yours." She swept her hair away from her neck and revealed a light sprinkling of star marks just below her ear. They were almost solid white and camouflaged against her pale skin.

I smiled at her, attempting to come up with something to say, but before I could utter a word, one of the guards stepped forward and motioned for us to proceed.

My heart raced as I heard the girl mutter, "Gods. I think I'm going to be sick." A thin sheen of sweat coated her pale forehead, and her wide eyes darted about the room nervously. Though my stomach was twisted in knots with anticipation of meeting the king, I stepped toward her and squeezed

her arm reassuringly. When she finally met my gaze, however, she seemed to have regained some of her composure, a broad smile tugging at her lips.

As I stood in line, I looked around and counted. There were thirteen other girls wearing elegant gowns that showcased their star marks. Each one of us stood up straight, nervously shifting our weight from one foot to the other, unable to contain the anticipation.

My skin felt numb, my heart a lump of lead; the memory of past kings' cruelty weighed so heavy I could barely stand. A small smile crept onto my face, masking the pain that lurked beneath; it was a soldier's façade I'd perfected through countless battles.

The girls' steps echoed in the ballroom, and I trailed behind them. Our procession wound around the perimeter of the space until we formed a crescent in front of the dais. Every eye in the ballroom was on us, watching, judging, calculating our worth. A large throne was carved from what looked like pure gold, and its surface was awash with sparkling gems that winked in the candlelight. Each of us caught in a moment of stillness between anticipation and awe.

The room erupted in a chorus of cheers and whistles as the announcement was made: "King Henrick." Everyone jostled for position, eager to get a glimpse of the man. He approached the dais, his gaze lingering on each girl as he moved down the line, appraising them with a scrutinizing eye. A profound silence fell over the crowd as he did so. The king held his head high and a regal air about him commanded attention.

He was handsome. His hair was light brown and cropped close to his ears. But the top was neatly styled in soft curls that framed his face and gave him a boyish charm. But there was nothing boy-like in his broad shoulders and tall, muscular frame.

He wore a midnight blue coat that had been embroidered with shimmering gold thread in the pattern of the human kingdom's crest along his chest. His sky blue eyes were accentuated by the rich hue of his coat.

His eyes darted from girl to girl, scanning our bodies for the star marks that showed our power. I watched his gaze linger on each of us as he counted and measured the star marks each of us were blessed with.

The number of stars usually indicated how powerful a Starblessed was, but there were those whom I had met who barely possessed any markings, yet they had capabilities far greater than those with larger ones.

My stomach fluttered the closer he got to me, and as he moved before the girl I had spoken with only moments before, her eyes widened. His gaze tracked over her body, and there was a trace of confusion on his face when he didn't immediately find her marking.

His gaze quickly slid over to me, and I held my breath as my heart began pounding in my chest.

My lips parted as I felt his gaze gently sweeping over me, beginning at my neck. He seemed to linger on the star marks there for a long moment before trailing slowly down my body, setting off pinpricks of awareness that spread all the way to my toes. His eyes eventually settled on my hips and then traveled further southward before coming to rest on my thighs.

His gaze slid back to my star marks, and he lingered there for a moment longer before looking up to meet my eyes. His eyes were wide and curious, as though searching for something in my face.

"Welcome, Starblessed." His voice was warm and welcoming, and his eyes were focused solely on me. "It is my great honor to welcome you to our kingdom, and it is my great privilege that each of you have offered me your hand."

Slowly, his eyes shifted from me to the rest of the Starblessed as he spoke again. "I know many of you have traveled far to be here, and I do hope that you will enjoy your time here in our kingdom."

I jumped as he clapped his hands together, and a sudden blast of music filled the air. His eyes glistened with joy as he looked around the room and shouted, "Let's celebrate!"

He slowly ascended the steps of the dais, the golden streaks in his hair shimmering in the torchlight. His gaze moved over the crowd before coming back to me with an intensity that sent a chill down my spine until he finally sat on the throne. I stood transfixed, unable to look away until a servant stepped in front of me with a crystal glass full of crimson wine. It was only then that I snapped back into reality.

I accepted the goblet of wine with a polite "Thank you," but I had no intention of taking a single sip. Even the heady aroma made me slightly dizzy, and I knew that if I were to indulge in the red liquid, my senses would be completely dulled. The other girls seemed far less cautious than I did. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed one of the girls, the one I had spoken to earlier, draining half of her cup in one gulp.

I looked back toward the dais, and King Henrick was still watching me. His gaze was softer now, but still assessing. Everything about him felt so different from Sorin. He briefly lifted his crystal goblet of dark red wine in a silent salute, and I softly inclined my head in acknowledgment before finally taking the smallest sip from my glass.

The air in the room was heavy with smoke and perfume. Everyone seemed to be very well off, dressed in expensive silks and laces, jewelry glinting from their necks and wrists. There was an unmistakable look of smugness on each person's face, and none of them had a trace of hunger in their eyes.

Outside of the fourteen Starblessed in the room, I didn't see anyone who wasn't human. I watched carefully, looking for any trace of someone from the fae kingdom, or any kingdom beyond, but if King Henrick was working with them in any way, he was keeping it well hidden.

"Enjoying yourself?" King Henrick's voice caught me off guard, and I turned to look at him over my shoulder. I had been so absorbed in watching everyone else that I hadn't even noticed him approach.

I paused for a moment before nodding my head and letting a gentle smile spread across my lips. "I am."

"I'll have to be honest. You look about as bored as I feel."

I chuckled, my nose twitching as I involuntarily inhaled. With a furrowed brow and laughter in my voice, I uttered, "This is your celebration."

He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling before turning his gaze back to me. His shoulder brushed mine and he gave it an extra, gentle nudge. "That's what they'd like you to believe, but I'm really just here for the wine and dessert."

I shot him a mischievous smirk and teased, "You don't look like the type to indulge in dessert."

His broad smile was beaming and genuine, making my stomach flutter with nervous energy. And guilt flooded me that I was standing here joking with this king when I had left Sorin on such bad terms. When Jorah...

No. I couldn't think about him.

"You've been studying me enough to notice?" he asked playfully.

"Well, you are the man I'm meant to marry." I let my gaze run over him slowly, making a show of looking over every inch of him. "I think I should

at least make sure you're worth the honor."

King Henrick's laugh boomed throughout the room, and I couldn't help but return a beaming smile. He leaned forward with a friendly gaze, his hand outstretched toward me.

"I like you. What's your name?" he asked.

His hand felt so different from Sorin's as my fingers curled around his. Where Sorin's were tough and worn with years of work, his were soft. "Thalia."

"Well, Thalia," he said, looking down at me with mischief in his eyes, "if you deem me worthy enough, do you think you'd be interested in a dance?" He leaned closer to me, and I could feel the anticipation radiating from him.

My cheeks grew warm and my heart raced as I looked into his eyes. He gave me a hopeful smile, waiting for an answer. It made my chest hurt as I couldn't stop thoughts of Sorin from clouding my mind. After a moment, I replied, "I suppose a dance wouldn't hurt."

"No." He shook his head and let out a low laugh before removing the goblet of wine from my grip. "I suppose it wouldn't."

He extended his arm, and a servant materialized at his side, plucking the glass from his grasp.

With the slightest tilt of his chin, he gestured toward the dance floor. "Shall we?"

Taking my hand in his, he gently tugged me forward, every step drawing us closer to the expectant stares of the crowd. Everyone in the room was watching us. I could feel the heat of their stares on us, and my skin prickled where his touched mine.

The room was a blur of color, the notes of a romantic melody filling the air. He stepped into my space, his face just inches away from mine. His fingers gently wrapped around my hand, then the other traveled to my hip as if it were meant to be there. He began to lead us slowly in circles, and I felt nothing but his gaze holding me captive.

"Did you have to travel far?"

I felt a tightness in my throat as I nodded once in response to his question, lost in a flurry of memories—the dark forest, my heart racing with doubt as I rode away from Sorin. I tried to push thoughts of him from my mind as I finally answered him.

"It was about a day and a half's ride. From just outside the fae kingdom."

"And you just arrived today?" He studied my face carefully, and I couldn't tell if he was honestly interested or if he was studying my responses.

"Just a couple hours ago."

"And yet, you're still here dancing with me. I would be laying in a bed somewhere."

"And miss the chance to meet you?" I cocked my head to the side. "That wouldn't have left a very good impression, would it?"

"I'm not sure you're capable of leaving a bad impression, Thalia." His eyes locked with mine, full of intensity and desire. His warm hand on my hip felt heavy, pulling me closer to him as my heart pounded in my chest. A blush rose up my neck and trickled down my collarbone.

"I don't know about that. Maybe don't ask anyone from my village, just to be safe."

King Henrick leaned forward, his eyes twinkling as he smiled. His voice was gentle and full of amusement as he said, "It sounds like the people of your village might be fools. How is it that a beautiful creature like yourself isn't married yet?"

I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes, desperately trying to shake Sorin's face from my mind. No matter how hard I tried, he remained in the forefront of my thoughts as the question was asked, and my heart ached with longing.

The words seemed to stick in my throat, but I forced them out. "I haven't yet found someone worth marrying." I tried my best to maintain eye contact with the king, who appeared pleased with my answer and gave me a kind smile.

"We should change that."

I made a show of looking around the room and taking in those around us. "Why? Is there someone here that you would recommend?"

King Henrick's smile spread wider as he shifted his grip from my hip to my waist, pulling me until my body was pressed flush against his. His lips curved as he murmured, "It wouldn't be wise of anyone in this kingdom to touch you. If anyone other than me were to grace you with their fingertips, I'm afraid I would have to be responsible for cutting off their hands."

A flush of heat spread across my skin at the sound of his words, words that made me think of another, and my fingers reflexively tightened on his shoulder.

"So you're that kind of king?"

He ran his finger along the small of my back in a barely noticeable move, but I felt it throughout my entire body. "If you mean the kind of king who doesn't like others touching what belongs to them, then yes."

I watched him carefully as I smiled at him, but he was impenetrable. His face was a passive mask and his eyes betrayed nothing. "I don't yet belong to you."

"Maybe that's something we should remedy as well." He spun me around, catching me off guard, and laughter bubbled out of my throat as my head swam.

My fingers tensed against his shoulders, and his chest rumbled with a deep chuckle as he drew me closer. My nose brushed against the base of his neck, and he smelled of rain at the end of a warm summer day.

He opened his mouth, and I leaned in, desperate to hear what he was about to say. But before the words could escape his lips, a voice from behind us called out, "Your Majesty, you are needed in the war room."

My body snapped to attention as my heart rate quickened, and I desperately tried not to let my interest show on my face.

King Henrick's gaze darkened as his hands clenched against me, his fingers digging into my flesh. His breathing became shallow, and the tension in the air was palpable.

"I'll be right there."

He twisted his body around, and for a few long moments, he scanned my face. My brows furrowed together, and let the smile fall from my face in an expression of concern, trying to convey my worry through my features.

"Is everything okay?"

His lips turned up at the corners while his eyes remained dull and shadowed. "Of course." He sighed. "There's never a day off in the game of kings."

"Okay," I said hesitantly.

"Join the rest of the party." He finally released me from his grasp, bowing his head slightly before stepping back. I returned the gesture with a deep bow and when I looked up again, my eyes met his. His gaze was

heavy and guarded. With one final lingering look, he turned away, and I inhaled deeply, relieved yet desperate to know more.

CHAPTER 9

SORIN

I sipped the wine slowly, letting the liquid wash over every inch of my tongue, coating it with the bitterness. With an unsteady hand, I poured half the contents of the glass into my mouth.

I shifted my weight in the chair, sinking into the leather. The hard wooden frame pressed against my scalp as I leaned back. Taking another sip of wine, I prayed to the gods that the spirits would calm my racing mind. But no matter how much I poured down my throat, the onslaught of thoughts of her would inevitably come.

They always did.

I dragged my hand down my face and let out a low, guttural groan. I could already feel the dull throb in my temples, the sickly-sweet taste of alcohol that would still linger on my tongue tomorrow. But I pushed away those thoughts; that was tomorrow's burden, not something to worry about today.

Thalia had been gone for close to two days, and the thought of not knowing where she was or if she was safe made my stomach churn with worry.

I knew she was more than capable of taking care of herself. She was by far the greatest warrior Evren employed in his kingdom, but that didn't mean I wanted her in danger. I hated that she so recklessly volunteered herself for a task that could end up getting her harmed.

I knew that she could charm the human king. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that the man would fall in love with her if that was what she

wanted, and if I was being real with myself, there was an even bigger part of me that felt twisted inside at the thought.

Thalia wasn't mine because she didn't want to be mine. But that didn't mean I wasn't writhing with jealousy at the thought of anyone else touching her, laughing with her, or holding her at night when she couldn't sleep.

Even if everything she was doing was for the sake of our kingdom.

I was damned by my jealousy nonetheless.

I lifted my glass and downed the rest of its contents. As soon as I set it back on the table, I reached for the wine and unstopped the bottle. I filled my glass back to the brim before setting the bottle back on the table.

The door opened, and I squinted up at Adara and Evren as they entered.

I didn't care to see either one of them today. Evren and I were barely speaking after yesterday. After I made my feelings known about him letting her go.

I did so loudly and without thought of disrespecting my soon-to-be king. He wasn't my prince in that moment, he was my friend, my brother, and I hated him for the choice he made.

I knew it was unfair of me, but I had to get it out. I had to take my frustration and anger out on someone, and Evren had let it be him.

"I'm not sure right now is the right time for this conversation." Adara ran her hand over my forehead and buried her fingers into my hair. She gripped the strands tightly in her fingers as she pulled my head up to look down at me. "How drunk are you?"

I smiled up at her because I couldn't bring myself to be angry with her. She was just as angry about Thalia leaving as I was. I lifted my thumb and index finger and left a tiny space between them as I held them in front of her face. "Just a little."

She leaned down and peppered a gentle kiss to my forehead before she let go of my hair. My head fell back against the chair, exactly how she had found me.

Evren was studying me carefully, with a stern look on his face, and for a moment I was worried that he was still angry with me.

"We have received new word. Do you think you're capable of handling it right now?"

My shoulders snapped back, my spine stiffened, and a chill passed through me as his words cut through the fog of alcohol like a knife.

"What information was received? Is it about Thalia?"

Evren shook his head quickly and my heart pounded in my chest as I waited for him to speak. "Not exactly. The human king has deployed some of his men toward the fae kingdom."

I swallowed hard as I stared at my friend. "So, he really is involved with your father?"

Of course, we already knew that, but it was the how involved that was the unknown. But deploying part of his army, that was far deeper than I think any of us thought.

"There is word that they were transported into the fae territory."

My blood ran cold at his words. "They have blood magic?"

I didn't want to let myself consider the possibility. Gavril having blood magic had been bad enough, but to know now that he wasn't the only one? Was it his father or did we send Thalia to a human king with blood on his hands.

"I don't know." Evren shook his head as he clenched his jaw. "Everything we know now is hearsay. We have no real information for us."

"I'm going to the human kingdom." I stood and my head swam slightly.

Evren's eyes narrowed at me, but it was Adara who spoke. "You're not going anywhere. Not tonight."

"I am not going to send Thalia into that kingdom, into a fucking trap, and just sit here and hope that she makes it out with good intel."

What if someone from the fae kingdom was already there? What if they recognized her?

Evren opened his mouth, but I cut him off before he could speak.

"You are my friend, soon to be my king, but I am going whether you allow it or not. You would do the same if it were Adara."

Evren watched me carefully before he spoke. "I would, but Adara is right. You're not going tonight. You've had too much to drink, and I need your head to be clear."

He held his hand out to me, and there was a small piece of parchment folded between his fingers. I took it without thought.

"The human king has invited me to his kingdom to attend the game for his hand in marriage. I have informed him that I regrettably will not be able to attend, but I will send a liaison in my place."

My heart pounded in my chest at his words.

"I had every intention of making that liaison you, if you can sober up and keep your shit together."

"Of course, I can. You think he's setting a trap? That your father is trying to pull you from the safety of our kingdom?"

He nodded as he watched me. "I do."

That didn't change my answer. Not in the slightest. "I'll go first thing in the morning." I pushed the glass of wine away from me, and part of the contents spilled over on the table. "Shit."

I started to clean it up with shaking hands, but Adara quickly knocked my hands away and did it for me.

"Go and get some sleep. You're going to need it."

CHAPTER 10

THALIA

My eyes were gritty from lack of sleep as I absently stirred my spoon around in my tea. Every sound from the night before had been magnified as my ears strained for any sign of danger outside my chambers. My heart raced with every creak that came from the walls, and I jumped at the sound of a crackling ember in the hearth.

And when I did manage to close my eyes, it was thoughts of Sorin that haunted me.

But as the sun shined through my window, I climbed out of the soft bed and dressed in one of the fine dresses Adara let me borrow as I tried to force thoughts of him away.

I had been sitting with the Starblessed for the last hour. They hardly touched their food, but I couldn't resist. In front of me were thick slices of fluffy pastries and rosy-red nectarines that burst with sweet juice when I bit into them.

I groaned as the flavor hit my tongue.

"Do you possess magic?" one of the girls to my right asked. She was beautiful, her skin a deep olive tone that glowed in the morning light and made the green of her eyes shine like emeralds.

"Some." The girl from the night before nodded. Layla. I had learned her name upon entering the dining room this morning, and I'd decided that it fit her well. "Most don't think I will because my star mark is small, but I am able to perform some magic."

"What about you, Thalia? You have the biggest star mark among us all."

The eyes of all the girls in the room were trained upon me as she posed her question. I lifted my glass of tea and brought it to my mouth as I tried to think of a way to craft my response.

"I do. I can run a hot bath and refresh flowers in a vase as if they aren't on the brink of death. I've also learned how to untangle my hair."

"Gods, I wish I could do that with my magic," said the redhead with wild curls that framed her pale face.

"I can help you." I tore off another piece of the pastry and shoved it in my mouth before licking the sticky sugar from my fingers. "It just takes a bit of practice."

The girl gasped slightly, and I stopped as I began to shove another bite of the pastry in my mouth.

"Honestly, it's really not hard at all."

But the girl's eyes were no longer on me, and she was looking over my shoulder.

"Good morning, ladies." I recognized the deep timbre of King Henrick's voice as soon as he spoke, and I wiped the back of my hand across my mouth before I turned fully to face him.

As I looked up, his gentle blue eyes locked with mine and a warm, comforting smile spread across his face. I felt my face flush as his gaze held mine.

"I am hoping to get to know you all better over the next several weeks. There are going to be trials in the competition for my betrothal that my advisers have put in place, but I would simply like to start with breakfast, if you all would allow me to join you."

"Of course," one of the girls answered quickly.

King Henrick gently moved a chair away from the wall with an almost imperceptible creak and took a seat at the end of the table. Three ladies were seated between us, but I could still feel his presence ripple through me as if there were no one else in the room.

"Did everyone enjoy the party last night?" He glanced over the room briefly before his eyes stopped on me, lingering for a moment before sweeping away to take in the rest of my competitors.

That's what these women were. My competition.

"I have never been to a more extravagant party. I could have stayed there forever." The one across from me smiled at him. "Although I do wish

that we all had gotten a chance to dance with you."

It wasn't unnoticed that I was the only one who he had danced with the night before. I could see it in the way the girls had been watching me the moment I walked into the dining hall.

Him dancing with me and me alone had put a target on my back far larger than having the biggest star mark could have caused.

"As do I." King Henrick reached forward and started piling pastries and fruit on his plate. "Unfortunately, I was pulled away for official political business."

"Of course." She smiled, though it was much more reserved than before. "I do hope that we get the chance to dance with you at another time."

King Henrick nodded as he lifted a pastry to his mouth. He looked over the feast of food in front of us, and he paused as he looked around. "Did none of you eat?"

Most of the girls shifted in their seats, but I couldn't help the small snort that left my mouth. King Henrick looked down the table to me, and I pointed to the orange-glazed pastry directly in front of him.

"That pastry was the best. You're lucky you came when you did. I was about to move on to my third."

His eyes twinkled as a wide grin spread across his face, and he quickly moved to grab the pastry from the tray. He stood and stepped around the table and hovered beside me, his body so close I could feel the heat radiating from him. His hand brushed my shoulder lightly as he carefully placed the flaky treat on my plate.

"By all means, it's yours."

My cheeks began to burn, and my stomach flipped as I stumbled over my words. "Oh. I didn't mean..."

"I can't let you go hungry in my kingdom." He raised a brow at me before lifting his thumb and running it along my bottom lip. There was a whirlwind of emotions coursing through me, but it was clouded by so much guilt. "Although it does seem like you enjoyed yourself before I arrived."

My lips tingled from his touch, and I couldn't look away from him. "Very much so."

"Good." He clenched his hand into a fist as he stepped away from me and looked around at the other girls. "Eat," he commanded.

King Henrick's voice echoed around the dinner table, and he locked eyes with each of us as he spoke. He spoke slowly, deliberate syllables dripping from his tongue like honey. "You all will need your strength for the trials, and a piece of strawberry or papaya will not do." He paused, looking around the room at our plates before continuing. "The first trial will be a display of your magic and how you can best support the crown. Four of you will be eliminated after." A wave of tension rolled through the room, and I could feel it in the air as everyone waited for King Henrick to continue. The silence was oppressive.

A few of the girls inhaled sharply, and I felt my teeth unconsciously press together. So much for not revealing too much with my power. I would need to wait until the very end. I only had to prove myself better than the other contenders, but that didn't mean I had to show all the cards in my deck.

My thoughts raced as I contemplated what trials we would be made to endure. Would we have to demonstrate our combat proficiency? Would I have to physically battle these other women to gain a position next to him?

I could almost hear Sorin's chuckle from the back of my mind, as I surveyed my opponents with a calculating eye. Each of them had their own strengths and weaknesses which I had to take into account if I was going to succeed at my task. He would enjoy this part. Watching me show each of them what I was worth, watching me beat each of them as if they held a chance against me.

"After we get through the first trial, my advisers will determine the second. More of you will be eliminated after the second trial."

I watched my competitors closely, taking note of their moves with a keen eye. I had the power to outwit them all, but I couldn't afford to take any risks, not when my mission depended on convincing this king to become close enough to me for me to gain vital information. My heart raced as I tensed in anticipation of the competition. A single misstep could cost me everything.

"But we won't worry about the trials today. I'd like to spend a little time with each of you to get to know you better." King Henrick's gaze roamed around the table before landing on me. I felt my stomach flutter and warmth grow in my chest, despite knowing it was wrong to feel that way.

When he said, "Layla," his eyes snapped away from me to her, and that feeling of warmth instantly died out. He held out his arm in invitation for her, and she gracefully accepted, linking her arm through his as they left the room, leaving the rest of us behind. As they passed by me, his eyes flickered to meet mine one last time before they disappeared.

CHAPTER 11

THALIA

I watched as King Henrick and Layla exited the dining room, their arms linked together. A twinge of disappointment tugged at my chest, but I quickly brushed it aside.

Taking a deep breath, I turned my attention back to the remaining girls at the table. Their eyes darted around nervously, the weight of the impending trials hanging heavy in the air. It was clear that everyone was sizing each other up.

Every other girl was competition no matter how friendly we all pretended to be. We were all quietly gauging each other as competition and trying to figure out where our individual strengths lay while determining where ours would come out on top. These girls weren't my friends, they were what was stopping me from getting what I came for.

I needed to make a move, to assert myself and show them that I was a force to be reckoned with. But I had to do it subtly, without revealing the full extent of my powers. I couldn't afford to draw too much attention to myself just yet.

I cleared my throat, gathering the attention of the girls. "You all really should try the orange pastries. I'm not sure where you all came from, but we don't have anything that tastes like this in my village."

They nodded, seemingly relieved to have a distraction from the mounting tension. We engaged in small talk, discussing our backgrounds, interests, and aspirations. I listened attentively, observing their mannerisms and trying to find any useful tidbits of information that could aid me in the future.

As the conversation flowed, I made sure to subtly steer it toward the trials. I asked about their strengths and what they believed would give them an edge in the competition. Some were confident in their magic, while others were beyond fearful for what was to come.

I shared a bit about my own magical abilities, downplaying the true extent. I emphasized my desire to support the crown and be of service to the kingdom.

I mentioned the fae kingdom, but not a single one of them batted an eyelash when I did.

As I sat at the table, engaged in conversations with the other girls, a hush fell over the room. I looked up, and my spine straightened when I saw King Henrick and Layla reenter the dining room. The girls around me exchanged glances, excitement and nervous anticipation evident on their faces.

King Henrick's gaze swept across the room, but it didn't take long for his eyes to find mine. His warm smile greeted me, and I felt a rush of both excitement and apprehension.

"Thalia," he called out, his voice carrying across the room. "Would you join me?"

I stood up quickly, feeling the eyes of the other girls on me. With a nod, I followed King Henrick as he made his way toward the hall.

As soon as we were out of earshot, he turned to face me, his eyes filled with intrigue. The air between us was charged with a mixture of attraction and caution.

"Thalia," he said, his voice low and measured. "You seem relieved that I pulled you out of that room." His gaze was playful. "Are you not getting along with the others?"

I met his gaze, a soft yet guarded smile on my lips. "I am, but they are my competition, you know."

King Henrick chuckled softly, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "Indeed, they are. I think they might be a little bit intimidated by you."

I raised a brow, surprised. "Me? Intimidating?"

His eyes sparkled as he leaned in closer to me, his voice low and husky. "Very much so, Thalia. You have certainly made an impression."

"I have done little more than stand around in a pretty dress."

His gaze fell, roaming over my body like a caress, and it felt wrong. "And yet, somehow I cannot get thoughts of you from my mind."

He leaned in further, his voice dropping so only I could hear. "I think they know."

"So, you've made them hate me?" I asked playfully as I crossed my arms.

"I don't know about that, but I have made them see you for what you are."

My heart raced at his words. I wasn't sure there was anyone in this world who saw me for what I truly was. No one except Sorin, considering I couldn't seem to hide things from him even when I tried. "Which is?"

"Someone they should be watching."

I could feel his breath against my cheek, and it made my stomach flutter at the feel of him, but thoughts of Sorin clouded in my mind. "You hardly even know me."

"That's part of the allure, isn't it?" He ran his tongue over his lips. "You have your secrets, and I have mine."

"I suppose we do."

"Tell me one." He reached forward and ran his warm hand along my cheek gently.

"What?"

"One of your secrets. Give me just one." His gaze fell to my lips, and for a moment, I wondered if he was going to kiss me.

"And what will I get in return?" I asked almost breathlessly.

"What do you want?"

I leaned in closer, lowering my voice. "A secret of your own."

His eyebrow quirked up, and a knowing smile played on his lips. "A secret for a secret."

"Exactly."

"I can do that." He nodded and dropped his hand from my face. He reached down until he took my hand in his, and he pulled me forward. We reached a door at the end of the long hallway, and he pushed it open.

Sunlight poured into the hall, but the king didn't stop until we stepped outside.

We moved into the vibrant garden and were surrounded by an array of colors from every flower imaginable. The smell was sweet and heavy, and it

seemed to envelop us.

"Is this where you come to share your secrets?" I joked as I looked around us.

"I don't share my secrets, Thalia." He turned to face me, his gaze darkening, before taking a step back. He pulled me with him, taking us deeper into the garden.

"Neither do I." I shook my head softly.

"Just one." He held his finger up, and I reminded myself that I had a job to do.

"I never cared for my village." I told him one of the truest things I could think of. "As a Starblessed, it was always known that I would one day be promised to some man in power."

His steps faltered, and he watched me carefully.

"You regret being here?"

I stared up at him and shook my head. "I do not."

"Yet, you are here with a man in power just like you thought you'd always be."

I tried to push the memories from my mind, the nightmares of my past. "I can imagine far worse men to be here with."

He laughed softly. "I'm not sure if I should take that as a compliment."

"You should," I assured him.

"Well, for what it's worth, I am glad you're here." He looked away for a moment, and he almost seemed lost in his own thoughts.

"Is that your secret?" I asked, and he turned back toward me.

"No. I don't think that is something I could hide." He slid his hand up the sleeve of my dress until it rested at my elbow. I tried not to tense as his fingers grazed over my scars. He leaned in closer to me, and I shouldn't have felt as comfortable in his presence as I did. "I never wanted to be king."

"What?" I leaned back away from him so I could take in his expression.

"I guess we're a lot alike in that way. Neither of our futures were up to us."

"I suppose they weren't." I swallowed hard as I studied him.

"But what comes next does."

The way he was looking up at me made me feel guilty for what I was doing. For a moment, I wished I hadn't come at all.

But I would sacrifice everything to keep the people I loved safe. Even if this king wasn't what I expected him to be.

I maintained a composed expression, concealing everything I was feeling. "It does. To us, and to these trials, I suppose."

King Henrick studied me for a moment, his gaze piercing through the layers of my façade. "I'll give you one more secret." He leaned forward and pressed his mouth against my ear. "I wish there weren't any trials at all. I wish it was left to choice."

My heart quickened at his words, caution swirling within me. "If I have to earn my spot at your side, then I will do so."

CHAPTER 12

SORIN

I trailed behind the three guards, my chest filling with dread as we approached the castle. Evening had already descended, and the air was still and quiet. I tugged at the stiff collar of my formal attire, frustrated by Evren's insistence that I wear it.

But I wasn't here as one of Evren's warriors. I was here as his liaison, and I had to look my part.

When I arrived at the gate, I saw the hyperawareness in all the guards' eyes. They had been expecting me, but at the same time, I think they doubted that one of us would actually come.

But of course, I came. I would go to whatever end this world demanded of me for her.

There were lanterns lit throughout the garden as we approached the castle, the flames flickering against the darkening night sky, and I straightened my jacket as we approached the doors.

One of the guards turned to me. His eyes narrowed and his jaw tense.

"The trials are to begin within a few moments. The king will welcome you just before it starts."

I nodded my head silently, but inside, a million different thoughts raced through my head. What kind of trials was he to put these women through? What must they do to earn a spot to marry a king who wasn't worthy?

But I forced myself to swallow down every demand I had of them as we moved forward. When would I finally see Thalia so this pressure inside my chest would finally lighten up enough for me to breathe?

I could hear the light music and the chatter of a crowd as they led me through the extravagant castle. In ways, it reminded me of the fae kingdom. Everything was opulent, and nothing about it looked like a home. This was a castle for a king, not a husband or father. This was a castle that Evren's own father could easily find comfort in.

The guard led me through a long hallway before he reached an open set of double doors. He didn't falter as he continued forward and pushed through the crowd.

I followed him step for step, and I held my head high as I silently watched those around me. I didn't know what to expect walking into this kingdom. There had been no word from Thalia, and even though I was meant to be looking for a threat, every single part of me was looking for her.

The guard stopped in front of the large dais, and I spotted King Henrick with a gold crown set upon his head. He looked little more than a boy who had just come of age, and I absently wondered if he knew what he was getting into. Did he truly understand the cruelty of kings or was he playing a game that he had no business in?

"May I present Sorin Keir of the Blood kingdom, liaison to Prince Evren Achlys." The guard deeply bowed before the king so I did the same. I bent at the waist, showing my respect, but I would not kneel before him.

I did not serve him, and there was only one that I knelt before. One prince, and the one I loved, if she would let me.

I would spend the rest of my eternity on my knees for her.

"Please rise, Sorin," King Henrick said smoothly as I lifted my head to see him watching me carefully. "We are happy to have you arrive at our kingdom. Although, I am disappointed that your prince was unable to come himself."

"He sends his deepest apologies. He is still quite in his honeymoon phase, and he is unwilling to leave his mate."

King Henrick laughed softly as he leaned back in his throne. "That, I understand. I have a feeling I won't want to leave my own kingdom in the coming weeks."

I smiled back at him, but thoughts assaulted me of him with Thalia. Was he interested in her? Had he run his royal hands across her skin that I worshipped?

"Please come." He motioned toward the men who stood at the side of his dais, and I moved to join them. "The first trial is about to begin, and I have a feeling it will be a display none of us will want to miss."

I lined up at the end of the men and linked my fingers behind my back as I tried to control my agitation and impatience to see Thalia.

It was only a moment later that fourteen women walked into the room one after another, but all I could see was her.

Thalia stood in the middle of the line as they moved in front of the king. She was wearing a beautiful light blue gown that made my breath catch in my throat.

There was a circle of jewels lying across her forehead and resting in her curls, and it drew attention to the star marks that shimmered against her skin.

I hated that everyone in the room saw her. None of them were worthy to gaze upon her.

She stared straight up at the king with her head held high. She had yet to notice me, and I hoped I could keep it that way. The last thing I needed was to catch her off guard.

King Henrick stood, and a hush moved over the crowd. But I didn't look at him. I was too busy watching her and the small smile that lit up her face as she stared up at him.

She was far too good at playing her part.

"Tonight is the first trial for my betrothal. As we all know, these women have all been blessed by the stars, and with that blessing comes a magic that none of us possess. Tonight, they will show us that magic firsthand."

I shifted on my feet as I listened to his words. A display of their magic.

What he said was deceptively simple—this was a test to measure which of them was the strongest and most capable companion. Yet, what he really wanted was far more complex; he was looking for the one who could best serve his ambitions, no matter the cost.

As I raised my gaze to meet his, the boyish glint in his eyes had vanished, replaced by a hardened and merciless stare. His pupils were mere pinpricks against the backdrop of blue irises as he stared down at the Starblessed before him.

"Begin."

The first five girls stepped forward, ready to show off their magic. If any of them knew how the king wanted to use them, they showed no fear of it. The first sent a wave of energy through the crowd, and it glowed with a deep red hue as it flowed like ribbons in the air. The second girl cupped her hands together and threw them forward, releasing a bright white burst into the night sky. Thousands of tiny twinkling stars rained down through the air, eliciting gasps of awe from the mesmerized audience.

The next magic was much more subtle.

The third girl closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and suddenly the air around her began to stir. The wind picked up, blowing her hair and dress in all directions. Leaves and petals danced around her, swirling in the air like a small tornado. It was beautiful, but it lacked the power of the previous two.

The fourth girl walked forward with confidence, her eyes shining with determination. She raised her hand, and a bright light illuminated the room. People gasped as they covered their eyes, but I couldn't look away. It was as if the sun had been summoned to the palm of her hand, and it burned brightly in the air before her.

The fifth girl approached, and I couldn't help but notice that Thalia was next. I held my breath as the girl unleashed her magic. She raised her arms, and a wave of water shot up from the ground, soaring high above and crashing back down to the ground with a thunderous boom.

The crowd cheered even as water splashed on most of their expensive outfits.

Thalia gracefully stepped forward, her gloved hands clasped behind her. The fabric of her sapphire gloves stretched tightly across her wrists and up to her elbows, hiding the scars along her arms. But her star marks were on full display. As she slowly turned to face the king, her gaze caught on me for only a moment.

I watched her falter, only slightly, only long enough for me to notice. As she straightened her posture, I couldn't help but notice the rhythmic pulse of a vein against her neck and how it sped up with each passing second. My mind raced with thoughts of tracing that spot with my tongue and taking her far away from this place.

She slowly twisted her hands in her gloves, never taking her eyes off them. I watched as a spark of energy seemed to surge through her body, and

tiny flashes of light began to flicker from her fingers. Her eyes filled with determination as she lifted them up toward the king, and I held my breath, hoping she wouldn't go too far.

She spread her hands apart, and a brilliant blue light sparked between them. The color of the light seemed to perfectly match the vibrant hue of her dress, as if this had been her plan all along. Her smile widened as she allowed the power of her magic to unfurl around her in an elegant dance. Its luminescence was clear for all to see, but I feared that it wouldn't be enough, not for her and not for the king who stood watching expectantly.

But then, Thalia began to move. She twirled, the light trailing behind her like a comet's tail, and the air around her began to shimmer and hum. Her movements grew more fluid, more mesmerizing, and soon the room was filled with the light of her magic. It was as if the stars themselves had come down from the heavens to dance with her.

My heart raced as I watched Thalia's magic unfold. I knew that she was more powerful than any of these girls, but I also knew that she was holding back. I could see it in the way her eyes flickered toward me for just a moment and then back toward the king.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from her. Her grace, her power, her beauty—it all took my breath away. And as she spun faster and faster, I felt my heart racing in my chest. I wanted her more than anything I would ever find in this world or the next.

And I could see it in every eye in the room. They all wanted her too. Her magic filled the room, dancing around each person who surrounded her, kissing them with a taste of her power.

Finally, with a flourish of her hands, Thalia brought her dance to an end. The room was silent for a moment, and then the crowd broke into thunderous applause. Even King Henrick stood up, a smile on his face as he clapped.

"That was truly remarkable," he said, and Thalia bowed her head gently.

The rest of the girls continued to display their magic, but none compared after her.

Everyone in the room was still watching her. Even as the other Starblessed performed. They were all watching her carefully, cunningly.

They were watching her as if they knew what that kind of power in the hands of their king could mean for their kingdom.

But they were all fools.

Thalia's magic wasn't close to the most impressive thing about her. If I was being honest, it was one of the most inconsequential things I could think of.

But the memory of her magic lingered in every face; longing and delight subtly creased their features as they watched her.

Even as the last Starblessed finished her show of magic and their king stood, they couldn't look away.

The hall became cloaked in an eerie stillness. The girls stood rigid and silent in the throne room, each of them holding their breath as the king slowly called out four names that I didn't recognize. The four Starblessed with the weakest powers. They all exchanged glances, a mixture of relief and disappointment playing on their faces as they realized who would not be named queen.

Thalia remained standing before the throne. She had a look of determination on her face as if she would stop at nothing to ensure her victory.

The king stood up, walked down from his throne, and approached Thalia. He gazed at her with a look of admiration in his eyes.

My jaw clenched so tightly that I feared it might snap.

"Dance with me?" He extended his hand and pulled her close, his eyes glinting possessively. She instinctively glanced in my direction, her gaze locking with mine briefly before she looked back to him and nodded softly. His lips lifted into a satisfied smirk as he twirled her into the center of the room.

He quickly brought their bodies together as he began moving them to the music. I hated to admit it, but the king and Thalia looked perfect together. They were both so regal, so powerful, and gods, she made it so effortless for everyone to fall in love with her.

I gritted my teeth and tore my gaze away, trying to focus on anything else in the throne room. But my hand drifted subconsciously toward the hidden blade beneath my jacket as I watched that cursed king reach for her waist with one hand, grasping her fingers tightly with the other. His body pressed against hers as they moved across the floor, their silhouettes

entwined like lovers. Around them, a few of the Starblessed remained—but their postures were guarded now, watching her carefully as if she posed a threat. Her beauty had always been mesmerizing, but this display of her power seemed to have wiped away any prior camaraderie between them. She was now nothing more than their enemy.

I gritted my teeth as I was forced to endure two more dances before he finally relinquished her hand. He bowed toward another girl, inviting her onto the dance floor while Thalia retreated to the side of the room and accepted a glass of wine from a servant. Her eyes were cast downward, avoiding me.

I couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt as I watched her. There was such an immense pressure on her to perform in front of the king and the entire court. But I also knew that Thalia was different. She was stronger than the others, both in magic and in will.

And I couldn't help but feel drawn to her in that moment when I should have been looking anywhere but at her, even though I knew it was dangerous.

Even when I knew I would be risking everything.

I walked over to her, my heart hammering in my chest. She looked up at me, surprise and anger written on her face.

"Why are you here?" she hissed, her voice barely audible over the music.

I passed by her, not paying her a bit of attention, before I took a glass of wine from the servant standing to her left.

I turned back toward the crowd, watching the king spin another Starblessed around the floor, watching him carefully.

"I needed to make sure you were okay," I replied so quietly that I wasn't sure she could hear me.

Thalia's face hardened, her eyes burning like coals as she glared out at the dance floor. Her clenched fist trembled at her side.

"You shouldn't have come." She pushed off the wall, and her tight lips formed into a smile as she moved away from me.

"You had to know that I would," I breathed, my voice low and dangerous as she passed in front of me.

Her breath hitched in her throat, but she didn't stop.

King Henrick pulled her into another dance, and I forced myself to stay in that ballroom to mingle with the men who were desperate to speak with the Blood kingdom's liaison as he spun her around the floor.

Finally, they stopped after what felt like a thousand dances later, and he whispered something in her ear, eliciting an affectionate smile from her lips, before leading her out of the hall with his hand firmly clasped around hers.

I waited a few moments before I crept down the hall after them. I hovered in the shadows as anticipation pounded in my chest. I could smell her scent lingering in the air, and my feet moved involuntarily forward.

She was close by, and I couldn't stop until I at least got to speak with her, to touch her for just a moment.

"Did you enjoy your night?" I froze as the familiar voice of King Henrick echoed down the hall. I carefully leaned against a wall and then slowly edged my head around the corner. To my surprise, not a single guard was in sight—which was laughable for a kingdom that guarded its secrets so tightly.

"I did." As Thalia spoke, I noticed the king couldn't take his eyes off her. His gaze lingered on her face as she talked, and it almost seemed like he was lost in a trance. The other women may have been vying for his attention, but it was obvious to anyone that the king was already enamored with her and her alone.

"I have to admit, I should have known better," he muttered, his voice hushed with awe. "Your magic... it's beyond anything I could have imagined."

"What did you expect?" She was watching him carefully, and I wondered if he could see how intensely she was calculating his every response.

"Honestly, I'm not sure. I've heard of the Starblessed powers before, but I've never experienced it firsthand."

"I didn't realize that the human realm learned of our history." She spoke the words carefully crafted for him to tell her more than he ever planned to, and he fell right into her trap.

"They don't." He shook his head softly. "Not really. We know of you all. Of the fae kingdom, the Blood kingdom, and the kingdoms beyond, but you all are very much a mystery to us."

"Then what made you want to marry a Starblessed?" She tilted her head, and she was studying him carefully.

"To be honest, I am more intrigued by the Starblessed than any other story I have ever heard of from another. Should I not be intrigued by my future wife?" He leaned in and his voice dropped, taking on a throaty quality as he spoke. His gaze flickered between her eyes and her lips, and with agonizing slowness, he drew nearer. My jaw tightened as I felt my heart thumping wildly in my chest.

"I suppose you should." Thalia's eyes were locked with the king's, and her breathing was shallow. He seemed unable to look away from her, his features softened in admiration. She stood a little taller, aware of the power she had to captivate him despite his station as ruler.

He moved methodically, a barely noticeable step that seemed to take an eternity before his chest met hers. I watched with bated breath, holding myself in check, my knuckles white against the strain of my tightly closed fist.

He looked at her, his gaze lingering on her face for a few seconds too long. His voice was soft and gentle as he said, "And I am intrigued by you, Thalia. Far too intrigued for it to be healthy."

Thalia raised one of her gloved hands and pressed against his chest. I couldn't tell if she was pushing him away or clinging to him, but my blood boiled just the same.

He grabbed her chin between his thumb and forefinger, gently forcing her to raise her gaze toward him. His lips parted, and he murmured something softly against her skin. I watched as he lowered his head, hesitating a fraction of an inch before pressing his lips against hers in an intimate kiss, and I had to look away.

The moment felt like it stretched on for a lifetime before the door finally opened and then shut again. I stood where I was, heart racing in my chest, body stiff with tension at the thought of him being alone with her.

Of him touching her body in places that I had worshipped with my tongue.

Thalia was right.

I shouldn't have come.

I would compromise her. I needed to be sure that she was okay, and I would compromise everything to make sure she didn't have to give away

too much of herself to get the information we needed.

If I was being honest, I would ruin everything she was working toward because the thought alone of another man touching her made me want to destroy the world.

I started to leave, but then footsteps echoed down the hall. King Henrick stepped back from her door, and his broad smile shrank to a thin line. His gaze shifted to the ground, and he ran a hand through his hair, rumpling it.

I took a few steps back, pressed against the wall, and held my breath. He passed without noticing me, his head bowed in concentration. I knew I had to follow him—time was of the essence. Yet, my feet suddenly felt too heavy to move, like they were stuck in cement. My gaze lingered on her door against my better judgment until it eventually drew me closer. I kept my steps light so as to not raise suspicion, and I didn't even bother knocking before I moved inside her room.

I found her standing on the balcony, gazing out at the moonlit gardens below. Her eyes were closed, and her lips moved silently as if she were whispering secrets to the night air. She looked ethereal, like a creature of the moon itself, and I couldn't help but feel both drawn and intimidated by her presence.

"Thalia," I whispered, stepping closer to her. She didn't open her eyes, but her spine went rigid.

"I knew you would come," she breathed, turning to face me.

Her eyes were dark and filled with emotions that I couldn't quite decipher. I stepped closer until I was standing directly in front of her, feeling the heat of her body radiating against my skin.

"I knew the moment I left the Blood kingdom that you would come."

"Thalia," I whispered, reaching out to touch her arm.

She pulled away from my touch, her eyes narrowing on me.

"You shouldn't be in here," she said again, but her voice lacked the bite it had before.

"I had to see you," I replied, stepping closer to her.

She sighed heavily, her shoulders slumping. "You know this is dangerous," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I know," I admitted. "But I needed to make sure you are okay."

Thalia looked up at me, her eyes searching mine. For a moment, it seemed like she was going to say something, but then she looked away.

"I can take care of myself, Sorin," she said softly, her voice laced with uncertainty.

"I know you can," I said, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. She leaned into my touch, and I felt a jolt of electricity rush through my body. "Evren received word that King Henrick has deployed part of his army to the fae kingdom. It is rumored that they were transported into the kingdom."

Her eyes widened in surprise and fear. "When?"

"We learned of it just before I left. Evren asked me to come. If they have blood magic..."

I could see the tremble in her hands even as she narrowed her eyes at me. "I'm supposed to believe that this wasn't your idea?"

I ignored her question and closed the space between us. "If he's deploying his army, then he is in much deeper with the fae kingdom than we realized. If they are using blood magic, then we don't know what we're to face. Have you heard anything?"

"Not yet." She shook her head. "But I am starting to get close to him."

"As I could see."

"Don't do that." She took the smallest step back, putting space between us. "Don't pretend you're jealous of a man I'm on a mission to make like me."

I tried to swallow down the rising emotions that seemed to be bubbling out of me. "What would you like for me to be jealous of then? The way you let him touch you in the daylight or the way you smile at him like you haven't smiled at me in months."

I felt guilty the moment the words passed my lips. I shouldn't have said them, but I couldn't take them back.

I wished I could have taken back the last several months of our lives. I wished I could take away every single thing that had ever hurt her.

Myself included.

Yet, I couldn't stay away.

She stared at me, not answering my question, and it was as if I could see the anger building inside her. Her eyes narrowed, her spine stiffened, and her lips pressed into a thin line.

"This is why you shouldn't be here. I suppose you would have been really jealous if I had brought the king back to this very room and showed

him exactly why you like me so much.”

I reached forward, pressing my hand gently against her neck and catching her off guard. I moved forward, and she matched my steps until her back pressed against the wall. I crowded her, not leaving a breath of space between us, as I stared into her eyes.

“Yes, Thalia. Fucking you is the exact reason I haven’t been with anyone else since the moment I met you. It’s the exact reason I can’t see anyone else.”

She started to turn her head away, but I stopped her with my thumb against her chin.

“Bring the king back to your room if you must, but do not feign ignorance when he shows up dead the following day.”

She gasped slightly, and her throat bobbed beneath my hand.

“This is my job, Sorin.”

“And you are mine.” I practically growled out the words, but I couldn’t stop myself. “Do what you need to, but don’t let yourself forget that fact. I will travel through every kingdom, every world, to claim you.”

There was a sound outside the door, a shuffle of feet going down the hall, and we both stilled instantly.

“You need to leave,” she hissed.

I ran my thumb along her jaw one last time before I moved toward the windows and disappeared into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER 13

SORIN

I pulled on fresh clothing and stepped out of my room. I had barely slept the night before, had barely been able to do anything but think of her and obsessively watch her window from mine.

I stopped short when I almost walked into a guard who was posted just outside my door.

"Excuse me," I said quickly and closed the door behind me. "I didn't see you there."

Had he been there all night?

"King Henrick would like for you to join him for breakfast." He turned on his heel and started down the hall without giving me an option.

I followed the guard down the long hallway and descended a staircase that led to a large dining hall. The smell of freshly baked bread and cooked meats greeted me as I entered the room.

King Henrick sat at the head of the table, dressed almost like he had been the night before, and he was surrounded by his advisers and other men who he deemed powerful enough to dine with him.

"Ah, Sorin. Glad you could join us," he said, flashing me a smile.

I took a seat at the table, acutely aware of the way the others watched me.

There was apprehension in their eyes, their bodies stiff with mistrust, as if I were an enemy in their midst.

An enemy they had invited here.

"Of course, Your Majesty. Thank you for having me."

I lifted the glass of water to my mouth as a servant started loading my plate with food before placing it before me.

"Tell me, Sorin." King Henrick cleared his throat, and I looked back toward him. "How is the Blood kingdom prospering? There is word that your prince shall be a king soon enough."

"He will. He had more than proven himself during the war with the fae kingdom. Our people will follow him to the ends of this world." I chose my words carefully, making sure King Henrick knew where we stood.

King Henrick nodded, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. "Yes, the war with the fae kingdom. I have heard rumors that your new princess is quite skilled in combat. Is it true that she's leading the charge in your army?"

I clenched my jaw, a flash of anger coursing through me at the way he smirked. "She is a vital asset to our kingdom, Your Majesty. I am the captain of our army, but the Blood kingdom knows the value of our princess and every other woman who fights at our side."

I made sure to look around at every man at the table, not a single woman present.

King Henrick's jaw clenched, and I knew I had struck a chord. "Such a shame that I missed the war." He leaned back in his chair. "I would have loved to see your princess in action."

I resisted the urge to jump up from my chair and strangle him. Instead, I took a deep breath and forced myself to stay calm.

"You're sad over missing a war?" I cocked my head to the side as I watched him.

King Henrick's eyes glinted with amusement. "I am a king, Sorin. Wars are part of our lives."

My hand shook with the urge to grab my dagger. "Forgive me, Your Majesty. Even as a king, I don't think I could see anything entertaining about watching people die."

"Death is the cost of living." He was watching me so carefully, and I knew that I was giving too much of myself away. I was allowing him to get under my skin just like he wanted to.

"Is that why you invited my kingdom here? I thought I was here to watch you pick a bride, but am I here to learn of a pending war?"

I could feel the tension in the room as everyone waited for King Henrick's response. My spine was rigid and my stomach tight as I prepared

for what was to come.

King Henrick leaned forward, his eyes piercing into mine. "You are here because I asked for your kingdom to be so. There is no upcoming war unless someone is to bring it to our doorstep."

There was a threat in his voice, the warning of a king.

"Right now, I am looking for a bride." He leaned back in his chair, and his smile turned wicked. "You've been around enough magic in your kingdom. Is there anyone that has caught your eye from the competitors?"

I bit my tongue to stop myself from saying the things I wanted to say. "I guess that depends on what you're looking for in a wife." I ran my hand over my chin. "They are all beautiful, but if it is power you crave in your companion, there have been a couple that seemed to have far greater abilities than the rest."

He nodded his head slowly, and I could feel his advisers looking back and forth between us. "I do not need your opinion on which of them would look best beneath me. I can handle that all on my own."

I raised an eyebrow, my patience wearing thin. Thoughts of him with Thalia bombarding me. "Then I assume you're far more interested in my opinion on their magic?"

"You are somewhat of an expert, are you not?" The way he watched me made me feel uneasy. There was more than a simple assessment in his eyes. He was calculating, dissecting me, and I didn't like it.

"I don't know that I'm an expert, but yes, magic is common in my world." I nodded but didn't dare take my eyes off him. "What exactly do you want to know?"

King Henrick rubbed at his jaw and seemed to be crafting his response in his mind. "I want to know which of the Starblessed you would choose." His hand clenched into a fist for only a second before he released it. "You're the captain of the Blood army. You have to be constantly strategizing and assessing the risk. Which one of these Starblessed do you think would be the biggest benefit at your side?"

"There are two," I answered him honestly. "Both of their magic was impressive, even as someone who is surrounded by it in my day-to-day."

His pupils widened, and he leaned forward in his chair. "Which ones?"

"The one in the blue dress."

"Thalia."

He nodded as if he knew I would say her name.

"And the other?"

"The one with the fiery red hair."

"Cyra." His lips curved into a smile. "Thank you for your input, Captain. It has been... enlightening."

I nodded stiffly as he dismissed me and began talking quietly with one of the advisers at his side.

CHAPTER 14

THALIA

Sorin was here.

The fact both frustrated me and made me more nervous at the same time.

I was meant to impress King Henrick, to make him fall for me so I could gather as much information as was vital for our kingdom, and now, I was supposed to do it while Sorin watched me.

I was supposed to do it with the knowledge that the king was definitely working with our enemy and possibly using blood magic to do so. Was that why he was looking for a Starblessed bride? Would he be using one of us to strengthen the blood magic that he possessed or King Riven? I hated to admit that part of me thought that King Henrick could be good. He was charming and handsome, and I had seen no signs of blood magic in his kingdom. The only magic I could feel was that of the other Starblessed.

“The second trial,” King Henrick spoke as he moved in front of the remaining ten Starblessed, and I drew my attention back to his face.

I tried to focus on his words, but my mind kept wandering back to Sorin and the way his hands had lingered on me the night before, the way his words had echoed in my mind long after he left. I couldn't let my emotions get in the way of my mission, not now. Not when so much was at risk.

It was difficult enough to maintain my composure around King Henrick, with his piercing gaze and charming smile, but now I had to do it with the added pressure of knowing that Sorin was watching my every move.

I stole a quick glance in his direction and found him leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. There were many others standing near him. Representatives from different regions within the human kingdom, but I noted no fae. Sorin was watching me with a mix of intensity and something else I couldn't quite place. It was almost as if he wasn't sure whether he wanted me to succeed or fail in my mission.

My breath caught in my throat, but I forced myself to look away, to look as if he meant nothing to me as I looked back at the king.

I was staring at the king as he spoke, yet I was suffocating in Sorin.

"This trial is one of combat," King Henrick spoke, and a heaviness settled in my stomach. "With the many wars that have been happening in our surrounding kingdoms, I need to know that I have a queen at my side who will fight for my land just as I will."

There were so many words that he wasn't saying. So many secrets veiled behind his carefully wielded words.

I knew the moment they asked us to dress in leathers rather than fine dresses that today's trial would be different, but this hadn't been what I expected.

"We will be fighting one another?" one of the girls asked, and her voice shook around every word.

King Henrick stopped, and his lips turned down into a frown. "No. You will not be battling the other Starblessed."

While one part of me was relieved, there was a much bigger part that was suspended in fear as we all waited for him to continue.

Instead of answering, the king gestured toward the door, and four burly guards walked in, carrying a large crate between them. They set it down in the center of the room and stepped back.

King Henrick walked over to the crate and lifted the lid, revealing a collection of weapons. Swords, daggers, and axes glinted in the light, and my heart started pounding in my chest.

"You will be fighting me," King Henrick said, his voice cold and unyielding. "If you can land one strike against me, you pass this trial. If you cannot, you will be eliminated."

Eliminated. The word echoed in my head and around the room.

He truly expected us to fight him?

I had heard many rumors of King Henrick's ability since I had been here. The other Starblessed spoke of him as if he were the greatest king, the greatest warrior they had ever encountered, but I had met many great warriors in my life.

I couldn't deny that his body was impressive, his muscles firm beneath the clothing he wore.

The thought of fighting him made me feel sick to my stomach. Not because I didn't think I could complete the trial but because he and his advisers were parading me and the other Starblessed around like puppets on a string.

I knew I could complete whatever challenge they put in front of me, but it didn't mean that I wanted to.

It reminded me too much of my home. No, not home. The Blood kingdom was my home. It reminded me of my father.

Competing for my spot, for his love.

Or what I thought was love at the time.

As I stood there, watching King Henrick speak, I started to see him for what he was, and the luster of what he pretended to be began to fade away.

Of course, I already knew.

I wouldn't be here if he wasn't another greedy king willing to put so many lives in danger to gain whatever power it was that he wanted, but he had been very good at making me forget that fact.

I took a deep breath, letting the air fill my lungs, and forced myself to focus on the task at hand.

As we all approached the crate to choose our weapons, I noticed Sorin's eyes watching me intently.

I grabbed a thin sword, feeling its weight in my hand. It felt natural, like an extension of my arm, and if I was being honest with myself, it almost felt more familiar to me than my own magic.

The sword had always belonged to me, my magic had not.

But as I turned back to King Henrick as we prepared for the next trial, I knew I would never let anyone take either from me again.

CHAPTER 15

SORIN

As I watched Thalia from across the room, my heart twisted with a mix of pride and concern. She was a vision in the leather uniform, her determined eyes focused on King Henrick. But beneath her façade, I knew the weight of her mission and the danger that lurked within these trials.

The tension in the air was palpable as King Henrick revealed the true nature of the second trial. A wave of disbelief washed over the Starblessed as they realized they were expected to fight the very king they were vying for. It was a test not only of physical prowess but also of their loyalty and resilience.

Thalia's gaze flickered with a hint of trepidation, but she quickly masked it with determination. She was strong, resourceful, and more than capable of facing this challenge. Yet, I couldn't help but worry for her safety. The thought of her standing against King Henrick, his strength and skills honed from years of experience, sent a chill down my spine.

I knew I had to trust in Thalia's abilities, but a part of me yearned to step in and protect her. To shield her from harm and keep her from the perils that lay ahead. It was a battle within myself, torn between the desire to see her succeed and the instinct to keep her safe.

As the trial commenced, King Henrick's presence commanded the room. His movements were precise, his gaze unwavering as he effortlessly parried each strike from the Starblessed.

The Starblessed had been taking him on in pairs, and despite the advantage of being two against one, not a single one had landed a strike.

You could see the defeat in their eyes as each pair moved away from the makeshift ring and to the side to watch their competition.

Eight of them had yet to land a hit, and as the last two approached, I wondered what the king planned to do if no one did.

But it was Thalia who would compete next, and she would not fail.

She moved with grace and determination, her eyes never leaving King Henrick's form. The other Starblessed, Cyra, seemed to move in opposition of her, but Thalia paid her little attention.

The way she wielded her weapon with skill and precision spoke volumes of her training and determination. She was a force to be reckoned with, a true warrior.

And I knew that King Henrick underestimated her.

The condescending smirk that graced his face as he moved away from her proved that he had no fear of her. He believed that his training and experience would give him the advantage she lacked.

But every strike she could deliver, every calculated move she made, was a step closer to unraveling the secrets that bound King Henrick to the fae king.

Secrets that were vital for us to learn.

The room filled with the clashing of metal and the sound of heavy breaths as the two of them fought against the king. Some almost managed to land a glancing blow, only to be swiftly countered and disarmed. Her dagger slid across the ground, and King Henrick turned his full attention on Thalia. The stakes were high, and the tension seemed to swallow every ounce of oxygen from the room.

But it was Thalia who continuously captured my attention, her determination radiating from her every pore. She moved with a fluidity that was both mesmerizing and deadly. The clash of steel against steel echoed in my ears as I watched her dance with King Henrick, a delicate balance of offense and defense.

She didn't dare look around her. Her focus was solely on the king before her.

And it was his arrogance that was his downfall as he did not see Thalia coming for him with her blade drawn.

His eyes widened as she thrust forward, but he faltered in his step. He was not used to being the prey, and his hesitation cost him as he was not

able to fully avoid her strike. Her blade pierced through his leather armor and into his arm.

A muffled gasp was heard throughout the room and a ripple of disbelief echoed among the Starblessed. Thalia had done what the other contestants had failed to do. In minutes, she had brought down King Henrick and gained the upper hand.

I watched as the men from the king's personal guard rushed toward Thalia. A wave of protectiveness surged through me, but Thalia looked relaxed as she stood with her sword hanging loosely in her fingers at her side.

King Henrick gripped his upper arm, but a smile graced his lips as he looked at her.

As he stared in admiration at the woman I loved.

One of the guards grabbed her by the wrist, disarming her of her weapon, and she allowed it. If she hadn't, the guard would have already been dead.

The guards hesitated, unsure of what to do next. The tension in the room mounted, thickening the air. Thalia's expression remained calm, her eyes locked with the king's. In that moment, it was as if the rest of us faded into the background, leaving only the two of them.

And then, with a subtle movement of his hand, King Henrick signaled for the guards to stand down. The tension in the room eased, but the intrigue remained. Thalia had proven herself, not only as a formidable contender in the trials but also as someone who could stand at the king's side.

As the guards retreated, Thalia's gaze shifted, meeting mine for the briefest of moments. There was a glimmer of triumph in her eyes, but also a silent plea for understanding.

I wanted to run to her and pull her into my arms. To tell her that she didn't need to prove anything to anyone. She didn't have to be the one to put herself in danger to save a kingdom.

But then movement caught my attention from the corner of my eye. Cyra moved swiftly toward the king with a small dagger tucked into her hand.

He didn't see her coming because he was watching Thalia so intently, and she used that to her advantage.

In a flash, Cyra's blade was inches away from King Henrick's throat. Thalia's eyes widened, and I could see the panic etched on her face. My own hand reached for the blade at my side as the air seemed to be sucked out of the room.

King Henrick, to his credit, remained calm. His gaze flicked to Cyra then back to Thalia. It was then that I realized that Thalia had managed to take her own sword back from the guard who disarmed her, and now held it clenched in her hand.

"Lower the dagger, Cyra," the king said calmly, his voice smooth as silk, as he lifted his hand slowly and laid his fingers over hers that were still gripping the dagger. "It seems we've found our victors."

Cyra hesitated for a moment, her eyes darting around the room as a smile lifted the corners of her lips.

Her hand was trembling as she lowered her weapon and took a step back from the king.

For a moment, the room was silent, but the tension slowly dissipated. King Henrick reached out for Cyra, taking her hand in his, and he carefully removed the dagger from her fingers.

He said something to her so low that the rest of us couldn't hear before he turned back to Thalia, his expression unreadable. But it was clear to see the trepidation that still shone in Cyra's eyes.

A round of applause began through the crowd of people as King Henrick stepped forward and moved toward Thalia.

And I found myself clapping along with them even as I watched Cyra narrow her eyes on the direction he was going. As soon as he reached Thalia, he tugged her into him, his body pressing firmly against hers, and I couldn't look away as I watched him whisper something into her ear.

He leaned even farther into her, breathing her in as his eyes fluttered closed.

It didn't matter that he was surrounded by members of his court, the courts of other kingdoms, or another victor in his trials. He seemed to be completely unconcerned that they and the remaining Starblessed were all watching him.

He was the king. He could do as he pleased and whatever he wanted.

And it was clear to those of us around him that he wanted Thalia.

There wasn't a thing I could do about it despite how desperately I wanted to rip his hands off of her and demand that he knew she belonged to me.

It wasn't until I stepped toward them that I realized I had moved.

It wasn't until I heard Thalia whimper softly against the king that I stopped.

The king pulled away from her, just enough to brush his lips against the edge of her jaw. A message that he had marked her as his own for all of us to see.

It didn't matter that there were two victors in his trial.

He may not have announced that Thalia would be his future queen, but for all of us that looked upon them, it was clear to see.

She had already won the king over. He would fall to her, and she would be the one to bring him to his knees.

He finally let his hands fall away from her as he took a step back. One of his advisers rushed forward, looking over the wound on his arm and checking his neck, but he was still looking at her.

The softest smile graced Thalia's lips before he was pulled away.

She stepped away from the king, and every eye in the room tracked hers and Cyra's movements. She fidgeted with the long sleeve of her shirt that touched her wrist before her gaze fell on me again.

Her eyes implored me, silently pleading with me not to make a scene.

I knew she could see the jealousy, the possession blaring in my gaze even as I tried my best to hide it.

I clenched my jaw as I realized what she was asking me.

She wanted me to trust her, to have faith in her.

But she had to know that I had never had more faith in anyone in my entire life. It was her that I would trust until my very last breath. Her that I would worship on my knees as I laid my life before her.

So, I nodded my head once, understanding the unspoken message in her eyes.

Thalia had a way of calming me down, of making me see reason even when the jealousy inside me threatened to consume me whole.

I didn't move as she walked away from the king, her back straight and her head held high.

CHAPTER 16

THALIA

I needed a moment alone to gather my thoughts and process the whirlwind of emotions that had overtaken me during the trial. My heart raced as I navigated through the crowded hallways of the palace, seeking solace in the quiet corners where I could block out the others.

After what felt like an eternity, I found myself in a secluded courtyard. The soft sound of trickling water from a nearby fountain provided a soothing background melody, calming the storm inside me. I leaned against a stone pillar, closing my eyes for a brief moment, attempting to regain my composure.

As I stood there, catching my breath, it felt like I only had a few moments before I felt a presence approaching. I reached for my dagger at my side, only to remember that it wasn't there.

The sound of footsteps grew closer, and I looked over my shoulder to find King Henrick standing only a few paces away. His gaze met mine, and I sensed a mix of apprehension and admiration in his eyes.

"Thalia," he said, his voice warm. "May I join you?"

I hesitated for a moment, considering his request, before I nodded, granting him permission to approach.

King Henrick closed the distance between us, his footsteps echoing softly in the courtyard. We stood there in silence for a moment, the weight of our respective roles hanging in the air.

My gaze flickered to his arm, where a thick gauze was now bandaged around the wound that I inflicted.

"I must admit, Thalia," he began, his voice carrying a hint of vulnerability. "Your skill with a blade surprised me today. You have proven yourself to be a formidable adversary."

I nodded, acknowledging his words. "Thank you, Your Majesty. My father trained me diligently. Although, I am sorry that I had to give you that." I pointed toward his wound. It wasn't a lie. My father had trained me, just not in the skills I was forced to showcase today. He trained me in obedience, in servitude.

Thoughts of his face flashed into my mind, and I tried to force them out. He had raised me to be a warrior, but not the kind that could protect herself.

He had always wanted me at Gavril's side.

He had willingly given me away to that monster.

A small smile tugged at the corner of King Henrick's lips. "You landed a blow when no one else could. Respect is not easily gained, Thalia, but you have earned mine, and more."

His gaze trailed down my body, and I could feel his want pouring off him.

His words hung in the air, leaving a subtle tension between us. I sensed that there was more he wanted to say, something hidden beneath the surface. A flicker of hope sparked within me.

"Your Majesty," I ventured cautiously. "May I ask you something?"

He nodded, his gaze steady and unwavering. "Anything."

"Why these trials?" I continued, choosing my words carefully. "Why is this the way you want to decide upon your queen?"

A brief flicker of surprise crossed his features before he regained his composure. He sighed softly, his eyes clouded with a mixture of weariness and resignation.

"Our kingdom..." He hesitated for a moment as he looked away from me. "Having a strong queen at my side is crucial for our kingdom's survival."

"Is the kingdom at risk?" I let my voice hold the trepidation that I felt inside.

"Not with the alliances I have arranged." He shook his head, and my heart rate spiked. "I will do whatever it takes to protect my crown."

My mind raced with what to say next, the implications of this alliance swirling in my thoughts. His revelation held the potential to change everything, to shed light on the mysteries that haunted our world.

"And I will do everything I can to aid you to do so," I said, my voice steady.

King Henrick studied me for a long moment, his eyes piercing and calculating.

"I believe you," he said finally, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "You will make a great queen."

Trepidation swirled inside me even as I smiled.

This was what we wanted. This was what I had come here for.

"Thank you, Your Majesty." I pressed my hands into the wall behind me. "I want to be." I paused as I stared up at him. "But I fear that I barely know anything about your kingdom, let alone how to be a good queen."

King Henrick stepped closer to me, his eyes flickering with something that could only be described as desire. "Then let me teach you," he said, his voice low and husky. "Let me show you the ins and outs of ruling a kingdom, of being a queen."

My heart thudded in my chest as he reached out and brushed his fingers against my cheek. His touch was gentle, but there was an underlying hunger there that made chill bumps form along my skin.

"I would like that," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

He stepped even closer until only inches separated us. "Good," he murmured, his breath hot against my cheek. "There are so many things that I'd like to teach you."

My breath hitched as he leaned in, his lips hovering dangerously close to mine. My heart raced as I felt his hand slip around my waist, pulling me closer to him. I hesitated for a moment, unsure of whether to give in to the conflicting desire that was coursing through my veins.

I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted to find Sorin and demand he give me everything he had been holding back because of me.

But then, as if sensing my hesitation, he pulled back, his gaze searching mine for a moment before he spoke.

"Perhaps not tonight," he said softly, his voice tinged with regret. "I think you've already been through enough today."

I nodded, my heart still pounding in my chest. "Soon," I echoed, feeling apprehension run cold in my veins. I knew that this was dangerous, that I was treading on thin ice by allowing myself to be drawn into his web of desire.

Especially not when the one I truly desired, the one I ached for, was in the same palace.

If I was being honest with myself, every time I felt my heart race from his nearness or my spine tingle from his touch, it was Sorin who crossed my mind. It was him who I imagined, him who I longed for.

King Henrick's fingers trailed along my waist as he took a step away from me. He was still watching me with his gaze full of want, and I straightened as I looked away from him.

"I'm sorry about your arm." I nodded toward the bandage. "I know that was the trial, but I don't like harming you either way."

"This is nothing." He shook his head softly. "One of my healers will have it fixed before the night is over."

Magic.

The only way one of his healers would be able to accomplish that would be with magic.

That flurry of desire died inside me with his words. If he had a magical healer here, that meant they had to come from the fae kingdom or from my own. It was unheard of for a fae or vampyre to be living in the human kingdom, even if it was to serve their king.

"Of course." I smiled carefully at him. "I am still sorry for doing so."

He nodded, his gaze flickering over my face. "And I am sorry that you were forced to do it. I wish our fates were simply left to choice." He looked away from me for a moment, and he looked so lost in thought. "If I wasn't a king and you weren't a Starblessed, I wonder what would become of us."

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "We may have never met."

"True." He looked back to me with a solemn smile on his face. "I imagine I would have owned a small farm and used my hands to work the earth every day."

I cocked my head as I studied him. "You know? I think I can actually see that."

He chuckled softly as he watched me. "Are you imagining me getting my hands dirty?"

There was a part of me that wanted to ask him how dirty his hands already were. How deep was he in with the fae kingdom?

But that wasn't what he was asking me.

"I didn't realize kings were so bold."

He laughed again, but this time it was deep and throaty and filled with something that made my stomach flip.

"I should bid you good night." He ran his hand through his hair as his gaze trailed down my body. "You should rest after today's trials, and I want to do anything but let you rest."

I swallowed hard as he spoke.

"Good night, Thalia." He took another step away from me as if he was forcing himself to leave.

"Good night, my king."

CHAPTER 17

SORIN

I paced my small room by the light of the fire. It had been hours since the end of the second trial, hours since I watched the guards escort the eight Starblessed who were found lacking back to their rooms.

I had no idea what King Henrick would do with them now. Did he simply ship them back home as easily as they had come?

What would he do when he realized that the one he wanted was never his to have all along?

I feared what he was already demanding of her. What we all were.

But I would wait for her until every star in the sky had turned to dust.

I would wish upon her skin, I would pray against her lips.

There wasn't a world in which I wouldn't feel a desperation for her that was capable of eating me alive.

I pressed my head against the doorframe and begged myself to stay where I was. Every part of me wanted to go to her, to make sure she was okay, to assure that she wasn't with the king when all I could think about was her.

But that was where she should have been.

That was what we were here for.

And I hated every second of it.

I clamped my eyes closed and imagined her face. I forced myself to think about what she looked like when it was only her and I, when there were no nightmares, no duties that kept us apart.

I imagined how she would feel if she no longer held herself back with me, if she was willing to give me as much as I was her.

Would she call out my name without the fear of others hearing how badly she needed me? Would she call out her prayers like I was the only god she served?

I groaned as I imagined her beneath me, her full lips open as she gasped for breath, her eyes pleading with me for more.

I pressed my hand against my trousers, feeling how hard I was beneath them.

But as much as I wanted her, I couldn't bring myself to go to her now.

I took a deep breath and slid my hand beneath my trousers. I hissed as my hand wrapped around my cock, and all I could see was her.

Her name slipped past my lips as I stroked myself, my hand desperately grasping for more as I thought of the pleasure that only she could give me.

I imagined her eyes widening as I kissed every inch of her body, and my breathing grew heavier.

I felt a tightness coil deep inside me, and I knew that a single touch from her would tear me apart.

My hips thrust forward into my hand and all I could see was Thalia's face as she arched into me with a desperate moan that only filled more fuel to the flame inside me.

The muscles in my legs tightened as I moved my hand faster. I imagined her lips wrapped around my cock, imagined her tongue sliding against my length with each motion.

My hand tightened on my cock as I stroked it harder, faster.

My breath escaped my lips in a series of shudders as I thought of filling her.

I ground my hips against my hand as I held my release for as long as possible.

I groaned as the tightness inside me released in a flood of pleasure.

I imagined being inside of her, and it was too much.

Too much of what I couldn't have.

Too much of her.

I couldn't stop the way I called out for her as I came.

My chest ached as I pulled my hand away and tried to catch my breath. I pressed harder against the doorframe and tried to pull myself together.

I was here to do a job, and it was a job I was dangerously close to failing.

Thalia was a fate I couldn't fight, and I didn't want to.

I turned and walked to my bed, sinking down into it as I closed my eyes.

I would suffer every moment for her.

CHAPTER 18

THALIA

The moon bathed the castle grounds in an ethereal glow, casting an enchanting spell over the night.

I stood before the grand entrance to the ballroom, my heart pounding wildly in my chest.

Tonight was important, and I could feel myself being on the verge of getting everything we needed.

My hands shook as I adjusted the heavy fabric of my gown, making sure it laid against my body perfectly. The deep blue silk felt smooth against my skin, and the low neckline exposed a hint of cleavage.

The dress was tight around my waist and flared at the bottom into a gentle train, giving me an air of regality. The long sleeves were adorned with intricate gold embroidery that matched perfectly with the crest I knew would adorn King Henrick's chest.

I took a deep breath and tried to steady myself before stepping through the door into the grand hall beyond.

Music flooded my ears as soon as I stepped inside, and I let my gaze float over the hundreds of people who mingled in their finest attire as they all turned to watch me enter.

My eyes quickly scanned the room, searching for Sorin, but he was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment, but I forced myself to focus on what I was here for.

I made my way through the throngs of people, my heels clicking against the marble floor with each step until I reached King Henrick.

He was surrounded by his courtiers, a smile on his face, but his eyes were cold and calculating as he looked me over. I curtsied deeply, my eyes downcast, before lifting my gaze to meet his.

"Your Majesty," I said softly, my voice honeyed and smooth.

His eyes gleamed even as one of his courtiers continued to talk. He paid them no attention. Not now that I stood in front of him.

"You look lovely." His gaze fell to my chest before slowly caressing down my body. Chills broke out across my skin, and there was a tightness in my stomach that felt wrong being there.

"Thank you."

He extended his hand, and I took it without question.

He tugged me into his chest and didn't stop until my skin pressed against his. "Let's dance," he murmured softly for only me to hear.

He led me onto the dance floor, my feet hardly touching the ground as he moved me in a perfect circle. I could feel his heat radiating from him, and I inhaled his intoxicating scent.

His arms were strong around me, and his hand never left my waist as we swayed to the music.

I could feel the eyes of everyone in the ballroom on us, and as I looked up, the gaze of Cyra bled into me as she watched us.

"I fear you are creating enemies for me." I nodded to her. King Henrick looked but hardly paid her any attention before turning back to me.

He leaned in close, his words a whisper against my ear. "Let her be your enemy. It's much better to have an enemy in your face than a disguised enemy at your back."

I felt a chill pass through me, guilt rising up inside for how good it felt to be so close to him when every part of me ached for Sorin. But being in the arms of the king was easy. I had no fear of losing him, no panic over protecting my heart.

He was nothing more than a handsome mission who I would leave behind the moment I needed to.

But then my eyes landed on one person who made everything with King Henrick run cold, Sorin. He stood in the corner, his gaze trained on me with an intensity that made my heart stall in my chest.

He looked devilish in his black formal attire, the collar unbuttoned and the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. As our eyes met, he lifted a glass of red

wine to his lips and took a sip, never breaking his gaze from mine.

I could feel the heat rising to my cheeks as the king twirled me around the floor, trying my best to keep my composure. The mission was all that mattered, even if my heart was pounding wildly in my chest.

King Henrick's hand tensed along the small of my back, and when I turned back to face him, his gaze was settled on Sorin.

"You seem distracted," he said, his voice laced with a hint of possession.

My heart thundered in my chest, and I knew that the slightest misstep would ruin everything. I needed to keep the king's focus on me and me alone.

I stared up at the king, silently begging him to forget about Sorin, who I could still feel watching me from across the room. "I guess I am a bit." I lifted my hands until they met at the back of his neck. "I'm not used to such grandeur. I still find that my breath catches in my throat as I try to take it all in."

King Henrick's lips eased into a smile, and he leaned in closer to me. "Well, let me make it easier for you." His hand moved to my lower back, pulling me even closer to him. "Why don't we take a break from the dance floor and go for a walk in the gardens? It's a beautiful night, and we can enjoy some peace and quiet away from the crowds."

I felt a shiver run down my spine, but I knew that I needed to take advantage of this opportunity. I nodded, trying to suppress the uneasiness that bubbled inside me. "That sounds lovely, but aren't you meant to be entertaining your guests?"

"They can entertain themselves for a while." He linked his fingers in mine and raised our joined hands until he pressed his lips against my knuckles.

I could practically feel Sorin's gaze burning into my back, and when the king's eyes moved back in his direction, I pressed myself closer to him, drawing his attention back to me.

"We should let them." I nodded and tightened my hand in his.

King Henrick's smile was guarded, but his eyes were molten as they met mine. He took a step back, keeping my hand securely in his, and he pulled me behind him.

Together, we made our way out of the ballroom and through the bustling castle halls until we reached the gardens. The air was cool and crisp, and

the sweet scent of flowers surrounded us.

Firelight led us down the winding path, and King Henrick didn't loosen his hold on my hand for even a moment.

There were other people in the gardens, but most bowed deeply at the waist before quickly moving away from their king.

As we walked, King Henrick's grip on my hand became firmer, almost possessive. He seemed to be on edge, constantly looking over his shoulder and taking in his surroundings.

"Is everything all right?" I asked, trying to hide my own apprehension.

He didn't answer me immediately but instead came to a stop in front of a small fountain. The moonlight reflected off the water, casting a soft glow on everything around us.

Finally, he turned to face me, his eyes glinting with a dangerous intensity. "Everything is fine." He dug his fingers against my waist and pulled me into him until my chest pressed against his.

My breath rushed out of me before I took a sharp inhale and looked up at him.

In another life, I could see exactly why the other Starblessed were so enamored with this man.

But in this life, he was my mission, and I couldn't afford to lose focus.

I let my hands move up his chest until they rested on his shoulders, my fingers digging into the fabric of his suit.

"I just wanted to be alone with you for a moment." He lifted his hand and ran it along the curve of my jaw. "Everyone is so enamored with you, and their attention drives me crazy."

My heart leaped in my chest, and I tried to push down the fear that threatened to consume me. Had he noticed Sorin?

"They are enamored with you. You are the king."

King Henrick's lips curled into a smirk, and he leaned down until his face was inches from mine. "Their interest in me is purely out of duty. They want you because you're breathtaking."

His grip on my waist tightened, and he pulled me so tightly against him that the heat of his body radiated against every inch of me. "But you are not theirs."

"No," I whispered the word as I shook my head.

He leaned in even closer until his lips were at my ear. "I want you to be mine," he whispered, his breath hot against my skin.

My heart was racing, and I tried to keep my composure as I looked up at him.

"What will being yours look like?" I asked breathlessly. "Will we get time alone, or will it always be like this?" I motioned toward the castle.

He cocked his head to the side slightly as he studied me. "You don't like the politics my position holds?"

"The politics are fine." My fingers dug into his neck, clinging to him. "But it is you that I want. I just wondered if we'll have moments without all this."

King Henrick's eyes darkened with desire, and he leaned down to capture my lips in a fierce kiss. His hands were everywhere, pulling me closer, crushing my body against his.

I let out a soft moan against his lips, my own desire and frustration burning within me.

My hands moved to his hair, tangling in the soft strands as I tried to keep up with his intensity. His hands roamed over every inch of my body, his touch rough and possessive.

Thoughts of Sorin flooded me, but I tried to force them away. I tried to trick myself into thinking I wasn't imagining that it was his hands that raked down my body, that it was his tongue that pressed against mine.

But I couldn't stop it.

The memories of Sorin's touch surged through my mind like a tidal wave crashing over me. I had never craved something so badly in all my life.

My want for Sorin was intoxicating and terrifying.

I had never wanted or needed anyone more, and that kind of need, that desperation, it stole the very breath from my lungs.

Suddenly, King Henrick pulled away from me, leaving me panting and wanting more.

Wanting a man who wasn't the one I was currently clinging to.

"You are mine, Thalia," he growled softly for only me to hear, but there was such a possessiveness in his voice that it sent a shiver down my spine. "No one else's."

I swallowed, my desire for Sorin still burning within me, but I pushed it aside, forcing myself to focus on the man in front of me.

"Yes," I whispered, my body still buzzing with desire. "I'm yours."

"And tomorrow, we'll tell everyone else." The king straightened, taking my hand back in his, and he led me back into the castle.

CHAPTER 19

SORIN

I could feel her the moment she entered the room.

I had tried to go back to my own rooms here at the castle, but the moment I saw her walk away with the king, when I had seen that territorial look in his eye, I had felt like I was going to go insane with jealousy.

When I was sure no one was watching, I slipped into her room, closing the door silently behind me, and I waited. I drove myself crazy thinking of every possible scenario that could be happening.

Was he touching her? Kissing her?

What would I do if she didn't come back here tonight?

I knew I should have gotten out of there before I did something stupid and risked all the work she had been doing here.

She was here to save a kingdom, but I would raze it to the ground for her.

The door closed with a soft click, and the only light in the room was the soft glow of the flickering flames in the hearth.

She pressed her back against the door, and I watched her chest rise and fall as she tried to catch her breath.

She looked stunning, and I had to clench my fists to stop myself from storming forward and claiming her.

She closed her eyes and pressed her head back against the door. "What are you doing here?" Her voice was so soft that I could hardly hear it.

"We both know why I'm here." I stepped out of the shadows, and she raised her head to look at me.

Her gaze was so dark with desire that it made my blood boil.

"Did he touch you?" I growled out every word, and my jealousy dripped from every syllable.

She nodded her head slightly as if she feared my reaction. "He kissed me."

I nodded my head. This was what we wanted. This was what we were here for.

Thalia was doing her job.

But my chest felt like it was going to crack open under the weight of it.

"Sorin," she breathed my name, and I stepped closer to her.

My fists were clenched at my sides because I didn't trust myself. She was the deadliest poison, and I willingly swallowed every drop.

It didn't matter that I knew she wasn't good for me.

I didn't care that she had told me time and again that she couldn't do this with me.

I would fall to my knees before her and let her take any part of me she wanted.

"He kissed you." My voice was calm, and I watched Thalia's dark eyes widen in surprise. She opened her mouth to respond but hesitated, biting her bottom lip.

"Did you enjoy him kissing you?"

Thalia's eyes snapped up to mine, her gaze flickering with a mix of surprise and desire. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

I moved closer to her, my body so close that I could feel the heat of her skin against mine.

"Answer me, Thalia," I growled, my voice rough with jealousy and desire.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she looked at me with a fire in her eyes that stole my own breath away.

"What if I did?" She raised her chin, testing me.

I could feel the anger and jealousy boiling up inside me, threatening to spill over.

"Did he make you whimper when he drew your lip between his teeth?" I moved in closer until I felt intoxicated by the scent of her. I ran my nose along her collarbone so lightly she didn't feel real before me. "Did he make you beg for him the way you like to do for me?"

Thalia let out a soft moan as I pressed my lips to her neck, and her hands moved to clutch at my shirt.

"Answer me," I repeated, my voice low and demanding.

She shook her head, and I could feel her body trembling beneath my touch.

I pulled back slightly, my eyes locking onto hers. "Did you like his hands on your body or did you wish they were mine?"

"I thought of you," she said so softly I worried I imagined her words.

I let out a low growl, my hands moving to cup her face, my thumbs running along her cheekbones.

"Good," I whispered roughly before crashing my lips down onto hers.

Our kiss was rough and desperate, both of us trying to claim the other. I ran my hands down her body, pulling her closer until there was no space between us.

Thalia's hands moved to tangle in my hair, pulling me even closer as she kissed me back with the same intensity.

I slid my hands down her body, lifting her up and pressing her against the door.

She let out the softest moan, trying to stifle the sound, and I was reminded of where we were. But I couldn't stop.

"We shouldn't," she whispered, but her hands were still on my body, and her eyes still held that fire.

"I don't care," I growled out, kissing her again with all the ferocity I felt.

I pressed my hips into hers, and the whimper that passed through her lips was enough to make me fall to my knees.

I dropped her back to her feet before I slid my body down hers. I gathered the skirt of her dress in my hands as I settled on my knees before her.

"This is dangerous."

I nodded in agreement even as I dropped my head and pressed a soft kiss at the inside of her knee.

"Sorin," she hissed my name, but it sounded like a plea.

I ran my hands up her legs, pushing her dress up with my thumbs.

I could feel her trembling beneath my touch, and I lifted my eyes to look at her.

"Tell me you don't want this."

She was silent for a moment, but I watched her expression change. "I can't."

Her words were quiet, but I could hear the desperation that laced them. "Then don't stop me."

I pressed my lips to her stomach, right against the material of her dress, but I was desperate to taste her skin.

I slid the dress up, exposing her soft thighs.

Thighs that I could spend a lifetime worshipping.

I ran my hands up her legs, and she let out a gasp when my fingers slid between her thighs.

"Sorin."

I could feel the urgency in her voice, and I knew she wanted me just as badly as I wanted her.

I ran my nose along the length of her thigh before pressing a kiss to the apex of her legs.

She let out a soft moan, and her hands moved to push my hair back.

Thalia's skin was so soft, and I craved the way she felt beneath my fingertips.

I slid my hands up her thighs again until I reached the edge of her undergarments, and I bit back a groan.

"Hold your dress." I bit out the command, and she did exactly as she was told.

She stared down at me as I ran my fingers along the length of her sex and felt how wet she was beneath the fabric.

She let out a muffled moan, and I nudged her legs until she spread them just the slightest bit.

Her hips rolled against my hand, and I slipped a finger beneath the fabric, groaning as I felt how hot and wet she was for me.

I pushed the fabric to the side and slid my tongue between her folds.

I groaned against her because she tasted so damn good. I had been starving without tasting her.

Thalia's knees buckled, and she moaned my name, gripping my hair even tighter.

I sucked her nub into my mouth, and I could feel how swollen and sensitive it was.

I pressed my thumb against her nub as I tasted every inch of her, and she threw her head back and let out a moan. Her hips bucked forward into my hand, and I ground my teeth together to stop myself from biting into her flesh and claiming every part of her.

Everything inside me was begging me to do so.

I wanted to taste her blood. To free fall in the way only that could provide, but I wouldn't do it.

Not to her.

Not after everything she had been through.

I lifted her right leg in my hand and placed it over my shoulder so I could dive deeper into her. I licked, sucked, and nipped at her flesh until she was riding against me.

I looked up, and my gaze met her hungry one. I didn't look away as I gave her what she would never ask me for.

I drew her pleasure to the surface, stealing the breath from her lungs, and I was so damn hard in my trousers as I watched her.

I pressed my lips gently against her nub, and she whimpered at the change of pressure.

"Who do you belong to, Thalia?" I spoke the words against her sex.

"What?" she asked breathlessly.

"Tell me who the fuck you belong to. I need to hear you say it." Even with her beneath my fingers, I could feel the greediness for her raging through me, demanding that I take what was mine.

"I'm yours."

I groaned against her, knowing that I could spend the rest of my life doing this and never get enough.

Her thighs were shaking, and I could feel her knees buckle against me.

"You are mine," I repeated the words. I demanded that she hear them, and she nodded her head quickly.

I sucked her nub back into my mouth, harder and faster than before, and I slid two fingers inside her and curled them forward.

She cried out before slamming her hand down against her mouth, trying to muffle the sound, but I didn't stop.

I didn't care in that moment who heard it.

If me claiming her ruined the mission, then so be it.

I would ruin anything to have her.

Everything but her.

It was selfish and foolish, but I couldn't think clearly around her.

I slowly pulled the pleasure from her body before I dropped her leg back to the ground and stood.

She leaned back against the door, her body placid, but her gaze was still filled with the fire that made me burn from the inside out.

"Turn around," I growled out the words as I undid my trousers, and her gaze tracked the movements.

She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth before she did as I said. She turned and pressed both hands against the door.

My fingers fumbled with the million buttons along the back of her dress before frustration got the best of me. I wrapped my hands along either side, and I jerked until the buttons flew to the ground around us.

Thalia gasped, but I was too busy running my tongue along her spine to be worried about the damn dress that I pushed off of her and onto the floor.

"Do you have any idea how good you taste?" I growled out the words as I reached around and pushed my hand between her thighs.

I gathered her wetness, stroking my fingers through it before I brought my hand up to her mouth. "Taste how fucking perfect you are after I've had my mouth on you."

Thalia groaned, and her hips bucked forward. "I need you," she said the words just before she let my fingers slip into her mouth.

She lapped at my fingers, sucking away the proof of her pleasure eagerly, and jerked my trousers down my hips.

"Do you want me to fuck you?" I pulled my fingers from her mouth and let them trail down her body until I reached her sex again. I slid a finger inside her and groaned as I felt how tight she was around me.

"Yes. Please." Her voice was barely more than a whimper.

I pushed another finger inside her, and I could feel her whole body shudder as she cried out.

"That's it. Let me hear you." I fucking loved that sound.

I loved that she shuddered at my words.

I loved that I had that power over her.

I thrust my fingers in and out of her slick heat before I moved them to her back. I pressed against her spine until she leaned forward and pressed her hands against the door once more to hold herself up.

I ran my cock through her sex and groaned at the feel of her against me.

"Sorin." I could hear the need in her voice, and I wanted everyone in the damn castle to hear that I was the one fucking her.

I wanted them to know that it was my name that poured from her lips while she clung to my skin.

I pressed the head of my cock against her entrance, and I pushed into her slowly, my body shaking with my lack of control.

"Gods, I want to hear you scream."

She gasped as I thrust forward, her fingers digging into the harsh wood of the door.

"I want them to know exactly who you belong to as you come around my cock." I thrust forward again, and her sex convulsed around me.

Fire flared in my stomach, and I moved my fingers from her back to her hips. I held her body as I pounded inside her, my fingers digging into her flesh. I wanted to leave my marks on her.

I wanted everyone to know that she was mine.

That anyone who dared to look at her would know she would never be theirs.

I pressed myself deeper inside of her, and I could feel the first tremors of her orgasm against me.

I reached around her, fluttering my fingers against her nub, and she cried out my name.

My muscles shook as the first tremors of my own orgasm started to roll through my body.

"You feel so fucking good."

She moaned my name against the door, and she gripped me so tightly that I knew I couldn't hold on any longer.

I crashed against her, and I felt my orgasm roll through me. I gripped her hips hard enough to bruise as I ground against her. I wasn't gentle, and I couldn't force myself to be.

I thrust into her one last time before we both went still. I was inside of her until I had nothing left to give. Her body had drained me completely, and yet, I still wanted more.

I rested my head against her back, and I struggled to catch my breath.

"You are mine, Thalia," I said the words quietly, but they rang throughout the room.

Her body shook beneath me, but I could feel her pulling away.

"You need to leave." She pulled away from me, and the loss of her body against mine was like a punch to the chest.

She bent down, grabbing her dress and holding it against her chest as if I hadn't just been buried inside her.

"You shouldn't have come at all."

She turned and met my gaze, and I saw the fear on her face.

But whether it was the fear of failing the mission or letting me in, I wasn't sure.

"You're right." I nodded and pulled my trousers back into place.

"Thalia," I said her name, but she lifted her hand and silenced me.

"King Henrick told me tonight that he's going to choose me as his queen. We are so close to getting what we want."

What we want.

She had no damn clue what it was that I wanted.

"Of course." I nodded again and backed away toward her window.

"We need to be careful. We cannot let our kingdom down because of your jealousy."

Every word was like another punch. The Thalia that I held in my arms was not the same woman once she pulled away. "That was my mistake."

I bit down on my lip and refused to demand the things from her I knew we both wanted. I refused to tell her how desperate I was for her to just let herself want me.

She opened her mouth as if she was going to say something else, but I was already slipping away into the darkness and back to my room.

CHAPTER 20

THALIA

I couldn't stop the way my stomach tightened as I pushed out of my room. I could still feel Sorin's body against mine like a brand. I could taste his lips and smell him over every inch of me.

It didn't matter that I had scrubbed him away in the bath as if King Henrick would be able to spot his touch on me the moment he saw me.

Last night had been a mistake. A mistake that could cost us far more than either of us wanted to pay.

But Sorin made me forget why I was here. He made me crazy and irrational, and even now, as I stepped toward the guard who was posted outside my door waiting for me, I craved him.

"Good morning," I said to the guard, and he bowed his head slightly in my direction. A show of respect that none of them had given me until now.

That only made my stomach twist harder.

I followed him wordlessly as he led me through the castle. I didn't know where he was taking me, but King Henrick always sent one of his guards when he wanted me.

And I could do nothing except follow his command.

We stepped into a large room that had furniture pushed to the sides, and I heard the clang of metal before I spotted King Henrick standing in the center. He wore nothing but a pair of leather trousers and boots, and sweat glistened along his skin.

He would have been enough to look at all day if my breath didn't catch in my throat. Because across from him stood Sorin, a blade in each hand and his bare chest on display as well.

Sweat riveted down Sorin's chest, and by the way his chest rose and fell, I knew they had been at this for quite a while.

"What's going on?" I asked Cyra as the guard left me at her side.

She looked over at me, but by the way her eyes narrowed slightly, I knew she wasn't impressed. "They've been training with one another for the last hour. Our king wanted to see what the Blood kingdom's captain has that makes him so valuable."

The way she said the words made it sound like she didn't see his value at all, but then I tracked her gaze as she took Sorin in. Her eyes roamed over every inch of his exposed skin and muscles, at the fingernail marks that ran along his chest.

My heart pounded wildly in my chest as I looked at the marks I had given him, marks he had pulled from my body in a way that only he could, and I quickly looked away from him to look back at King Henrick.

"It would appear that the captain is good for something, though." Cyra snickered beside me as she kept her voice low enough for only me to hear. "A man doesn't get marks like that from being worthless."

"No." I shook my head slowly. "I don't suppose he would."

Cyra pulled her gaze away from Sorin long enough to look back at me. "I don't see any such marks on King Henrick." Her eyes fell to my hands before they quickly moved back to my face. "Either he exaggerates his own worth or you haven't sunk your claws into him nearly as much as you made the rest of us believe."

I shot back at her words and tightened my hands into fists at my sides.

"Excuse me?" I practically growled the words.

"Oh. Don't be so prudish." She waved me off. "All of us assumed that you had been on your back for days now considering the way he looks at you."

I bit my tongue as I stared at her.

"You wouldn't be the only one." She grinned, and bile rose in my throat.

"You've slept with him?" I knew the answer even before I asked it.

"Why should I tell you when you refuse to tell me?" She turned more to face me. "I think our king has had his fair share of sampling among most of the Starblessed that arrived at his doorsteps."

I turned back to look at him. He was still sparring with Sorin, and their blades slammed together as each of them tried to land a blow on the other. But even from here, I could tell that Sorin was holding back.

“I’ll tell you, though.” Cyra had stepped closer to me, and I looked at her over my shoulder. “I desperately want to be queen, but I would give just about anything to be that captain’s whore just for one night.”

I couldn’t stop myself or the way I spun around to face her. I crowded her, forcing her back against the wall, and my chest heaved against hers as I forced myself to remember where I was.

Cyra looked over my shoulder to the men who were fighting behind us, but she quickly looked back to me with narrowed eyes.

“I can’t tell which upset you more, the fact that I’ve already been in the king’s bed or the fact that I want to be in the captain’s.”

“I couldn’t care less about the captain.” I growled out the lie even as I stepped closer to her. Her eyes flashed with fear even though she tried her hardest to mask it, and a taste other than fear fueled something inside me. “You will never touch him. Don’t even allow yourself to dream of pressing your skin against his.”

“The captain?” Her voice shook slightly.

“No.” I shook my head and tried to clear my mind. I tried to force out the images of her laying her perfect hands on him, of him falling to his knees before her in the same way he worshipped me. “The king.”

Cyra shifted against me before she seemed to find her spine once again. “I don’t have to touch him.” She leaned closer until her mouth was near my ear. “He is the one who seeks me out at the end of the night. He is the one who tucks you into your bed before crawling into mine. Let him pretend with you in front of everyone all he wants, I already know that my mouth can make the man curse the gods as he begs for release.”

“Everything okay?”

Cyra let out a sharp inhale, and she shot back away from me at the sound of King Henrick’s voice. I closed my eyes slowly, taking a deep breath before I turned to face him.

“Everything’s fine.” I tried to sound as normal as possible, but there was such a tenseness in my voice. “We were just talking.”

King Henrick laughed as he looked back and forth between the two of us. “It looked more like the two of you are the ones who needed to blow off

some steam in the sparring ring instead of us.”

“Of course not.” Cyra planted a fake smile on her face as she moved around me and to the king. She pressed her hand against his wet chest, and I let myself look to Sorin as the king’s gaze fell to her.

He was watching me carefully as he ran a towel along the back of his neck, and I swallowed the desire that threatened to consume me as I looked at him.

“It was just a few words exchanged between ladies.” Cyra grinned up at King Henrick, and my gaze fell to the star mark along the back of her neck. It almost looked golden against her skin, and it was far brighter than most I had ever seen.

“You sure?” He lifted his gaze to look at me. “Thalia, are you okay?”

I nodded my head even though I wanted to confront him about what Cyra had just said. It didn’t matter that he had lied to me. Honestly, I had expected him to do so, but there was something about being blindsided by something that I didn’t see coming that angered me.

He had been sleeping with her, with who knows how many other of the Starblessed, while he had been telling me how badly he wanted me.

“I’m fine.” I smiled at him. “How was your sparring?” I motioned toward the ring, and King Henrick looked back to Sorin as he slowly pulled Cyra’s hand off his chest.

“Good.” He nodded his head toward Sorin, and Sorin nodded his own in acknowledgment before slipping his shirt back over his head. “The captain here sure gave me a workout.”

He turned back to me with a smile, and it was hard not to notice the way he stepped away from Cyra.

He pulled me into him, wrapping his arms around me in a hug, and the warmth of his body bled into mine. “I was looking for you this morning, but it seems you slept in.” He leaned back and pushed a curl behind my ear.

“I apparently needed the rest. How did you sleep?” I tried my hardest not to look at Cyra, but she stood there with a grin on her face at my question.

“Like the dead.” He laughed and took a step back from me. “Let me grab my shirt, then I want to show you something.”

I nodded my head and stood there with my hands pressed together behind my back. Sorin was leaving the room, and I desperately wanted to

follow him. Trepidation swam through every inch of me at the thought of being alone with King Henrick.

King Henrick pulled his shirt over his head before tucking it into his trousers, and Cyra seemed to watch his every move.

"Cyra," he called her name, and I hated the way she smiled at him. "I will see you later."

She deflated with his words, and my mind ran wild with what he meant by that.

How did he speak to her when they were alone? How did he touch her?

I forced down the thoughts and returned his smile as he stepped toward me. "You ready?"

"Yes." I nodded and let him take my hand in his.

As we walked out of the sparring room, I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease settling in my stomach. I tried to shake it off, but the memory of Cyra's words kept replaying in my mind. It was as if she had set a fire that was impossible to put out.

It didn't matter what she had done with the king I was trying to win over. I couldn't stop replaying thoughts of her with Sorin in my mind.

"Is something bothering you?" King Henrick's voice snapped me out of my thoughts, and I looked up at him.

"No. Everything's fine." I forced a smile and gently squeezed his hand.

We walked in silence for a few moments before we arrived at the stables. King Henrick let go of my hand and turned to face me.

"What did Cyra say that upset you?" He was watching me carefully, his gaze studying every inch of my face.

"It doesn't matter." I shook my head. "She's my competition, and she's just trying to get under my skin."

His jaw clenched as his mouth settled into a hard line. "Cyra isn't competition for you."

I tried to force a smile on my lips as I turned away from him to look at the dark brown horse who seemed to be watching us.

"What are we doing here?" I nodded toward the stables, and I tried to hide the tremor in my voice.

"I want to take you somewhere," he said as he walked forward and caressed the side of the horse's face. "Somewhere I don't take anyone."

My stomach tightened at the thought of being alone with him, away from the castle, away from Sorin.

But it didn't matter.

"Okay." I nodded as he opened the small gate and led the horse from its stall.

He mounted before reaching his hand down for me, and I looked down at the dress I was wearing. If I had known, I would have changed.

King Henrick chuckled softly. "I didn't plan this very well, but I promise it's not a far ride."

"Okay." I reached up and placed my hand in his. He pulled me up, and I lifted my skirt enough to allow me to lift my leg and straddle the horse in front of him. His gaze flew to my thighs before I settled into the saddle against him and straightened the fabric.

King Henrick reached forward for the reins, and his other hand settled on my stomach as he pulled me back closer against him.

"You ready?" He whispered his words against the back of my neck.

Chill bumps broke out along my skin, but I simply nodded before his heels moved in the stirrups and we shot forward.

We rode through the countryside, the wind whipping against my face and the sound of the horse's hooves slamming against the soft grass beneath me. I saw no signs of the people of his kingdom. No homes or farms or the bit of the city I saw when I arrived.

"We're still on royal land." He seemed to read my thoughts. "No one comes here unless they have permission."

I had never seen royal lands like this.

We passed by rolling hills to the dense forest at the edge of the land.

Finally, we arrived at a clearing nestled on the edge of the forest. The sun was high overhead, casting golden rays and shadows over the trees.

King Henrick dismounted first before helping me down from the horse. He tied his reins to a tree before taking my hand in his.

He led me to a small pond in the center of the clearing, and my eyes widened in wonder at the sight before me. Lilies floated on the calm surface of the pond, and wildflowers of every color covered the land.

"This is beautiful." I tried to take every bit of it in, but it seemed like there was something new every way I looked. It really was beautiful, but it's beauty was clouded by the fear that I couldn't let go of.

"I'm glad you think so." He smiled down at me before taking a seat on the grassy bank. "My mother and I used to come here when I was a child to escape... all of that." He waved behind us to where we had left the castle.

I took a seat next to him, the grass tickling my bare legs beneath the hem of my dress.

We sat in silence for a few moments, and it would have been peaceful if I wasn't feeling so tense.

I rested my arms on my knees and turned my head to look at him. "Thank you for bringing me here."

He smiled at me, his eyes studying my face. "It's nice to escape for a little while."

I nodded as I looked at him.

"My advisers want me to hold a final trial." His words were hesitant. "Between you and Cyra."

"Okay." I swallowed hard as I thought about what else they could possibly want. "If that's what you want."

"It's not." He looked out to the pond. "I don't want to make you prove yourself in front of them."

My chest tightened at his words, but they were nothing more than that. His actions had proven otherwise.

"You are the king."

"Yes, but I still have people to answer to." He sighed, running his hand through his hair. "I wish I could make it all go away. The trials, the politics, the pressure."

"Maybe I can help." I turned more to face him.

"How so?" He grinned, and if we were in any other situation, I would have fallen for that smile.

"I don't know." I ran my fingers through the grass as I contemplated what to say. I was desperate to make him want to open up to me. "Tell me what's troubling you, what pressures you're facing. You don't have to face it all alone."

He was quiet for a long moment before he spoke again. "My advisers, they want more. More for this kingdom. More than my parents ever strived for."

"More what?" I let my fingers touch his and traced the lines of his knuckles.

“Power, land, alliances.”

As soon as the words passed his lips, my stomach tightened, and I tried to not let him see my reaction.

“What happened to your parents?” I glanced up at him just as a flash of pain filled his eyes.

“My mother died when I was twelve. My father lived up until three years ago before his heart finally gave out on him.”

“I’m sorry.” I was sincere. I could taste the reminder of grief on my tongue.

“What about your parents?”

“My father is still alive.” I swallowed hard as I spoke about the man I hated. “He still lives in the village where I was born, but my mother, she...” I hesitated for a second. “She passed away a long time ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Were you and her close?”

It was such a hard question to answer. My mother had loved me, but not enough to stand up to my father. She had loved me but not enough to fight for her only child. “I was.” I nodded as I bit down on my lip. “But my childhood... My father decided very early that I was going to be a Starblessed who became something more. He wanted me to be someone who would change the fate of our family.”

“And you did.” He wrapped his fingers around mine before bringing my hand to his mouth. He pressed his lips to my knuckles so gently I feared I imagined it. “You are to change more fates than just theirs.”

I thought about his words as he pressed my hand into his chest. “Swim with me.”

“What?” I chuckled and looked back to the pond.

“I didn’t bring anything.”

He stood, keeping my hand in his, and pulling me to my feet. “Come on.” He led me to the edge of the water before dropping my hand and pulling his shirt off over his head. “I promise I won’t look.”

He grinned, and the smile on his lips promised sin.

I crossed my arms and ran my thumb over the scars that were hidden beneath the fabric of my dress. “I am competing for the king’s hand and you expect me to just strip down and jump in that pond?”

“That’s exactly what I expect.” He jumped on one foot and pulled off his boot before quickly grabbing for the other. “I can order you to do so if

that's what it will take."

"And who is here to see me disobey your orders?" I cocked a brow at him even as my hands trembled. "No one."

"I don't need witnesses, Thalia. You said it yourself, I'm the king." He tucked his thumbs into the sides of his trousers and lowered them down his hips.

I couldn't force myself to look away. Not when he slipped his hand over his privates so I couldn't see or when he tossed his trousers to the side. He was completely bare before me, and I was fully dressed.

I cupped my hand over my eyes as I laughed. "You're crazy."

"Maybe," he chuckled, "but I'm fun."

I heard the splash of water, and I peeked out from under my hand to look at him. He was already waist-deep in the green water, and he beckoned me forward with the curve of his finger.

"Get in, Thalia. It feels amazing." He lifted his wet hands and ran them through his hair as he watched me. It was so hard to reconcile that the man before me was the same one who I was meant to fear.

"It's not happening." I laughed as I looked behind us to where the horse still stood. I should demand that we go back, but doing so won't get me what we need.

"No one is going to find us," he promised me, and for a moment, I wished that they would. I wished that anyone would walk through that small clearing until we were forced to stop whatever this was. "I didn't want to do this, Thalia, but as your king, I order you to get in this water."

"You're demanding." I toed off my slippers, and he smiled.

"You have no idea. Now get in here before I throw you over my shoulder and drag you in myself."

I stared at him as I slowly undid the buttons that drew a straight line from my sternum to my stomach. The dress fell open, revealing the lace undergarments I wore beneath, and I took a deep breath as his gaze darkened at the sight.

I slid one shoulder out of the fabric before allowing the other to do the same, and it took only seconds before the dress fell into a pool of fabric at my feet.

King Henrick moved deeper, the water now touching his shoulders, as he watched me. "You're beautiful, Thalia." He licked his lips, and I tried to

calm my racing heart as I kept my arms wrapped around me.

The only thought that continued to race through my mind was my scars. He was going to see my scars, and I was fearful of what he would do when he did.

“If this water is cold, I’m going to kill you.” I joked just before my toes touched the water. To my surprise, it was warm, and I groaned at the feel of it.

“You’ll have to find another reason.” He chuckled. “I wouldn’t lie to you about this.”

But he’d lie about something else. Everything else.

I sank into the water as quickly as I could, burying my arms beneath the surface, and moved toward him.

As I swam closer, I could see the way his gaze roamed over my body, lingering on every curve. I tried to ignore it, but my body reacted to his attention, and I felt a flush spreading over my skin.

I hated being this exposed in front of anyone, and I typically only allowed it with Sorin.

Because I felt safe with him.

I was not safe with King Henrick.

When I was close enough to touch him, he reached out and took my hand, pulling me close to him. His skin was warm against mine, and I felt a shiver run through me as our bodies touched.

He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me even closer, and his hard body pressed against my softness.

"That's better." His gaze dropped to my mouth just as one of his hands lowered and gripped my thigh. He tugged it forward, lifting me off my toes, and he didn’t stop until my legs were wrapped around his waist.

I could feel his breath hot against my lips as I placed my hands on his shoulders to keep my balance. His fingers dug into my thigh, pulling me tighter against him, and I bit down on my lip as I felt the hardness of him press against my sex.

His hand slipped up my back, his fingers trailing over my skin as he watched me. "I've been desperate to feel you like this," he groaned before he dipped his head forward and ran his nose along my jaw. "You are so damn perfect."

He pressed his lips so gently against my neck that I wouldn't call it a kiss. It was as if he were trying to memorize every curve of me.

I leaned my head back, allowing him better access, and he groaned as his hands continued to move over my skin.

"I'm not." I shook my head, and the water lapped at my shoulders with the movement.

His lips grazed against the base of my neck as he muttered against me. "You're wrong."

His hand touched the inside of my elbow, and I jerked involuntarily out of his touch, but it was too late. He gripped my forearm in his hand and turned it over at the surface of the water.

I steeled myself and locked down every bit of emotion that was surging through me.

"What happened?" His eyes were wide as he ran his thumb over the scar closest to my wrist.

I tried to jerk out of his hold, to hide them back beneath the depths of the water, but he refused to let go.

"It's nothing." I pressed my left hand against my scars as if I could hide them from him. "I think I've had enough swimming for today."

So much shame filled me, and it swirled and danced with my fear until I couldn't tell one from the other.

His hands tightened against me, holding on to me with a desperation that shook in his fingertips, and he stared down at me. "Thalia."

I looked over my shoulder, back to the bank, back to the comfort of my dress. King Henrick had seen my scars, and he would be foolish not to know what they were. He would be a fool if he didn't know who I was.

"Thalia, look at me." He let go of my arm and reached up to press his fingers against my jaw. He turned my head until I had no choice but to look at him.

"You don't have to tell me about this if you don't want to." His gaze was soft and pleading with me, and it made my chest ache with guilt. "I just want to be here, with you."

"It was a long time ago." The words trembled from my lips.

"Then let's leave it there for now." He dipped his head until he could catch my gaze again. "We have a lifetime to tell each other all the things we hide from everyone else."

His hand tightened on my jaw before he slowly slid it back and pressed his fingers into the back of my neck.

"Okay." I nodded my head as I watched his gaze darken with desire. But I couldn't shake off the feelings that were eating me alive.

He moved closer to me until I could feel his lips moving against mine. "I don't care what secrets you hide, Thalia. I would spend a lifetime discovering every one if you let me."

His lips pressed harder against mine, and I gasped at the feel of him.

His hand tightened on my neck as he deepened the kiss, and I lifted my arms and wrapped them around his shoulders as I pulled him toward me.

Trust me. I poured the words into the kiss.

Trust me. I begged him as my tongue ran across his lips.

I didn't know how much more I could take of this, and I needed him to trust me.

He deepened the kiss before his teeth nipped at my bottom lip, and I moaned into his mouth.

It was wrong. Everything about this felt completely and utterly wrong, but it was also exactly what I wanted from him.

I needed him to want me more than anyone else, to crave me in a way that he never would Cyra. I needed him to look at me and want to share all the pressures that were coming down on him with me so I could help ease them.

And that ate at me the most.

Everything I was doing. It felt easier when I didn't know him, when he hadn't been so kind to me.

His hand moved to my thigh, and my spine straightened as I anticipated his touch. I was so incredibly tense, but he didn't seem to notice.

His hand moved higher and higher, creeping closer to my center, and I kissed him harder to force myself not to stop him.

I dug my fingers into his hair, and I imagined that it was longer. I made myself think of nothing but Sorin as King Henrick moaned against my mouth.

His fingers touched my center, and my hips surged forward.

"Oh, gods." I moaned against his lips as a rush of pleasure flooded through me.

He groaned as his fingers moved over me.

It felt so wrong, but as I thought about Sorin in front of me, I imagined him touching me, it felt so good.

I buried my face in his shoulder, pressing my mouth against his skin as I moaned against him. His fingers pressed harder against me, pushing the thin layer of fabric against my sex, and my heart raced in my chest.

"Gods, I've been dying to touch you." He moved his fingers faster and faster until I knew there was no way I could fight off the surge of pleasure that threatened to crash inside me.

"Please," I cried out, and I didn't know what I was asking for. I felt so at war with myself, with what I wanted and what my body was begging me for.

"Yes." King Henrick breathed the word against me as his fingers pushed harder against my body, and I could no longer hold on.

I bit down on his shoulder as my body jerked forward, and I muffled the cry on my lips.

Sorin.

It was all I could think about, the only word I wished to say, and I had to bury that want deep inside me as I rode out my pleasure.

His hand tightened on my neck until it was almost painful, and he moaned against me as the waves crashed through me.

I could feel his body harden against me, and I clamped my eyes closed. I didn't want to do this. I didn't want this to go any further.

I tried not to tense up against him, but I couldn't stop it. King Henrick moved his hand away from my center and gently wrapped both of his arms around my back to hold me against him.

He didn't say a word, and I didn't know what to say. My mind was racing with a million different thoughts and excuses, but I didn't need them.

I felt him move, and I took a shuddering breath before he set me on my feet.

The water lapped at my chest as I stood, trying to find my balance, and King Henrick caught one of my hands in his.

"We should get dressed." He nodded toward the bank. "I know I told you they wouldn't, but someone really might come looking for us if we're gone too long."

I opened my mouth in pretend shock and splashed water at his chest. "You mean someone could have been watching us?"

He pulled me into him playfully and pressed a gentle kiss against my lips. "Trust me. It's the only reason I stopped." He lifted a hand out of the water and ran it along my brow. A drop of water ran down my cheek, and chill bumps broke out on my skin. "I don't want anyone else to look upon you, Thalia. Not ever, but especially not when I'm in you for the first time."

I swallowed hard as I looked up at him. He was looking at me with so much sincerity and desire, and I wanted to drop his hand and back away from him.

"Like you said." My voice shook. "We have a lifetime."

"That we do." He smiled before he leaned down and took my mouth with his again.

CHAPTER 21

SORIN

The late afternoon sun was dipping down beyond the mountain ridge in the distance, and still, there had been no word about the king and Thalia's return.

I had watched them leave by horseback shortly after my sparring session that the king had talked me into, and I hadn't been able to think straight since I saw them ride away.

That felt like hours ago.

I paced from one end of the room they gave me to the next before I would check the window again. I felt like I was going crazy, but I would never not worry about her.

It didn't matter that she was more than capable of taking care of herself. The urge to keep her safe flowed through every part of me.

Where the hell had he taken her?

Part of me had considered following after them, but I knew I would have blown everything she had been working toward. She was so close to getting the information we needed.

And we did need it.

Because I had not been able to find out any information about King Henrick's involvement with the fae kingdom.

I was ready to forget the mission entirely. To just take Thalia home where I knew she was safe and figure something else out.

But she would never go for that.

Thalia would see her mission through to the end. It didn't matter what it cost her.

It never had.

I moved away from the window and headed toward my door. I couldn't stand to pace through this room a moment longer.

Just as I was about to reach the door, it pushed open with a slow creak, and I had my dagger in my hand before I could think better of it.

Then I saw a flash of Thalia's hair as she slid through the small opening she made, and I swallowed a deep breath.

"It's you." I slid my dagger back into its sheath but started to reach for it again as soon as I saw the look on her face.

Her eyes were wide and darting over my features. She had her fingers linked with one another, and she twisted them as if she couldn't sit still.

"What happened?" My heart hammered in my chest, and I moved toward her until I could feel her skin beneath my fingertips.

She shook her head gently, but it did nothing to ease the rising panic inside me.

"What the fuck happened, Thalia?"

"My scars." Her fingers moved to her sleeve, and even though the raised lines of skin were covered by the fabric, she pressed her palm against them as if she could hide them further. "He saw my scars."

"How?" There were a million thoughts running through my mind, but I could focus on nothing except that look of fear in her eyes.

Thalia reached forward, digging her fingers into my shirt. "Touch me."

"What?" Her words caught me off guard, and I had no idea what had happened to her. "Tell me what happened."

She shook her head again, and this time, I could see the slightest tremble in her chin.

"Please, Sorin."

The way she said my name broke something inside me, and I moved forward until I could wrap both of my arms around her. I tugged her against me, as close as I could get her, and I hated that I could smell King Henrick on her skin.

"Thalia," I growled out her name without meaning too, and her gaze shuttered.

"Erase his touch." She pulled on the collar of my shirt until I was forced to lean down into her. "I only want to feel you."

Anger and jealousy unlike any I had ever felt before erupted inside me, and I slammed my mouth against hers.

I kissed her like she was the only thing keeping me alive, and she kissed me back just as desperately. My hands moved down her back, gripping her just below her ass, and she pressed up on her tiptoes just before I lifted her from the ground.

She wrapped her legs around my waist, and I pushed the long fabric of her dress up her thighs.

I clamped my eyes closed as thoughts of King Henrick doing the same with her hit me. He was dead. I didn't care what he meant to this world or the people in it. He touched her, and I wanted nothing more than to kill him for even thinking about her.

I moved us toward the bed, and as soon as my knees hit the mattress, I leaned forward, dropping her against the bed as I moved over her.

The sounds of our panting echoed off the walls around us, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

I needed to touch her, to be inside her, to remind her that she belonged to me and me alone.

"Please, Sorin." Her fingernails dug into my neck, and I drew back, my eyes locking with hers.

"Did he?" The rest of the question died on my lips. I didn't even know what I was asking, I wasn't sure I would ever want to know.

"No." She shook her head quickly. "He just touched me." Her voice trembled along with her hands against my skin. "I let him. I thought of nothing but you, but I let him."

I growled again as I leaned down and pressed my lips against hers. I nipped at her lips, jaw, and neck as I tried to control the rage inside me.

There was always a desperation inside me to feed from her, to sink my teeth into her neck, and feel her flood me from the inside out.

But it was something I would never do.

I would never take from her after everything she had been through. After the way her body had been treated as if it weren't her own.

My hand shook as I ran it down her side. Even if she had allowed King Henrick to touch her, even if she agreed, this was just another moment when it was taken away from her.

"You're with me now, Thalia. You are mine." I punctuated each word with a kiss at the base of her neck until she nodded against me. "I will erase him just as I have tried to erase everyone before him."

My hand tightened against her side, and I worried my grip was hurting her.

"Please," she begged as she arched her back and pressed her body against mine. "I'm yours."

I slid my other hand up her thigh, almost dying at the feel of her bare skin. Only a slip of fabric covered her, and I groaned as I gripped the edge of it.

It didn't matter how many times I had touched her. I would never get enough. I would never take the privilege for granted that she gave me this trust.

I lifted, putting the tiniest space between us, and my fingers moved to the buttons down the front of her dress. I quickly undid each one as she stared up at me. "Take this off." I reached down, pulling the fabric up her body until it bunched over her hips. "I want nothing between us."

She lifted her hips, and I pulled the fabric higher. I didn't stop until I had it off her completely and thrown on the ground behind me.

She was so damn perfect in front of me. Every scar that littered her body, every star mark that seemed dull in comparison to the way she was looking at me.

She reached for me, and I grabbed her hands, holding them tight in my own as I hovered over her. "Tell me you belong to me, Thalia."

I needed to hear her say it, over and over, until I didn't want to leave this room and murder that fucking king for touching her.

"I'm yours." She breathed the words out like a prayer. "I'm only yours, Sorin."

My core tightened, and a chill ran down my spine. I felt like I was going to explode from how hot her words made me feel. "Mine."

"Always." She tugged her hands out of my grip and grabbed the front of my shirt. I helped her pull it up and over my head as she pulled herself up on her elbows.

My lips crashed against hers as I tugged her bottom lip between my teeth.

I moved lower, kissing the rise of her breasts, and her fingers dug into my hair. Her nails scratched at my scalp, and I groaned against her skin.

I ran my tongue over the thin fabric of the undergarments covering her breasts, sucking her nipple into my mouth, and I loved the way her fingers twisted in my hair as she breathed out my name.

I jerked the fabric down out of my way before I ran my teeth along her skin, and her body arched into mine from beneath me.

I kissed my way down her body. Nipping at her waist as she lifted her hips from the bed. I tugged her undergarments down her legs.

She pressed her legs together as I made my way down, and I lifted my eyes up to meet hers.

"Open for me." It was part plea and part command, and either way, she did so immediately.

I moved farther down her body as she spread her legs for me. I groaned as I slid my hand between her thighs, my fingers slipping through how wet and ready she was for me.

I thrust my middle finger inside her and curled it forward as she clenched around me. Her back arched off the bed, her hips moving closer to me, and my cock throbbed at the thought of being inside her.

I pressed a kiss to the apex of her thighs, and she bit out a curse as her hips surged forward again.

I slid my other hand beneath her, cupping her ass, and I finally lowered my head and ran my tongue through her.

"Please."

I gave her what she wanted. I sucked her into my mouth as I began pumping my finger in and out of her.

"You taste so fucking good," I murmured against her.

Every muscle in my body tightened as I worked her, and I wasn't sure I would last if she kept sinking her nails into my scalp while she called out my name.

"Sorin." Her thighs tightened around me as her sex clenched down around my finger. I pushed deeper into her, and my tongue circled her clit. I sucked it into my mouth as I slid a second finger into her.

Her deep moans filled the room, and she moved her hips against my mouth. Her grip in my hair turned painful as I sucked her into my mouth, and I couldn't stop or slow down as I moved my fingers deeper inside her.

She moved her hips wildly against my hold, and I growled against her, causing her hips to jerk forward. "Fuck, Sorin." She bowed off the bed as she clamped down around me, and I didn't stop.

"Give it to me, my love. Give me what's mine."

She moaned as I kept my pace. Her thighs tightened around me, her sex pulsed around my fingers, and she stared down at me as her body fell apart. I wanted to take every ounce of pleasure I could pull from her body.

"Sorin."

I loved the way she said my name. The way it rolled off her as she fell against the bed, wrung out and satiated. But it wasn't enough.

I slid my fingers from her body and brought them up to her mouth. She opened for me immediately, sucking my fingers between her lips, and I had to fight not to close my eyes as pleasure shot through me. Her tongue lapped at my skin, cleaning her orgasm from my fingers, and I moved to my knees.

I reached down, pulling my trousers down my hips, and her gaze fell to my cock. I pumped it in my hand once, twice, before lining myself up with her.

"Look at me." I needed her eyes. I needed to remind us both that this was ours and ours alone, and I would never let it go.

I sank into her, and a low growl escaped my lips as I buried myself to the hilt.

Her fingers dug into my arms as she wrapped her legs around my waist. I ran my hands down her thighs, my grip digging into her flesh, as I started fucking her.

I stared down into her eyes as I moved inside her. Every muscle in my body was tense with the need to come as she clenched around me. "Give me another."

I moved my hand to her clit and rubbed my thumb in gentle circles. She slammed her head back against the bed and clamped her eyes closed.

Every time I looked at her, all I could feel was pure, unfiltered possession coursing through me.

She stiffened beneath me, and a cry fell from her lips. But I wanted more.

I pulled out of her before I took her hips in my hands and flipped her onto her stomach. I didn't give her time to adjust as I pushed her knees apart

and slid back inside her from behind.

I fucked her roughly, my hands on either side of her, my body flush against her. I couldn't help but rub my teeth against the back of her shoulder. I wanted to mark her. I wanted to take what was mine.

I lapped my tongue over the place I had just bit, rocking my hips harder against her. My cock slammed into her, and a harsh cry left her lips.

She moaned my name over and over, her ass lifting to meet me at every thrust, and I was so damn close.

I could see the red imprints of my teeth on her shoulder, and I wanted to bite her again.

I closed my eyes, my hands fisting into the sheets beside her. Frustration and lust coursed through me. I never wanted to leave this spot. I wanted to be wrapped in the bubble of her forever, and I could hardly swallow down that need as I ran my nose up her spine and breathed her in.

"Oh gods, Sorin." She wrapped one of her hands around mine as her body tensed around me.

I pounded into her, my mind racing with each thrust, and I wanted to see her come apart beneath me once more.

"You are so good." I groaned out the words. "Look how fucking well you take me."

Her body shook beneath me as she cried out, and I pressed my body more firmly against her as I fucked her through her orgasm.

I buried my face in her neck, my teeth raking along her skin as her body squeezed me. I became inflamed with my need for her, and I didn't care that we were in an enemy kingdom on a mission.

All that ever mattered was her.

I pulled back, my arms trembling as I pushed my hips forward. Her sex clenched around me, and my body stiffened against her.

I was so close. So fucking close.

"Look at me, my love." I gripped her chin in my hand and turned her face until she looked up at me.

Her gaze was so open and vulnerable. There were so many unsaid things written in the very depths of her dark eyes, and I wondered if the same feeling was ravaging through her as it did me.

I love you.

She'd given herself to me when she felt the most vulnerable, when she had needed someone else to hold her together, and I would never take advantage of that trust.

"You're mine," I growled as I thrust into her again. I held her gaze as my cock buried inside her, and white-hot pleasure spread throughout my body.

I didn't pull out of her. I stayed exactly where I was as I tried to catch my breath.

My arms shook as I held myself up, and it took everything inside me to slide out of her and fall to the bed at her side.

Thalia looked over at me, her gaze sleepy and at ease. Every bit of that worry that had been there earlier, that anguish, it had disappeared from her dark brown eyes as she looked at me.

"I think we should leave." Her words were soft, but they shocked me to my core. "If I don't find anything out by the celebration tomorrow night, we'll go home."

I leaned forward and pressed the softest kiss to her lips. She tasted like everything I had ever craved in this lifetime. She was everything I had ever wanted.

"Tomorrow." I pressed my forehead to hers. "We'll go home together."

CHAPTER 22

THALIA

“Your Majesty.” I bowed deeply as I entered the room, and King Henrick's gaze fell over me like a touch.

“Good evening, Thalia. Thank you for coming.”

“Of course.” I finally stood and met his eye.

He was watching me carefully, his gaze running down my body before it met my gaze. I could still remember the memory of his touch like a ghost on my skin. Sorin had taken so much of it away, but there was nothing that could wash away my shame.

“I have been thinking about you ever since we got back from the pond earlier.”

I smiled as I opened my mouth to return the sentiment, but it was a lie. I had done nothing but think about Sorin. Nothing but obsess over the way he had touched me and whispered words to me that made me feel like I could face anything.

“I’ve thought of nothing but you as well.”

King Henrick cocked his head to the side, and he studied me with his piercing eyes. “Have you?”

“Yes. Of course.” My heart stuttered in my chest. “I haven't been able to stop.”

He nodded his head as he watched me, and a chill ran down my spine. The look in his eyes was the familiar want and possessiveness I had become used to with him, but there was something else too. It was as if he was suspicious of every word I uttered.

“Sorin has been helping you prepare for your role as my queen as well?”

His name was like a shock to my system, and even though I tried to school my reaction, I knew that he could see it by the way his gaze narrowed on me.

"What?" I stumbled over the word, and he noticed.

"Don't play dumb, Thalia. It's unbecoming for such a smart girl."

He stood, and as he stepped forward, his shadow loomed over me, and the sickening churn of my stomach made me waver. My heart pounded so hard my whole body shook. "You couldn't actually believe that I wouldn't have noticed the way the two of you look at one another."

I shook my head quickly. "It's not—"

"That's exactly what it is." He circled around me slowly as if preparing to strike. "What I can't quite figure out is if he has been helping you prepare with your politics or with your mouth."

Heat rose up my face, and I shook my head. "Neither," I said the word quietly. "He hasn't been helping me with anything."

He leaned in so close that I could feel the heat of his breath against the back of my neck. "I know that he was in your room last night. It would appear the Blood kingdom's captain isn't as inconspicuous as he thinks."

My breath caught in my throat, but I still shook my head. "If he was there, I didn't know it. He must have been spying on me."

The king stopped in front of me, and his normally adoring, possessive demeanor had completely vanished. In its place was a cold, ruthless ruler who was more than capable of getting what he wanted.

"That's what I was thinking at first." He moved around me, his hand trailing around my waist. The touch was light but still menacing. "Until I could smell him against every bit of you. Until one of my guards heard you crying out his name."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"You truly had me fooled, Thalia." He stopped directly in front of me and pulled me into him until my chest pressed against his. "I would have had no idea that you used to be Gavril Achlys's whore who he fed from at his will if it hadn't been for the filthy scars on your arms."

My heart raced and my palms grew sweaty as a wave of terror filled me. My body tensed with an intensity I'd never felt before—a mix of anger and fear.

I swallowed hard, trying to force my fear down, but it was impossible. I could see Gavril's face so clearly in my mind. I could taste the air from the cell where he used to keep me.

The scars along my arms seemed to burn with the memories of him.

"I was not his whore." My voice shook even as I tried to still my courage.

"No?" King Henrick asked calmly before he reached out and snatched my wrist in his hand. I tried to fight against him, to pull my hand away, but he already jerked the sleeve of my dress up, ripping the fabric, before I could stop him.

He dropped my hand as if he were disgusted with me as he stared down at the scars.

"Once I learned the truth of you and Sorin, I thought there was no way you would let me touch you, but you really are the perfect little whore." He lifted his fingers to his mouth and slid them inside as if he could still taste me on them.

My insides burned with both shame and fury, but no matter how much my anger flamed, my shame always seemed to be stronger.

King Henrick laughed, and I had to force myself to stay where I was. I wanted to back away from him, to hide my arm and my scars far away from where he could see them.

But I refused to allow myself to do so.

"But it was those scars that gave you away. Everyone has heard the stories of the Starblessed that Gavril fed from for years. I'm a human, but if I were to feed from you as he did, would I gain power too?"

He reached his hand out to take my wrist back in his hand, but I snatched it away before he could.

"Don't touch me." Terror seized my lungs, but I forced the words from my lips. "You will never touch me again."

I straightened my spine and forced the fight that was cowering inside me to the forefront.

His eyes narrowed and darkened, and all I could see was his cruelty staring back at me.

"I don't think you'll have much choice." He reached out for me again, but this time, I shot my power from my hands. I did so in pure panic, and I had no control over what I hit or who I hurt.

I just knew that I couldn't let him touch me. I refused to let him take me. But no power escaped my fingers.

Panic ensnared me, locking its teeth into my flesh and refusing to let go. "What did you do?"

He smiled his cruel smile. Every bit of the king he pretended to be disappearing.

"This room." He waved to the walls around us, and I could feel them closing in around me. "They are warded against your magic. It's useless here."

My mouth fell open as I stared at him, and my hands trembled at my sides.

"Did you really think that you could kill the prince and King Riven wouldn't have the same blood magic he possessed?"

My blood ran cold at his words. "How?"

"He drank from his son until he was on the brink of death." His smile was sinister. "He took so much from his son that the magic he had obtained had become his own to wield in whatever way he wants. He is not as strong as Gavril, but it's enough to raze kingdoms to the ground if he so chooses."

I felt the blood drain from my face and a cold sweat broke out over my body.

This couldn't be happening.

"But he will need more power. Our alliance depends on it. So he will feed from whatever willing Starblessed I choose as my wife."

I took a step back from him, and he stepped forward. My mind told me to run, but instead, I reached beneath the slit of my dress and clutched the dagger that had been belted to my thigh.

I pulled it in front of me, holding it toward the king, and King Henrick's smile only turned more wicked.

"There she is." He ran his hand over his jaw. "There's the warrior they told stories of."

"Do not come a step closer." My voice sounded strong even though I could feel the tremor of terror in my chest.

He didn't listen. He took another step toward me, his gaze unwavering as he studied me. "You are to be my queen, remember? I will touch you anytime I please."

The tip of my dagger shook in my grip.

"That is never going to happen."

"You forget, my dear. I am the king, and you don't have a choice in the matter."

My heart beat faster as his words sank in.

My vision became cloudy, and I blinked as his face began to blur from my vision, and all I could see was Gavril. Gavril wrapping his bruising fingers around my bicep and pulling me toward him. Gavril's mouth latching on to my arm, draining me again and again.

My blood ran cold as I could no longer differentiate the difference between the past and present.

I had promised myself that I would never allow myself into this position again. I would never give someone this much power over me, but I had failed.

"Sorin." His name was a cry on my lips.

King Henrick's face twisted in anger at the sound of Sorin's name. He lunged forward, his hand reaching out to grab me, and I thrust the dagger forward, hoping to defend myself.

But it was too late.

King Henrick's hands closed around my throat, choking me and cutting off my air supply. My vision started to fade as I struggled to breathe.

I could still see Gavril's face in place of his. I could still feel the touch of Gavril's hand as it wrapped around my throat.

"Don't say his fucking name again," the king whispered harshly against my cheek as his hand tightened on my throat. "You are mine."

I slammed my hand forward, the dagger still clutched between my fingers.

The blade pierced through his clothes and into his skin, causing him to wince in pain. But I didn't stop there. With all my strength, I pushed the dagger deeper into his flesh, causing blood to pour out from the wound.

The king stumbled backward, clutching his abdomen in agony. His eyes widened in shock as he looked up at me, blood oozing around my blade. "You... you dare..." he gasped before he took a shaky step away from me.

I let the blade go. Let it fall from my trembling hand where it was still lodged in Henrick's abdomen, and I panted as the adrenaline raced through every part of me.

I blinked hard, trying to shake off the feel of the ghost of Gavril from my skin, and I looked at King Henrick.

"Take her!" he commanded, his voice filled with the pain from my blade.

Four guards stepped forward from the entrance of the room and rushed toward me, from every side.

They grabbed my arms, lifting and pulling me toward the wall. I struggled against them, but it was no use.

I could feel the wards against my magic around my body. I could feel the magic snapping against my skin. I could feel it clawing its way around me and trying to escape.

But nothing I did could break them. Nothing I did could free myself as my panic threatened to consume me.

I pulled against the guards as they tied my wrists against the stone wall, and I jerked my legs, kicking and screaming.

King Henrick pulled my dagger from his body and dropped it to the ground with a loud clang before he moved toward me. He clenched his jaw, and a vein thrummed in his temple, his face contorted with rage. His left hand was firmly pressed against the wound in his abdomen, and the crimson of his blood had already begun pooling on the floor.

I struggled against the guards, wanting to get away from him.

"We will marry in two days." He ran his free hand over his face. "That gives me time to break your spirit and your friend."

My heart dropped in fear.

"You will not touch him."

The king's gaze flashed in surprise at the venom in my voice.

"I will do as I please, Thalia. I've already told you."

He pushed up against me so quickly that I didn't have time to react. His body pressed against mine, and I could feel the warmth of his blood bleeding into my dress.

He lifted his hand and gripped my chin, squeezing me tightly between his fingers and forcing me to look at him. Pain laced through me until my jaw ached.

"You'll never break him." I tried to jerk my face out of his grasp, but his fingers were bruising in their hold.

"I will." He nodded and brought his mouth so close to me that I feared he was going to kiss me. His gaze fell to my lips before he brought them back up to meet my eyes. "And I have just the thing to do it."

CHAPTER 23

SORIN

My stomach was in knots, my palms were damp with sweat, and my heart raced as I paced the room, unable to settle my nerves.

It had been close to twenty hours since Thalia had left my room yesterday.

I had tried to keep my mind busy with working out every detail of how we would leave, but my every thought kept coming back to her.

She had asked for twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours before we left for home. One more day for her to try to get the information we needed.

And I had reluctantly agreed.

But I regretted it.

King Henrick was hosting a dinner, and as I grabbed a glass from a passing servant, I knew I would see Thalia at any moment. Cyra was already in the room, and she smiled at me as she passed.

I trusted her just about as much as I trusted everyone else in this kingdom.

I took a sip from the glass, trying to calm my nerves, before I felt a presence behind me.

"Captain."

I turned to see King Henrick behind me. He moved to my side, and seemed to assess the room as I was.

"King Henrick." I bowed my head slightly, but he wasn't paying me any attention.

"Would you like to try her?" He nodded toward Cyra, and my gut twisted with disgust.

"I have no interest in that, Your Highness," I said firmly, keeping my voice level.

He chuckled as if he found my resistance amusing. "Most men would jump at the chance to bed a woman like Cyra."

"She is competing for your hand," I replied, my eyes flickering to the entrance of the room as I searched for Thalia.

"Is she?" He cocked his head as he studied her, and a wave of nervousness washed over me. "She is quite skilled, you know." King Henrick continued, ignoring my comment. "Not in the ways our trials showed, but in things that matter in the dark of night."

"I am not interested," I repeated, my patience wearing thin.

The king's eyes narrowed, and I could see the anger building in his gaze. "I suppose not. If you were the one who taught Thalia how to do that little thing with her mouth then I doubt there is much that Cyra can show you."

My blood ran cold at his words. He knew.

He fucking knew.

"Excuse me?" I felt a pang of jealousy, but more than anything, fear ate at me.

Where was she?

King Henrick leaned in closer to me as if we were sharing a secret between friends. "Oh, don't play dumb, Captain. You know exactly what I'm talking about." He chuckled darkly. "I thought the way she screamed my name in pleasure was impressive, but it's so much sweeter when she's screaming it in pain."

I couldn't stop myself as my hand shot forward and buried in the collar of his shirt. I jerked him toward me, and I wanted to murder him as he smiled.

"What have you done to her?" I demanded, my voice low and dangerous.

I could hear the sound of his guards charging toward us, but I didn't care.

"Where is she?"

The king shrugged nonchalantly even as I lifted him so close to me he was standing on the tips of his toes.

"She's not your concern anymore, Sorin." He looked over my shoulder, but I didn't dare take my attention away from him. "She may have been

deceiving me all this time, but I've still decided to make her my queen."

My grip tightened on his shirt, and I pulled him closer. "I'll kill you if you don't tell me where she is," I snarled.

King Henrick laughed, his breath hot against my face. "You're in no position to make threats, Captain. You forget who holds the power here." He motioned to the guards who now surrounded us. "You are now a prisoner in my kingdom. Your fate is in my hands."

I gritted my teeth and took his throat in my hand. I squeezed until there was no mistaking the fear in his eyes.

"Release him!" one of the guards shouted, and I could hear the sound of swords being unsheathed.

I wanted to kill him. Every fiber of my being was screaming for me to end his life right then and there. But I had to be smart. I had to find Thalia before I could do anything else.

"Tell me where she is." I hardly recognized my own voice or my strength as I started to cut off his air supply.

"Here she is now." He nodded toward the entrance, and I turned to look behind me.

My breath caught in my throat at the sight of her. She was wearing an emerald gown, and her hair was pulled back in an intricate braid.

Her eyes were dull and lifeless as she stared straight ahead. Then I saw him walk out directly behind her.

King Riven walked at her back, in sync with her every step, and there was a wicked smile on his face when his gaze met mine.

They moved farther into the room, the crowd of people that had been watching me with their king stepping out of their way, and I watched as Thalia tried to hide the way she winced in pain with every step.

I felt my anger boiling in my veins as she got closer. The bruises on her neck were visible, and I could see the fear in her eyes.

This wasn't my Thalia. They had stripped her down, and even though I could see in her eyes that she no longer felt her strength, they were all fools if they thought they could take it away.

"So glad you could join us, Thalia." King Henrick's voice echoed in the room even in my hold. "You look stunning tonight."

"Don't fucking speak to her." I couldn't control the fury in my voice, and that only seemed to make King Riven smile harder.

"I suppose you already know King Riven." King Henrick nodded in the man's direction.

"Of course." King Riven narrowed his eyes on me, and for the first time since he entered the room, I noticed the red ring around his irises. "How is my traitorous son?"

"Dead." I pulled King Henrick farther in front of me so no part of my back was exposed to Riven. "Thalia there slit his throat on the battlefield."

Thalia didn't react, her eyes fixed forward and never meeting mine.

King Riven's smile grew even wider. "That was the only son who was worth anything to me. The one you serve on your knees is the one I'm referring to." He stepped closer, and the movement forced Thalia closer as well. I could feel the tension in my muscles as my grip on King Henrick tightened. "Oh, how it will upset him to know that I have both his little whores in my possession."

"Do not call her that," I growled, and I could see the fear in Thalia's eyes growing more intense.

"Why not?" He raised his hand and ran the back of it down her cheek, and she jerked away from his touch. "In every capacity I've ever known her, that is what she has been."

I couldn't think past his words, past the terror on Thalia's face. I dropped King Henrick's weight from my hand, and I didn't allow anyone the time to react.

I pulled one of my daggers from its sheath, and I didn't hesitate to let the blade fly from my fingers. Thalia's eyes barely flickered as it skimmed past her shoulder and lodged into the chest of King Riven.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion as I watched King Riven jerk back away from Thalia. But it was then that I saw that her hands were tied behind her with a piece of metal.

"Guards!" King Henrick howled in fury.

I counted at least eleven men running toward me, but I didn't care. I dodged the first three, and I didn't pause as I rammed into the next.

One managed to grab my shoulder and the other used his shield to try and knock me off my feet. I retaliated with a kick to the man's knee, and he fell to the floor. I turned quickly and threw my elbow into the other's temple.

My gaze flew back to Thalia where she was struggling against King Riven as he pulled her toward him.

Blood seeped from his chest, but he hardly seemed to notice.

If he had blood magic, he could disappear with her at any moment.

I refused to allow that to happen.

Another guard ran toward me, and I lifted another dagger and lodged it into the side of his neck before he could lay a finger on me. With a sickening gurgle, the man fell to the floor.

"Stop!" King Riven held his own blade in his hand, and he was staring at me with wide eyes. But all I could see was his blood magic staring back at me.

"If you come any closer, she dies." He moved the dagger to Thalia's neck, and I could taste bile rising in my throat.

"You're weak." I took another step in their direction, and his gaze darted around the room. "You couldn't handle a Starblessed on your own. You needed to restrain her?"

"He's warded the castle." They were the first words to pass Thalia's lips, and my chest tightened at how broken they sounded. "He has it warded against magic."

Which meant that was the only reason they had her. He was doing everything in their power to make her helpless to them.

"You fucking coward." I hissed the insult through my teeth.

"Coward!" He bared his teeth, and his grip on Thalia tightened. "Both my kingdom and this one will be unstoppable. Not you nor Evren will be able to stop me, and I will destroy you all."

At the mention of Evren's name, I saw fear mixed with anger in Thalia's eyes. It didn't matter how fearful she was. She would always do whatever it took to protect the people she loved.

With a loud roar, I charged forward with every bit of strength I could muster. It didn't matter that the guards were still advancing on me, I wouldn't allow a single one of them to stop me.

My shoulder collided with King Riven's chest, lodging my dagger further into him, and he immediately released Thalia from his grip as he gasped for breath.

She stumbled away, still restricted with her arms behind her, but her foot shot out and kicked one of the guards who tried to grab for her.

More guards were now closing in, and I pulled out another dagger in one hand while my other reached for Thalia.

"Sorin!" she cried out in alarm. "You need to go. You need to warn Evren."

I didn't consider answering her. If she thought for a second that I would leave her here, she was a fool. I would let the entire world burn before I would choose any of them over her.

I managed to get us near the door, but a red spark of power filled King Riven's hand. I caught sight of it too late, and he was already pushing it out of himself and toward us.

It was coming toward her.

I tried to jerk her behind me, but her body slammed into one of the guards. It was chaos, and I didn't have time to think. There was no strategy, no plan of war.

This was just her and I against everyone else, and there was only one thing I could do.

I shot forward, moving my body in front of hers, and I barely saw the magic before a sharp pain cut through my side.

My entire body jerked back as I heard Thalia scream, and I nearly lost my balance. Pain unlike I had ever felt before seared through my chest, and it was hard to think past it.

Black bled into my vision, and I turned to face Thalia. To help get her out. The look of terror in her eyes was the last thing I saw.

CHAPTER 24

THALIA

Sorin's body slumped, and I had never felt such rage or fear in my life. Not even when I had been locked away by Gavril. Nothing.

I tried to catch his weight against my body, but my hands were still restrained behind my back. I did little to soften the blow of his fall before his body slumped completely on the floor.

I could feel my magic thrumming inside of me, begging to get out, but even more so, I could feel the oppressive ward of the blood magic bearing down on me. It put a sickly-sweet taste in my mouth as if the ward was touching every part of me, stripping me of my strength and my magic.

One of the guards grabbed my wrist restraint from behind me, and he jerked harshly until I thought it would fall. I slammed back against him, my body barely being held up by his, and I cursed as he tried to drag me from the room.

"No!" I screamed.

I wouldn't leave Sorin. There was no way I was going to leave him behind with these cruel men.

"You need to feed from her." The sound of King Riven's voice made my stomach turn, and my eyes darted to where he still lay on the floor. Bright red blood puddled beneath him, and I could see the life draining from his eyes.

I wished I would have been able to kill him the same day I took Gavril's life.

I didn't enjoy killing anyone, not in war or otherwise, but I desperately wanted to see the last bit of life drain from his face.

"You need to feed from her now. Who knows if there are any others from Evren's court hiding in your kingdom."

King Henrick stepped toward me, and I struggled against the guard who still had a firm grip on me. I kicked and swung my arms, but nothing I did broke his hold.

I would not let him feed from me. I would rather die than let any of them feed from me ever again.

"Undo her restraints." King Henrick ordered as he stepped closer to me. "I'm going to have to cut her, and I fear if I do it on her neck, I'll kill her before I can get all the power out."

A whimper escaped my mouth, and I hated the sound. I hated how weak they had forced me to be, but I couldn't stop it.

My whole body trembled, and I feared my knees would buckle beneath me.

But my gaze flew back to Sorin. His eyes were closed and blood marred the side of his shirt. But I could still see the shallow rise and fall of his chest. Still alive. He was injured, but he was still alive.

I felt the guard behind me working on my restraints, and I tried to come up with a plan in my mind. But the panic clouded everything.

I needed to get us out of this castle, and I needed to get to Kalen. I had no idea where he was. His only communication was with Sorin, and I didn't know if I would be able to find him. Even if I was able to get us out of this castle, I didn't know how far we could travel. I didn't know if Sorin would make the trip before the injury to his side became too much.

Tears raced down my cheeks, and every part of me trembled as I stared ahead at King Henrick. One of his guards handed him a small blade, and he ran it over the edge of his thumb as his gaze traveled over the length of me.

"This could have been far less painful." His gaze met mine, and the guard released my wrist only long enough to grip it back in his hand.

He held it out to his king, and I hated the way it shook in front of him.

"The thought of having my own queen as a prisoner doesn't sit well with me, Thalia, but I will do what I must to protect my kingdom."

"I am not your queen."

He had a sad smile on his face as he took my hand in his. He was so cold, nothing like the king I had come to know, and I hated how foolish I had been.

He lifted the knife closer and closer toward my wrist, and I felt like a wild animal backing up in its cage, trying to get away from his touch.

"Please don't," I begged. I fucking begged him not to do this, and his gaze narrowed slightly at the sound of terror in my voice.

He lifted the sleeve of my dress, revealing the scars that were already littered across my skin, and he seemed to study them for a long moment.

"It will only last for a little while." He pressed the blade against my skin, and I tried to take a deep breath.

But no matter what I did, I couldn't swallow it. I grasped for it, clawed for anything to help calm my racing heart, but the panic rose and rose inside of me.

Anger and fear invaded me until I feared they would destroy everything that I was, and I couldn't take it any longer. The shrill, raw sound that escaped my throat was unlike anything I had ever heard before, and it echoed through the walls, bouncing off the hard surfaces and ripping from me without my control.

An invisible pressure bore down on me, the force bearing its weight upon my chest so that each breath was an effort and I could feel it reverberating in my throat. My skin prickled with fear as I frantically tried to push it out of me, beads of sweat forming on my forehead as I forced and strained until finally, with a seismic crack, the dam broke.

That oppressive, cloying feeling that was pressing down on my skin disappeared, and a power like I'd never experience before surged through my body. Warmth spread across my skin as I felt it covering every inch of me.

My magic felt like chaos, ripping through every pore.

I screamed as the magic swelled through me, my body jolting forward. The guard holding me stumbled back, his grip falling from me as if I had burned him.

King Henrick's eyes widened in shock and fear as my magic erupted, throwing him back against the wall with a force that made the stone crack beneath him. The other guards cried out in alarm, scrambling to get away from me as I unleashed my power.

It was like nothing I had ever felt before, a flood of pure energy that threatened to consume me entirely. I could feel it coursing through my

veins, burning away the pain and fear and anger that had been suffocating me just moments before.

A swarm of guards rushed toward me, but the fear in their eyes was like fuel to the fire inside me. I lunged forward, my hand glowing with otherworldly energy.

They attempted to dodge, but they weren't quick enough. My magic hit them, and they were thrown back as if they weighed nothing.

One of them hit the ground with a sickening crunch, but I didn't feel any remorse. Only the power inside me, urging me to keep going.

I launched myself forward, my eyes locked on Sorin's still form. I could see the wound on his side now, gaping and dark, and I knew time was running out. I couldn't let him die here, not like this.

The guards tried to stop me, but they were no match for my magic. I tore through them like they were made of paper, each blow sending them flying across the room.

My hand was still glowing with magic and I could feel the power inside me growing stronger with every passing moment. It was like a wildfire, raging through my veins and burning away everything in its path.

I reached Sorin's side, my heart pounding in my chest. He was so still, and I knew that I had to act fast.

I placed my hand over his wound, pouring every ounce of my magic into him. The wound glowed beneath my fingers, but it didn't stop the flow of blood.

He groaned, but his eyes still didn't open.

I needed to get him out of here.

With a furious determination, I pulled Sorin's body forward until he was sitting. He groaned again, the angle making his injury hurt worse. He blinked his eyes open, but he looked as if he had been drugged.

"I need you to stand." My voice shook. "Please just help me get you up."

Sorin started to look around us, but I placed my thrumming hand on his cheek and brought his gaze back to meet mine.

"Stand. Please, Sorin. For me."

His legs shifted, and I pulled on his arms, trying to lift him toward me. He was so heavy, and his body felt like dead weight even as he tried to help me.

It took us far too long to get him to his feet, and when I finally wrapped his arm over my shoulders and bore the weight of him against me, I could feel my power draining.

I pushed us toward the door, Sorin barely able to lift his own feet, and I cursed under my breath.

The guards had recovered from my initial attack, and they were closing in on us fast. I could hear their footsteps pounding against the stone floor, their shouts echoing through the hallway. Sorin's weight was becoming too much for me to bear, but I refused to let him go.

I stumbled forward with each step, my magic flickering and fading as I poured everything I had into keeping us moving. Sorin's breaths were becoming more and more ragged, and his skin was growing paler with each passing second.

"We're almost there," I gasped out, my voice hoarse with exertion. "Almost out of this place."

My hand dug into his side, and my arms shook against his weight.

"Come on," I urged Sorin as I pushed us toward the door I could see just ahead of us.

The door was our only chance. I knew that if we could just get through it, we might have a chance at survival.

But just as we were about to reach the door, a group of guards appeared in front of us, blocking our path.

I could feel Sorin's body growing heavier against mine, and I knew we were running out of time. I had to do something, and fast.

Gritting my teeth, I summoned every last bit of magic within me and released it in a wave of energy. But not an ounce of it touched the guards. Instead, flames licked from my fingertips and spread across the ground in front of us.

It was enough to give us the opening we needed, and we made a break for the door as smoke started filling the air.

I could hear Sorin's breathing growing shallower with each passing moment, the smoke only making things worse, and I knew we had to get him out of here before it was too late.

The air was thick with the heavy scent of burning wood and the crackling of fire. We stumbled out of the castle, coughing and gasping for

air, and I watched in horror as the fire grew. Flames were visible from every window, and I knew we had no time to waste.

I started dragging Sorin away from the destruction, his feet dragging as he struggled to keep up.

"Stop them!"

I could hear the screams from behind me, but I didn't slow down for even a second. I led us toward the stables where King Henrick had taken me only the day before, and every step seemed heavier than the one before.

We finally made it to the stables, and I quickly led Sorin to a horse, ignoring the whinnies and snorts of the other animals around us. The sound of the fire was deafening as it consumed the castle, and the animals could sense the danger.

The danger that my hands had created.

Sorin's breathing was labored and weak. I pulled away from him slightly, my hand hovering over his wound.

"We have to get out of here," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "Please, Sorin. Just hold on a little longer then I can heal you."

He didn't say anything, and I worried it would have taken too much strength to do so.

I lifted one of his hands onto the saddle, and his fingers tightened around the leather.

"This is going to hurt." I told him something he already knew.

I helped him lift his left foot, shoving his boot into the stirrup, and he groaned so loudly that the horse spooked a little. But I pushed him as hard as I could until his body slumped over on top of the horse.

I swung myself up onto the horse behind him and gathered the reins. I barely fit with the size of his body in front of me, but I held tightly to the reins with one hand and to him with the other. The horse whinnied and pawed at the ground, eager to be away from the chaos behind us.

I urged the horse forward, and we galloped out of the stables as fast as we could. The wind whipped through my hair, and my heart pounded in my chest.

I didn't know where we were going or in what direction to head, but I kicked my feet into the horse and led us faster and faster away from what lay behind us.

CHAPTER 25

THALIA

We had to stop. We rode for what felt like hours, galloping across the countryside and into the forest as the sun disappeared from the sky.

Sorin's weight was becoming too much for me to bear, but I refused to let him go. "We need to stop," I finally gasped out, my voice hoarse with exhaustion. "Sorin, can you hear me? We need to stop and rest."

There was no response from him, and I could feel the panic rising in my chest. I pulled on the reins, bringing the horse to a stop deep in the woods.

I slid off the horse, barely able to stand on my own two feet. Sorin was still slumped over the horse, and I pressed my hand against his forehead, feeling the heat emanating from his body.

I led the horse forward, stepping over rocks and branches until we reached a small overhanging cut out from the stone.

Moss clung to the rock, and I could see that there was a small trickle of water coming from a nearby stream. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough for us to survive the night.

I helped Sorin down from the horse, his body still limp against mine. I laid him down on the soft bed of moss and dirt, and I immediately went to work on his wound. His breaths were so shallow that I had to watch carefully to see the rise and fall of his chest.

I dug deep into my reserves of magic, pulling out every thread of power I could muster. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, reaching for the magic inside of me. It felt weak and tired, drained from the effort of keeping us both alive.

"Shit." I shook out my hands and slowly pulled his shirt away from the wound. He was still bleeding, but the flow was much slower now.

I lifted the skirts of my dress and drew the small dagger that was strapped to my thigh. I dug the tip into his tunic and ripped it through the fabric.

His bare chest came into view, revealing the wound that started at his side and seemed to be seeping across his chest and abdomen. Red streaks crawled under his skin, but it wasn't blood.

It was the touch of blood magic.

My stomach turned at the sight of it.

I started to clean the wound, using the water from the nearby stream to wash away the blood. I was careful to be gentle, but even so, Sorin groaned in pain.

"I'm sorry," I whispered as I continued to work. "I'm so sorry."

The wound was even deeper than I originally thought.

I could see the muscles move under his skin as he breathed, the wound stretching and contracting with every inhale and exhale. I knew I had to be careful not to puncture any vital organs or cause more damage.

I took a deep breath and focused all my energy on the wound. I summoned every last bit of healing magic that I had left within me, feeling the familiar warmth spread through my body.

I placed my hands on the wound, closing my eyes and channeling the magic into Sorin's body. I felt the heat and energy flow through my hands and into his skin, his body shuddering under my touch.

But his wound didn't respond.

Blood magic was one of the most dangerous and unpredictable types of magic, and it appeared that my own magic had no weight to reverse the effects.

And Sorin was going to die because of it.

Anger flickered inside me, but I couldn't hold on to it long enough for the regret not to take over. Remorse over everything I had done, over never loving him the way he deserved to be loved.

"Please, Sorin." I pleaded with him. "Please don't leave me."

I pressed my forehead against his chest, feeling the rise and fall of his breathing slow with each passing moment.

This was the exact reason I had tried so hard to push him away. I knew that losing him would kill me. It would rip away every part of me that I had left, and I wouldn't survive this world without him.

I opened my eyes, feeling the desperation and the anger rise like a tide within me. I stared down at the dagger that I was still clinging to in my hand.

I had promised myself that I would never let it happen again. No matter the reason, I didn't care about the cost.

I would give anything to save Sorin.

I would give anything for him to open his eyes long enough for me to tell him how foolish I had been. That I had never been so fearful to love someone the way that I did him.

I didn't let myself think too long about what I was about to do. Fear would creep its way in if I did, and I had no room for it.

Instead, I lifted the blade and pressed it against my wrist. I didn't dare close my eyes as it cut through my skin, slicing open one of my old scars. Blood immediately rose from the wound, running down my arm and dripping onto the mossy ground.

I lifted my hand to Sorin's mouth, smearing the blood across his lips. His head moved toward my hand, his lips pressing against my skin.

"Please, Sorin," I begged him. "Feed."

I lifted my wrist to his mouth, pressing my wound into his lips. I reached for his hand with my other and squeezed it, holding on to any part of him that I could.

Even as he lay before me dying, he was what gave me strength.

It was him that would always save me. Even in this moment, it was him.

His hand twitched in mine as my blood dripped into his mouth, and he groaned softly before his lips closed around my wrist.

Panic rose inside me, nightmares of my past threatening to take over, but then Sorin's heavy eyes blinked open and he looked to me.

There was so much pleading in them.

"Feed from me." I pressed my wrist harder against his mouth until his teeth finally sank into my skin. So much love, even in the face of death.

He knew.

He knew what he had done to me, what he was doing to me now.

I didn't let go of his hand, and he didn't let go of mine. I took a deep breath, preparing myself for the searing pain I knew would come with him feeding from me, but it didn't come.

Instead, it was as if I could feel him over every part of me. The scent of him invaded my senses, and the memory of the taste of his skin was all I could taste.

My body became flushed with want and even as he drew my blood into his mouth, all I could think about was what he felt like when he ran his hands down the length of my body, the way he worshipped me like I was the only god he would ever need.

I was overwhelmed with the feeling and the memories, and I couldn't separate them from what I knew to be true.

The pain in my wrist was dull and distant, and it didn't compare to the way my body burned with my need for him. I felt Sorin pull away from me, blood dripping from his mouth and running down his chin and neck. His skin was already healing, the shredded flesh knitting back together.

But I wasn't ready for him to stop.

"More." The word slipped from my lips.

A heavy pressure was building inside me, my body throbbing and aching under the weight of it.

Sorin's eyes widened in surprise as he heard the desperation in my voice. He hesitated for a moment before lowering his head to my wrist again. His tongue ran over the length of the cut there, cleaning off the blood, before he pressed his lips against my skin.

"Thalia," he whispered my name, and it was overwhelming. I couldn't help but moan as pleasure shot through my body. My fingers tightened around his.

My mind was consumed with images of Sorin, of the way he looked when he was lost in pleasure, the way his muscles tensed and flexed beneath my touch. I wanted him more than I had ever wanted anything in that moment, and the thought of losing him was unbearable.

"I love you, Sorin." My breathing became shallow and ragged, my skin flushed with heat.

"What?"

I felt Sorin's fingers tighten around mine as he lifted his head to look at me. The shock on his face was replaced by desire, the look in his eyes the

same as he had been looking at me for years, and for the first time ever, I didn't try to shut it out.

He pulled me to him, my body falling flush against his. His lips were on mine before I could move away, claiming me as his.

"You're hurt," I murmured against his mouth.

"I don't fucking care." He buried his hand in my hair and pulled me closer to him. "Say it again."

The wound on my wrist stung but was nothing compared to the fire that burned inside me.

"I love you." I said the words that I had been hiding from both of us for years.

"Gods." He gripped the back of my neck and pulled me forward until my forehead pressed against his. "I have waited a lifetime, Thalia."

He kissed me again, not giving me a moment to even think about what we were doing.

As our lips met, I could feel my entire body being consumed by everything that I had been holding back for so long. It was like a wildfire, burning through me and leaving nothing but pure passion in its wake. Sorin's hands roamed over my body, his touch igniting every nerve ending within me.

We would have to deal with the aftermath of what we had done, but it would have to wait. At that moment, nothing mattered except him and I.

His lips trailed down my neck, and I moaned softly, my fingers tangling in his hair. I needed him.

"Sorin," I whispered his name as I settled harder against him, my legs moving to either side of his thighs. I could feel how hard he was beneath me, and I knew that he needed this as badly as I did. "I thought I was going to lose you."

"I love you, Thalia." The words filled me with warmth and sparked an even bigger need inside me. "I'm sorry you had to do that." He ran his finger over my wrist, just below the cut. "I would rather die than make you give any more of yourself than you already have."

I shook my head because he was wrong. "I'm yours."

I stared up at him, and the growl that ripped from his throat was startling. "You are mine."

His fingers buried into me until I feared I would wear his mark permanently on my skin.

My fingers tightened in his hair, my hips grinding against him as I struggled to keep myself from falling apart.

His hands moved to my thighs and gathered the skirts of my dress quickly up to my hips. "No one else will ever touch you again. I don't care if the entire world is burning before you. You are done giving yourself for the sake of everyone else."

His hands skimmed over my hips, and they shot forward against him. I craved his touch, was desperate for him to give me more.

I needed him.

"Fuck," he hissed in my ear before I felt his hand slip through the wetness between my legs.

"Sorin." My hand tightened in his hair as I ground against him. I moved my hands to his pants, and I felt my stomach lurch when I realized that his clothes were just as shredded as the rest of him.

"No one else, Sorin. I'm yours."

I pulled him from his trousers and ran my hand up and down the length of him. He groaned under my touch, and his hand on me seemed to move harder and faster.

He moved back to my hips, lifting me up slightly before he lined himself up with me and slid inside.

"I don't want to hurt you." I ran my hand down his side before I pressed my lips against his chest.

"Do your fucking worst, my love." He wrapped a hand around the back of my neck and pulled me down until he was completely buried inside me.

My fingers dug into his shoulders, and I felt the burning inside me, threatening to take over.

"Please." I buried my face in his neck as I began to rock against him. His hips matched my rhythm until he seemed to lose the hold on his control. He moved deeper and harder with every stroke. One of his hands was firm on my neck while the other moved in small circles against my clit.

I began to move faster, my body desperate for release. I could feel my body tensing around him, and I never wanted to let him go.

I wanted to live in this moment with him forever, just the two of us with no one else in the world for us to face.

"Sorin." I threw my head back as my body trembled.

"Tell me again." His growl reverberated through my skin, and I knew his control was waning. "Tell me that you fucking love me."

"I love you." The pressure was unbearable, my body on fire, and only desperate for more. "I love no one but you, Sorin."

"Come for me." His voice was rough and filled with need.

He moved faster, pounding into me until I could feel the orgasm ripping through my body. I moved against him, my muscles tightening as he continued to fill me.

"Yes, that's it." He whispered the words into my ear before he pulled my hips down and pressed his lips against mine.

"Sorin." It was all I could say, the only thing I could think as I felt myself shattering.

"I'm here." His voice was strained, and his movements became rougher. "I've got you, Thalia."

His words ripped apart the last ounce of control I had left. They shredded me in the best possible way, and my orgasm ripped through my body in a way I didn't think was possible.

"Thalia," he groaned against my ear as his hips slammed against me once more. I could feel him filling me, both of us lost in the pleasure of one another, and I clung to him with a desperation that I never allowed anyone.

CHAPTER 26

SORIN

I startled awake and looked around me. Thalia was lying at my side, her arm draped across my waist, and her breathing soft and even.

But something was wrong.

The sun had risen a couple hours ago, and we should have already been on our way. But both of us needed the rest before our journey, and if I was being honest, I didn't want to let her go.

After we left this place, the moment we were stuck in, we would have to face every decision we had made, and I feared what those consequences would be.

I sat up and looked around quickly. It was quiet, the only sounds coming from the woods and the horse who drank slowly from the stream.

I scanned the line of the woods. I didn't see anything that drew my attention.

I looked down at Thalia and leaned down to press a kiss against her shoulder. Her skin was warm and soft, and I didn't want to leave her.

I moved carefully, my muscles protesting and screaming at me from the night on the hard ground. Feeding from Thalia had stopped the curse the blood magic had splayed my side open with, but it didn't heal me completely. Only time and rest would do that.

I pressed my hand to the wound as I climbed to my feet.

I had only taken six steps away from her when I heard the soft sound of a twig snapping under someone or something's foot.

I dropped to a crouch, scanning the area quickly until my gaze slammed into a pair of brown eyes staring back at me.

"Over here," Kalen shouted, and I gasped down a harsh breath as I looked over his shoulder.

Evren stepped into view, his black leathers covering his body, and I saw the relief on his face the moment he saw me.

"Where's Thalia?" They were the first words out of his mouth, and I could hear the panic in them.

I wasn't the only one in our kingdom who loved her, although Evren looked at her like she was a sister. He and Adara still loved her with everything they had.

"I'm here." She sat up with a groan, and Evren's gaze darted past me.

"How did you find us?" I looked around us. If Evren was able to find us this easily, then that meant many others would have been able to as well.

I had been only partly conscious during most of our travel, and I knew that covering our tracks was the furthest thing from Thalia's mind.

"Kalen." He nodded toward our spy. "He sent word that King Henrick was going to choose Thalia as his queen. I thought it might be time for me to come, but when I arrived, the castle was in flames."

I looked back at Thalia as she stood, and there was no denying the soot that soiled the bottom inches of her dress.

"The entire castle?" Thalia wrapped her arms around herself, and even though she saved us, even though we both knew what those cruel kings were planning to do with her, I could still spot the guilt in her eyes.

"To the ground." Evren cocked his head slightly and studied her. "But there were a few casualties outside of the guards and my father."

"He's dead?" I asked as I moved toward Thalia and took her hand in mine.

Evren simply nodded, and Thalia's hand trembled in mine.

"I'm sorry, Evren." Thalia pushed her hair out of her face. "As much as I wanted him dead, he was still your father."

"Don't ever apologize for him." There was a fire in Evren's voice and in his gaze as he stared at her. "He deserved far worse than death, and we both know it."

"And King Henrick?" I asked when I could feel the ghosts of Thalia's past eating at her.

"He's alive." Evren looked over to Kalen. "But we have him in custody. Turns out the human kingdom has no interest in supporting the war of their

king. Are you all right?"

He was speaking to us both, but his eyes lingered on Thalia, on how she was clinging to me in a way that she had never done before.

"I'm okay." She nodded. "I'm just ready to go home."

Evren stepped closer to us, and he pulled her into his arms. I dropped her hand, letting her hug him fully, and I could feel the worry radiating from his body.

"Adara's ready to kill us both," he whispered to her, but we all heard it.

Thalia laughed softly, but it was muffled by other emotions.

"She'll forgive me easier than she will you."

"True." He pulled her out of his arms and held her at arm's length as he looked her over.

I couldn't stop myself as I moved closer and wrapped my arm around her waist, pulling her back against my chest. I knew that Evren would never hurt her, but I still didn't want to be away from her. I wouldn't be able to breathe easily, to think clearly, until we were home and safe.

Evren looked down at her hands that were still holding his, and his eyes shuddered when he spotted the cut on her wrist. His gaze flew back up to meet hers, and she tried to tug it away.

"Who?" he demanded, his voice filled with venom.

There was almost no one in this world who understood what Thalia had been through better than Evren. The guilt still ate at a part of him that I knew he would never let go of.

"It was my choice." She tried to pull out of his hold, but he held on tighter.

"Who, Thalia?"

"Sorin." She jerked harder until her hand finally fell from his. She pressed her hand over mine where it rested over her stomach, and I stared at my best friend over her head. "He was dying."

Evren closed his eyes for a moment, taking in deep breaths.

"And you stopped it." His voice was barely audible.

"Yes," Thalia answered.

The silence that followed felt like an eternity, but finally Evren opened his eyes and looked directly at me.

"And this?" He motioned to the two of us.

I knew what he was asking, but there was only one answer that I could give.

"Always," I said firmly before leaning down to brush my lips against the top of her head.

The corner of Evren's mouth lifted just a bit. "If Adara asks, can you tell her this was my plan all along?"

"To almost get us killed?" I cocked my head with a soft chuckle.

"No." He rubbed the back of his head. "For you two to realize this." He waved between Thalia and I. "Let's leave the almost dying part between us."

I couldn't stop the smile as I thought about Adara being ready to kill him the moment we walked in the door.

"Now let's go home."

Thalia's body settled further into mine as he said the word.

Home.

EPILOGUE

THALIA

I stared up at the blue sky through the trees, and I squeezed my eyes closed against the sunlight.

Today had been tough. It had been exactly one year since the day Gavril and his army had arrived in the Blood kingdom. One year since we had lost Jorah, and I could feel the weight of his loss heavier today than I had for the past several months.

That guilt ate at me, but I tried not to feed it.

Not when I had so much to be grateful for.

"What are you thinking about in that beautiful head of yours?"

I squinted an eye open and turned my head until I was looking at Sorin. He was laying on the ground beside me, his head resting on his hand, and his fingers traced over the lines absently as if he were trying to memorize them.

"You." I answered him honestly.

"Oh yeah?" He grinned, and the devilish look on his face made my stomach flutter. "Are you thinking about reenacting what happened this morning or are you still reminiscing about the way I cured my hunger by eating nothing but you last night?"

I lifted my hand and slapped his shoulder, and he did nothing but laugh. He caught my hand in his and brought my knuckles to his mouth as he smiled.

"I was thinking about how grateful I am for you, but I think I've changed my mind."

"You can't do that, my love." He pouted playfully, and there was such a lightness in my chest as I looked at him.

"I most certainly can." I shifted my body until I was on my side facing him, and I traced my fingers over his jawline. "I'll be grateful for you another day."

He chuckled softly and his eyes trailed over every inch of my face. He knew I was lying. He had always been able to tell, but on a day like today when I was incapable of keeping my emotions in check, I had no chance of lying to him.

Especially not after he had held my hand every step of the way to Jorah's grave, or as he laid flowers next to Evren's on the ground where our best friend laid when I couldn't force my feet to move me a single step farther.

"So, what are you going to be today?" He leaned in until his forehead was pressed against mine, and his hand reached up to lay softly against my neck.

I closed my eyes as his thumb brushed over my pulse point. "I haven't quite decided yet."

"I could help you decide." He ran his nose along the length of mine, and a smile tugged at my lips.

I ran my hand over his chest, over the tunic that hid the scar I knew still laid beneath from the blood magic. My fingers trembled as they traced over the area, and Sorin let out a harsh breath.

"Do you think Evren will get mad if he finds me ravishing one of his greatest warriors out in the meadow just outside the palace?" He nipped at my bottom lip, and I whimpered against his mouth.

"What do you mean one of his greatest warriors?" I leaned back slightly and cocked a brow at him. "I think you misspoke."

"Did I?" He grinned and his fingers intertwined with mine. He rotated the thin band on my finger almost absently. "For some reason, I was thinking you were married to the greatest warrior in the kingdom."

I pushed at his chest until he fell flat on his back on the ground, and I moved over him until I straddled his hips. "That would be you."

Sorin's eyes glittered with amusement as he looked up at me, his hands coming to rest on my hips. "You know how to boost a man's ego."

"Ego is one thing you have plenty of." I rested my hand on his chest as I leaned down until my lips were hovering just above his.

His hips surged forward beneath me, pulling a soft moan from my lips as he winked at me. "Ego and something else."

I rolled my eyes, but he lifted his head until our lips met in a searing kiss. I surrendered to him, my body melting against his as his hands roamed over my skin.

The guilt and sadness of the day melted away under the heat of his touch, and I couldn't help the moan that escaped my lips as he rolled us over until he was on top of me.

We broke the kiss only when we were both gasping for breath, and Sorin looked up at me with eyes that shone the same love they had for years. "I will always be grateful for you, Thalia. Every day until death claims me, and even then." He pressed his lips gently against mine once more. "I will find you in every world, in every life, and I will worship you with every breath in my lungs."

My fingers dug into him as I clung to him with a desperation that I refused to hide any longer. "Promise me."

"I promise." There was so much determination in his words, such fierceness that used to scare me.

But not any longer.

"I love you, Sorin." I wrapped my fingers around the back of his neck, and he dug his own into my thigh as he lifted my leg around his hip.

"And I love you." He pressed a kiss to the base of my neck. "Now let me defile my wife before someone comes looking for us."

I laughed softly, and my chest ached with how much I needed him. "Anything you want, husband."

THANK YOU

Thank you so much for taking a chance on the Stars and Shadows series. You all have blown me away with your support of this series, and it feels so hard to say goodbye to these characters. I hope you have loved them as much as I do.

I would love for you to join my reader group, [Hollywood](#), so we can connect and talk about all of your thoughts on A Kingdom of Fire and Fate! This group is the first place to find out about cover reveals, book news, and new releases!

You can also sign up for my newsletter here:

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Again, thank you for going on this journey with me.

Xo,
Holly Renee

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USA Today Bestselling Author, Holly Renee brings readers a pinch of angst, an indulgence of heat, and the perfect amount of heart in every book.

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